

A four-star general from Oak Ridge - Part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 8, 2019)

Benita Albert continues her tradition of featuring select graduates from Oak Ridge Schools. This time she has selected a four-star general! Enjoy yet another exciting look at one of our own as Benita introduces us to General (retired) B.B. Bell.

As Veterans Day nears, I am proud to share the story of an Oak Ridge Schools alumnus whose military service espoused duty, honor and patriotism. This Part One of General B.B. Bell's story will mainly focus on his Oak Ridge roots.

In 1943, a young West Point graduate, Burwell B. (B.B.) Bell, Jr. was assigned by the U.S. Army to an engineering position on the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge. A leg injury prevented B.B. from entering the military proper during World War II. Mary Rector was a hospital assistant in Hot Springs, Arkansas where B.B. received leg therapy. Mary and B.B. married after his West Point graduation, and they immediately moved to the still-under-construction, secret city of Oak Ridge.

Little did they know that their new home would be their permanent home for B.B.'s entire professional career. He worked at both K-25 and Y-12, his career culminating in the position of Superintendent of Instrumental Engineering.

Mary and B.B. raised two children, Amelia and B.B., his father's namesake. It is this third B.B. in the Bell family whose story will be featured herein. Amelia and B.B. attended Oak Ridge Schools, graduating in 1962 and 1965 respectively.

Both children would go on to important government service. Perhaps this was in their genes, given that they were the great-great grandchildren of Arkansas Governor Henry Massie Rector and Mississippi Governor and Senator James Alcorn.

Amelia became a senior State Department officer for training counter-terrorism while her husband, Jim Knight, served as an Ambassador to both Benin and Chad.

B.B. accepted a ROTC scholarship as an undergraduate at the University of Chattanooga which was followed by a distinguished 39-year U.S. Army career and retirement as a four-star general in 2008. His military career sent him around the world to challenging, important assignments.

When asked about his Oak Ridge childhood, B.B. replied, "The Oak Ridge community was magic...unlike anything else in East Tennessee and perhaps America." He continued, "We were all huddled up together in a sequestered environment where our parents were engaged in a great mission for America. All kids felt good about that, and it was at our core."

B.B. attended Pine Valley Elementary School, Jefferson Junior High School (in the original ORHS building), and Oak Ridge High School. He recalled loving school, especially playing football and running track for Coach Nick Orlando. He cited teacher George Pitts and his eighth-grade algebra course as being outstanding, saying, "Everyone feared being in his class, but everyone relished succeeding with him."

B.B. played football for Jack Armstrong and Don Bordinger where he was a starter his senior year, playing both on offense and defense. He recalled, "Playing ball for such a storied program was a dream come true. It was also tough and formative. Many lessons I applied to my military life from what I learned on the practice fields at ORHS and on Blankenship Field."

He further reminisced, "Life for everyone was centered around the Wildcat Den and our second parent/father, Shep Lauter. He was our outside-the-home disciplinarian, provider, and surrogate parent."

Around town, B.B.'s memories included, "The original Shoney's restaurant where everyone cruised in their cars to see who else was cruising. Wonderful! Nonetheless, we were just like kids everywhere. Boys chased girls, played and sparred with each other, matured, and carefully maneuvered the stern hands of values-based and focused parents."

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B.B. left Oak Ridge for the University of Chattanooga (now the University of Tennessee Chattanooga) where he majored in Business Administration. His plans were to serve out his four-year military obligation from ROTC and to return to Chattanooga, the homeplace of his new bride, Katie.

The young couple could not have imagined what adventures were ahead. As B.B. summarized it, "Yikes, thirty-nine years later we did return (to the Chattanooga area), but to retire."

It was at the University that B.B. met Keys Fillauer, a Cleveland, Tn. native who would later move to Oak Ridge and develop the legendary "Civics Community" program in the Oak Ridge Schools as well as, in retirement, serve as Chairman of the Oak Ridge Schools Board of Education. It was Keys who facilitated my connection to B.B. for this story.

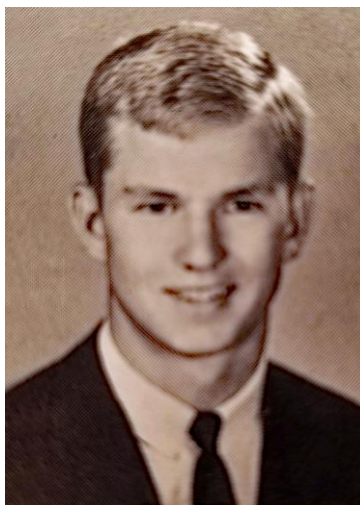
I asked Keys to describe his friend, and he replied, "B.B. always put others first. He always wanted to know about your successes, and this was true when he was a student or in command of NATO forces. A roommate, a fraternity brother, wedding participants, graduates of the University of Chattanooga, and friends for fifty-three years, we learned from each other the values we both have placed on commitment, leadership, and community. When B.B. was going to speak to my Civics class, I asked one of his aides how I should introduce him to my class. He responded, 'Sir, I will call him General, and you will have to decide.' I said to my class...please welcome my friend B.B. Bell."

The incredible 39-year military career of General B.B. Bell will be chronicled in the second part of his story. However, before closing this narrative, I am always interested in asking my featured alumni for advice to the current, young citizens of Oak Ridge who are finding their way to their futures. (Blame it on the teacher in me).

I appreciate the thoughtful answer B.B. gave to the following: "Do you have advice for young adults who might be interested in a military career?" He answered, "My best advice would be for the youngsters to ensure they have a strong allegiance and dedication to a set of values which distinguishes clearly right from wrong, and with them, allows one to establish a set of goals and objectives for success in life. This is the most important characteristic of a young soldier. Know right from wrong and follow that truth."

This statement is sound, parting advice to all of us, and it serves as an example of great wisdom and courage from a former child of Oak Ridge. Oak Ridge is honored to claim General B.B. Bell as one of our own.

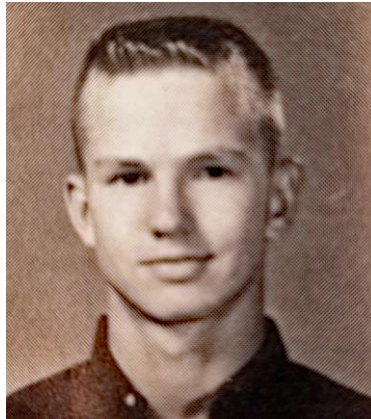
Thank you, Benita. Look for more exciting insights in the concluding article in the series coming up next.



B. B. Bell in his senior year at Oak Ridge High School

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B. B. Bell in his junior year at Oak Ridge High School



B. B. Bell, #82 in the front row