

Interview of Bill Porter by Jeff League, April 16, 2006

Bill Porter and I, Jeff League, sat down and had a meeting/philosophical discussion and history lesson as it turned out. That would have been 4-16-09. We were talking about why kids drop out of school and an example I gave got Bill onto the topic of Okinawa. We had been wanting to get Bill's recollections on tape but here it just kind of spontaneously came out and we were lucky enough to get the meeting on tape.

Bill's friend Bill Hill who runs the RemembertheDeadeyes.com web site had contacted Bill and let him know about the web site. This had gotten Bill excited about the Deadeyes again and Bill Hill had encouraged Bill Porter to share his memories. Bill had been hesitant but he was working up to it and here it just came out in conversation. Evidently Bill was a first lieutenant when the battle of Okinawa started and was promoted to captain sometime during the battle. He retired after twenty years in the army as a Lt. Colonel.

Jeff: But the other thing is this, you see, our schools got into a rut of just teaching kids facts and figures and dates. And they got away from making the process of learning how to learn an exciting process. So many kids drop out because they are bored stiff learning that Queen Elizabeth was born in 14 whatever and died in whenever. They can't see where it has any relevancy to their life to learn about the battle of Okinawa if it's just a statistic. When did you hit the beach in Okinawa? What day and what year was it?

Bill: Was it One April?

Jeff: Yes, it was, because remember, your friend Bill Hill called you on the anniversary on April first, April fools. OK on April first of 1945 the 96th Deadeyes hit the beach in Okinawa...

Bill: And I was with them on Okinawa. I was a first lieutenant in the second battalion of the 382 infantry regiment, E company. (During the battle the commander of F company was shot and Bill was ordered to take command of that company) And I am one of the few lucky ones that is still alive. And, I am still happy after 66 years. I am 92 years old now.

Jeff; OK if I read, "On April first of 1945 the 96th Deadeyes hit the beach in Okinawa and it was considered the worst Army, Navy and Marine battle in American history in terms of lives lost, and the Americans won." Now if I am going to school and a teacher is talking about World War II and I read this it just becomes a stale fact. But, I am talking to you right now and for me in talking to you and having this conversation, this becomes very real to me, because I am getting to talk to a man who has the first hand knowledge of being there. But, to a fourteen year old sitting in a classroom it means nothing.

Bill: Now on that ship there was lined up wave one. Wave two and a little boat went over the side. (Bill is drawing a map of a troop ship) And there was a bunch of men, there was a boat out here and there was a lot of praying going on. We had seen the beach from a distance and it is being blasted, blasted, blasted, plowed. And there were a lot of ministers helping us pray. We were scared shitless and I was too but I didn't admit it.

Jeff: This was not your first beachhead was it?

Bill: No.

Jeff: You had been through this before.

Bill: Yes, we had practiced this a whole bunch Stateside at a certain place off the Washington coast.

Jeff: Right.

Bill: But then I had already been, I don't think I was on the first wave into Leyte.

Jeff: You had already been in battle. So that causes one to take pause a second time. But for some reason did the beachhead on Okinawa feel more dangerous or worse than the first one on Leyte?

Bill: The enemy, the Japs, only hurt a few of us (on the beachhead) but fifty men on mean average from every company in the entire division during the battle of Okinawa. Note: Bill guesses that would be about 2,200 in total. At one time Bill's company of 200 was down to 19 men before replacements.)

Jeff: And a company is about two hundred?

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Jeff: And a company is about two hundred?

Bill: Yes, and there is about eighteen thousand in a division. So, you know how many people were lost, a lot.

Jeff: A lot.

Bill: For every person killed there were five people with arms, legs lost, eyes put out. People out there, you can't imagine how loud they were screeching for an aid man. Screaming, screaming. In the meantime I am trying to run a company. I am trying to keep easily ten people from a battleship, a destroyer or a cruiser, or an aircraft carrier, these people out there ready to give me artillery fire. The people who were dug in, now this is not a ship (he had drawn a picture of a troop ship) now it is Okinawa (he is using the same piece of paper to show me). We went in on this side. The marines went in up here and they met little resistance. We went over here and we took the mountain area, down this side. On a clear day we could see islands in the Ryukyu chain. What was I saying?

Jeff: Your 96th Deadeyes had the task of clearing the mountains.

Bill: We used a huge amount of what is called satchel charges. A satchel charge is about tada, tada, (Bill makes a motion with his hands).

Jeff: About the size of a lunchbox.

Bill: It has a timed fuse on it. The thing is, on this range of mountains they had built in bunkers and there was just hundreds of bunkers along here and the Japanese Generals and Colonels and so forth were heavily defended. We would take a satchel charge, you see now some of this is coming back to me and I have tried for fifty years to forget it all. It's too horrible.

Jeff: But, here is someone who would really like to hear what you have to say.

Bill: So here is a little satchel charge, easy to carry, weighs about, I am just going to guess, 25 pounds, and it has a timed fuse on it.

Jeff: Like a hand delivered hand grenade?

Bill: You shoved it into a door or the window or anything you can get it inside of. It is dynamite, no it is composition C2, which I don't know what that means.

Jeff: It is a form of what is known as plastique, or plastic explosive, a form of stable nitroglycerin.

Bill: It is very, very high explosive. And the only way is to get it inside the bunker where it is going to hurt real bad and get away from there because the explosion is going to be fantastic. Big fire in the hole! You scream that as loud as you can so everyone gets away. Big fire in the hole!

Jeff: Wow. I can't imagine.

Bill: So we knew there were people in those bunkers. We knew that every time a satchel charge went off it would kill anywhere from one to many. How many you never knew. So it's a very hard thing to put a satchel into a bunker. You are up in front of the lines. You can hear the guys inside speaking in Japanese.

Jeff: So those must have been some of the bravest men, those who delivered the satchel charges.

Note: On reviewing this text Bill wanted to add the comment that the soldiers who were among the bravest and had the most dangerous task were the aid men. They had to go out under fire to help those in need and the aid men suffered some of the highest casualties.

Bill: So there were a lot of people who were scared but we officers couldn't show it. For one minute not act brave in front of our men. We made many, many fifty mile marches.

Now you try to make a fifty mile march with your feet...

Jeff: In one day!?

Bill: Forced march, one day!

Jeff: With a thirty-five pound backpack on?

Bill: Well, at least you might have a light pack or something. With a full field pack I wouldn't have been able to do that. I went through a bunch of those hikes and when I got back I would have nothing but blisters for two weeks. Absolute blisters.

Jeff: Did it make you feel tougher?

Bill: No, I knew that every man in my company would drop out if I dropped out. They had done that in other companies.

Jeff: If one of the officers stopped?

Bill: If they could get the head officer knocked out that was a good excuse for a lot of others.

Jeff: So you had a very strong feeling of your responsibility for being an officer?

Bill: And I had a huge responsibility with these ten men from the navy ships and our artillery support and mortar support for our company. A mortar shell wouldn't even think about going through one of those bunkers. So, what we had was real rough mountain terrain and we couldn't use any tanks. A tank can get back with a five inch and probably penetrate a bunker. But the tankers couldn't get up there. So you dropped a great big artillery shell on that bunker. I'll tell you, that will make it go in.

Jeff: A chuckle

Note: Bill did remember later however some tanks with flame throwers used to clear out caves and could not imagine the thought of dying by flame thrower.

Bill: So those guys in the navy mostly were scared too because they could get killed real fast as well.

Note: Bill after this interview downloaded a history of the Okinawan battle on Wikipedia and read about all of the Navy suffering losses from kamikaze pilots and commented upon that.

Jeff: And then you were one of the people that were there when general Easley died too?

Bill: Oh, I was right there talking to him when he got shot. Now everyone else said that machine gun fire got him. But it seems to me that there was only one shot, bang. Everyone hit the ground and for sure general Easley hit the ground because he was hit right between the eyes.

Jeff: Sounds like a sniper shot.

Bill: Would he know that he was a general?

Jeff: Yes, Did he have his insignia on?

Bill: Yes, he didn't hide the fact that he was a general.

Jeff: Then he probably knew.

Bill: The thing is it could just have easily been my forehead.

Jeff: If you had been the ranking officer it might have been you. Probably a sniper saw a chance to take out a general. I mean, how important would that be?

Bill: Now you are just guessing. If it had been a machine gun why didn't it hit just him and not six more.

Jeff: So, was he a good general?

Bill: Absolutely, he was just a little guy, probably didn't weigh a hundred and twenty pounds. Little guy but he was 100% man. He was up in the front lines frequently, and he was brave. He was a one star general. His commander was General Bradley, a two star general, a West Pointer. And he was related to the three star general corps commander that ran the whole thing. They were classmates. This two star general (Bradley) goes to the three star general and says my men have been trained with a lot of fifty mile marches, trained hard. That's all he had to say. And he really meant it and it's true. Give me a tough job to do and the three star general gave him over the top of the mountains throughout all of this area that I just told you about.

Note: On editing this Bill also wanted to make specific mention of Lt. Colonel Cyrel D. Sterner who Bill also thought was an outstanding and brave commander. He was CO of second battalion, 382 infantry. Bill also wanted to add that he thought there was a huge number of brave men that he served with in both E and F companies.

Jeff: Because that was the toughest area.

Bill: Well, it was the front line, down here (indicating map he has drawn) over here on this side where there is more real estate. This was protected with the generals and everything up here. The headquarters, the ammunition, everything. Every once in a while somebody would throw a bazooka round. You know what a bazooka is? (assent) That was used a huge amount of the time by the front line men. The tanks were useless up there in the hills and mountains.

Jeff: So, could a bazooka shell penetrate one of the bunkers?

Bill: I don't remember that. We also used a lot of mortar and artillery fire. A few of our own stuff landed on our own people.... That is the real sad part, hurting your own people. So keeping track of these ten people. Mortar, artillery and ship fire, tada tada. That was real tough to hold onto (the communications). So when you talked to them you could say, Come here and hit that!

Jeff: And hope that they hit it. And that they weren't short and going to hit you instead.

Bill: No, you would say start back there (behind the target) and come back this way so that you will be sure not to hit the front line troops.

Jeff: Did you have air support?

Bill: Lots of airplanes off of ships, aircraft carriers.

Jeff: Would you call in for those strikes as well?

NOTE: At this point the conversation became confused on the point of what Bill did. As he was sitting nearby I asked him to clarify this.

Jeff: I am talking to Bill and I wanted to clarify a section on the manuscript that is confusing. I wanted to ask Bill if he could only communicate with the aircraft carrier or also with the planes in the sky.

Bill: I had communication with all of my platoon leaders, that was mandatory all of the time. But, I also had the spotters around and if I needed anything from any of those and all I had to do was find them and tell them what I wanted done.

Jeff: So your job was to communicate with the mortar and artillery spotter people?

Bill: The mortars were in my own battalion. But, then we had bigger mortars that were attached to the front line and those guys had spotters in there helping out. And then the ships from a battleship on down. I am not sure if they had a battleship. I don't think we used any sixteen inch guns.

Jeff: Was there a battleship in the fleet?

Bill: I am not certain, but I am pretty sure there were battleships in there and I think they helped plow the beaches. But, we didn't have any of those spotters (for the battleships). But, we had airplanes and a lot of the smaller navy ships, cruisers, destroyers and that kind of thing. But, in the regular battalion you have E, F, G and heavy weapons, and so I always had heavy weapons.

Jeff: Thank you, that helps a lot.

Back to other recording. (I have deleted the confusing conversation segment and pick up on the next flow of topic.)

Bill: But at any rate a satchel charge, you bet, that would knock it out. It seems to me that I have either seen or personally done satchel charges. And, that is probably the most dangerous thing you can do is find a hole or opening to put that thing in, in one of the bunkers. And then scream and run.

Jeff: And, then hope you didn't get shot while running.

Bill: I haven't talked about this much and I am only able to say it now.

Jeff: Thanking Bill (thinking it is over).

Bill: But, what happened to me is that I had my steel helmet on, I was down in a slit trench that maybe one of my men had dug for me. Maybe I had dug it for myself. Boy, you dig a slit trench happily just as fast as you can dig a slit trench. (Laughter). So that

when the artillery came if you were above ground or here you would die. So one shell exploded twenty-five or fifty feet away. I don't really know how far away. At any rate, how big a rock, I don't know, hit me right on the back of my head and slammed my face into the ground. My nose was broken and the bone was just sticking out and I bled like a stuck hog. Anyway I bled a lot and it was enough to get me away from the front lines and out of combat for a couple of weeks, and maybe that's the reason I am alive today. And a broken nose is the way I got a purple heart. (Laughter) Yeah and those guys that broke an arm or had an arm off, they look at me and say you only had a broken nose! (Laughing at himself) They are thinking, "Come on guy, do it the hard way." (Laughter)

Jeff: Yeah, but one is as valid as the other.

Bill: And you know, it's laughable now, but it's not laughable in combat. Now, there's very damn little you can laugh at when .. not only Americans .. but you see a dozen or two dozen or a hundred or whatever Americans and Japanese all of them screaming and hollering, wanting help.

Jeff: Yeah they (the Japanese) are people too.

Bill: And the amount of strain that is upon the body, the amount of strain that is upon the mind ... and the thing is I was somebody... somebody... and how can I forget about this? They said go into psychosynthesis. And I went into it and said that I want to forget all of that super negative stuff. And, I really forgot a whole bunch of it. Not just because I am 92 but

Jeff: Because you chose to...?

Bill: I trained the mind to do what I wanted it to do. Stop smoking, not think about all of that Okinawa stuff.

Jeff: Bill I have heard that when soldiers return home from war that there are two patterns. And one pattern are people who can do what you did, which is called compartmentalization. Which is what you did. That you can make a compartment in your

mind and say, Ok I am going to keep these memories here and they are going to stay here and I am not going to let them bother me, and I am going to go on with my life.

Bill: That is exactly what I did.

Jeff: But some people who came back could not do that and they were scarred for the rest of their lives.

Bill: There were a whole bunch of people who came back from there and they couldn't get this out of their minds and they just completely melted down from the super stress.

Jeff: And It was even worse in Viet Nam because there wasn't the support of the people back home. At least when people came back from World War II they were all welcomed home as heroes. You were welcomed home like a hero weren't you?

Bill: Yeah.

Jeff: So, that helped scar some of their psyches because of the way the war was perceived. (the Viet Nam veterans)

Bill: I don't know one single thing about Viet Nam.

Jeff: Think about this. This is the major difference. After you were removed from Okinawa by injury or the battle was over or whatever, you got on a troop ship and then sailed home ... And in Viet Nam they took them out of the jungle. Some might have killed someone that morning in a fire fight and they took him out of the jungle and that night they were on a plane to San Francisco. Back in the real world with nobody to talk to about what happened earlier that morning. That is the main difference between the war that you went through and the one the Viet Nam vets went through. There wasn't the same time frame for processing. They had massive culture shock. They went from killing to regular life and some of them just could not do it.

Bill: Well after the Philippines it was nothing. But then after Okinawa we just kind of rested a while.

Jeff: You started to come down, yeah.

Bill: And then we went right up directly into Tokyo. And from the Tokyo area, up into Hokkaido.

Jeff: That's the northern island.

Bill: And we thought that we were going to have a job or have to do something in Hokkaido. Where was I when the Japanese said I give up, where was I?

Jeff: Well, I don't know. When was VJ day? June 6th or 7th, I think, of 1945?

Note: Upon checking it was found that VJ day was August 15th, 1945 and the formal surrender on September 2nd 1945 aboard the USS Missouri. The battle of Okinawa lasted some 82 days and ended on June 23, 1945.

Bill: You see, I had been trying so hard to forget...

Jeff: And you started the Battle of Okinawa in April. So it was probably within a month of when they dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. How long did the battle last?

Bill: About three months.

Jeff: Three months! Your battle may have still been going on when we dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The mop up.

The conversation continues on the subject of the bombs and doesn't add anything more to Bill's recollections of Okinawa. As a note they were dropped on August 6th and 9th, 1945.

Note: Bill also wanted to add the following, in follow-up to his comment about the bravery of the aid men.

"Many brave men did not get the credit due to them, medals of various types for valor, because they were either not observed or reported to authorities to write up the honor. But many performed above and beyond the call of duty. It did not happen frequently but several times my men were in hand-to-hand combat. This shows that we were in unusually close contact on the front lines. Yes, a few men went AWOL rather than face most certain injury or death. I have said that we in the 96th have been to HELL and some returned alive or wounded. Those AWOL people must have the lowest self-concept possible."