

VETERAN: JAMES A. HILL
HIGHEST RANK/GRADE: PRIVATE
INTERVIEWED BY: DAVID SHIRLEY

During World War II, James A. Hill felt a sense of duty to his country and on February 22, 1944, at the age of twenty-two, enlisted in the U.S. Army at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. He served in the 1st Division, 16th Infantry under the leadership of Major General Terry Allen for one year and six months, but a wound he received in battle ended his military career.

This one-time longshoreman and Houston city bus driver first heard of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor while watching a Shirley Temple movie, *Little Miss Marker*, at the Boulevard Theater in Houston. He had a terrible feeling about what had happened, and his war experience reflected that feeling. But he felt it was something he had to do.

I learned from this interview to see war from a veteran's perspective. Things are not always as cut-and-dry as they may seem at first, but some things are worth fighting for--freedom and democracy are clearly things worth risking life and limb for.

On Wednesday, November 4, 1992, I sat down with Mr. Hill to discuss his war experiences. The interview went as follows:

Q: Where did you train as a recruit?

A: Camp Fannin in Tyler, Texas and advanced training at Fort Mead, Maryland.

Q: In what specialties were you trained?

A: Engineering.

Q: At what posts were you stationed in your stateside service?

A: After Fort Mead, we went to the POE, that's Port of Embarkation, at Fort Miles Standish, Massachusetts.

Q: What was your opinion of the weapons you saw or used in the service?

A: They were excellent.

Q: Were they reliable?

A: Right.

Q: What were your opinions of the equipment, clothing, and rations you were issued?

A: Well, we all griped about what we were. No G.I. was satisfied while he was overseas as far as that was concerned. We were cold, wet, and hungry all the time we were over there.

Q: How adequate were they for the climate and weather conditions you encountered?

A: Fair.

Q: How responsive were the supply services to your unit's needs?

A: Fair.

Q: What did you think of the quality of leadership while you were in the service?

A: Excellent.

Q: Describe instances of particularly good or bad leadership?

A: Our company commander was awfully brave. He never did ask the men to do anything that he didn't take the leadership his ownself.

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Q: Who were the "real" leaders — officers, noncoms, or enlisted men?

A: The captain and the first sergeant.

Q: What did you think of the discipline at the time?

A: It was fair.

Q: What did you think about the military courts and justice?

A: I didn't have any knowledge about that. I didn't know anything about that until after the war was over and they had the war crime trials over there in Germany.

Q: What forms of off-duty recreation were common?

A: We were in combat 52 straight days, and the only break that we got was for 24 hours. We took a hot shower and were put right back up on the front.

Q: So, you really didn't have any off-duty?

A: No.

Q: How did you and your comrades get along with civilians in the U.S.?

A: I guess you could say it was fair.

Q: What songs were popular during your military service?

A: "White Christmas."

Q: Did you note any instances of ethnic, racial or religious discrimination?

A: No.

Q: When you first learned you would go overseas, what was your reaction?

A: We didn't have no real information. Before I was wounded, our destination was Germany, probably Berlin. That seemed like where it was all going on. The Russians and the Americans hooked-up for the finale of the war in Berlin.

Q: Did you know before you started going overseas that that was the goal of the campaign?

A: Yes.

Q: What information, if any, did the Army give you about the countries in which you served?

A: None.

Q: Did you have much contact with civilians overseas?

A: A little bit in Belgium.

Q: And, how did you and your comrades get along with them?

A: It was excellent.

Q: What did you think of wartime civilian newspaper, magazine or radio coverage of the war and of your unit?

A: We had good coverage through the *Stars and Stripes*. That was the only newspaper we could get hold of.

Q: Did you take part in any combat action? If so, where, when, and against whom?

A: Northern France, Belgium, and Germany. Also the Battle of the Bulge, and the Ardennes Offensive. (I received two medals for that.)

Q: How was the morale of your unit?

A: Excellent.

Q: What effect did combat have on morale?

A: Partially.

Q: What factors contributed to a decline in morale?

A: We sang and talked about old times.

Q: What enemy propaganda, if any, did you see or hear?

A: I never saw any.

Q: Were you ever sent as an individual replacement?

A: When I went overseas, I was a replacement and they assigned me to that 16th Infantry, 1st Division.

Q: How did the veterans in that unit receive you?

A: Fine.

Q: Describe a "typical" day when your unit was committed to the front lines.

A: We were continuously on the move all the time that I was there. I was in combat 52 straight days when I got hit the 26th day of February, 1945. We never were much in a defensive position after the Battle of the Bulge, and they made that breakthrough. Then we moved constantly until I got wounded.

Q: How would you characterize your unit's combat performance?

A: A-One.

Q: What would you contribute that to the most?

A: Training—proper training and discipline.

Q: Could you recount the circumstances of when you were wounded?

A: It's going to take me awhile—The day that I got wounded was about 3:00 in the afternoon. We had been holed up, and we came to a clearing in the woods, and the company commander had drawn six of us out of the outfit to go into this clearing (more or less to draw fire to where the Germans would give their positions away). And that's when I got wounded at 3:00 in the afternoon on the 26th day of February, 1945.

Q: How effective was the medical care at the front and behind the lines?

A: Well, I laid there about three hours until it got dark, because the medics couldn't get out there and get to me. But they came out there and got ahold of me, then took me back to a company aid station. There they treated me and sent me to Herman Goering Hospital in Aucher, Germany. I stayed there for awhile, then was sent to Paris, France, and got on a plane to Bristol, England. Then we came back to the states. We arrived in the states the 13th day of April, 1945.

Q: Do you still suffer from your wounds?

A: Not too much.

Q: When your unit was not committed to the front lines, describe what a typical day was like.

A: There weren't any days like that. The 1st Division went in at North Africa and Italy on D-Day, and they kept losing so many men that they had to keep getting replacements. Like I said before, I took training with the engineers, but when I went overseas they put me in a rifle company. I was a B.A.R. man (Browning Automatic Rifle). We were constantly on the move, and my outfit went across the Rhine River. About the 8th or 9th of March, we were around the Romagen Bridge Head when we crossed the Rhine.

Q: How did you and your comrades regard the enemy troops as fighters?

A: The SS troopers were excellent fighters. There were some that had gotten out of North Africa. They were with Rommel there in North Africa and we put up there on the front lines in Germany. We found out that they were the best troops. We called them the SS Corps or the Special Services Corps.

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Q: Did you ever capture any enemy prisoners?

A: Not personally. We had several of them surrender that we sent back. A whole drove of them just surrendered when the war was ending.

Q: Did you or your division help liberate any prison camps or concentration camps?

A: Yes, but I can't recall the names of them.

Q: Do you remember your reactions upon seeing those camps and the conditions in them?

A: I didn't really make it that far. They were further into Germany.

Q: Describe any rumors you heard about the Atomic Bomb before its use.

A: No.

Q: What was your opinion in August 1945, on the use of the Atomic Bomb?

A: I didn't feel too bad about it, because I felt they had to do something to bring the war to an end.

Q: Has that opinion since changed? If so, how?

A: Well, somewhat towards the innocent people that the bomb killed—like the women and children.

Q: What awards and decorations did you receive?

A: Combat Infantry Badge, ETO Ribbon with 2 battle stars, Sharpshooter Medal, Bronze Star, Victory Medal, Good Conduct Medal, Purple Heart, and two or three more that I'd have to look up.

Q: Were the awards and decorations distributed pretty fairly?

A: Yes. They pinned the Purple Heart on me while I was in the hospital in England.

Q: Describe your welcome home to the United States.

A: When we got to New York, the people were lining the docks. I came back over on the *Queen Elizabeth* as a litter patient. Bands were playing and people were yelling and hollering—it was just exuberant.

Q: How long did you remain in the service after the end of hostilities?

A: After the war in Germany ended about May 7th, I was discharged from Brooks General Hospital in San Antonio the on August 22nd—about 4 months altogether.

Q: What did you do after you were discharged?

A: I went back to work as a city bus driver for one year and then went on to the Houston waterfront as a longshoreman until 1975. I had to take a medical retirement.

Q: Have you been a member of any national or unit veteran's associations?

A: Yes. D.A.V. (Disabled American Veterans).

Q: World War II was a significant national experience. What, if anything, did it teach you about America and Americans?

A: That this country is worth fighting for.

Q: Did you think America would have a bigger influence in the world because of the war?

A: Yes.

Q: Have you felt like those expectations have been realized since then?

A: Yes.