

PVT Jonel Cuddy Hill

1925 ~ 2016

Early Life

Jonel Cuddy Hill was born July 30, 1925, in Mankato, Minnesota, to Marguerite Pearl Cuddy and Harold Alexander Hill. By the 1930 Census, Marguerite's marital status was reported as single and Jonel said that he was raised by his mother and grandmother in Mankato. On July 30, 1943, Jonel was 18 years old, a high school graduate, and was promptly drafted into the United States Army. In early autumn, just before being shipped to basic training, he met Lois Annette Kanable, his future wife. Lois was raised in Basin City, Wyoming, a long way from Mankato. Jonel mentioned in his memoir that she was a freshman at the University of Minnesota when they met. They most likely met in Minneapolis.

World War 2 Experience



Jonel enlisted as a private. By this time, the war in Europe was consuming men at a great rate. Replacements were constantly needed in front-line divisions. They were either formed up into new divisions and sent into battle or individuals were sent to companies in the front line. Jonel received the latter treatment. In October 1944 he was assigned to Company F, 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, known as the Big Red One.

The 1st Infantry Division had been in constant combat since the Normandy invasion on June 6, 1944. In September it had reached the German border at Aachen and laid siege to the city. Aachen was captured on October 21, 1944. PVT Hill joined his company in time to fight in the Battle of the Hurtgen Forest, one of the most miserable experiences of the European Theater.

50 square mile hilly pine forest south and east of Aachen. We were given three days to go through and reach the Cologne Plain where tanks would burst to the Rhine. 8th Air Force to saturation bombing on November 16 to support attack launch. Pooh! Lots of noise and no observable result. Mud, Rain. Disgracefully poor intelligence. Soaked shoes and leggings. Weeks in wet, cold foxholes, two or three days at an abandoned old castle in the forest. Cold food — C- rations mostly. Tanks and trucks stuck in mud. German log bunkers well placed, tough and dangerous. Tree bursts of mortar and artillery shells - shrapnel. Sniper fire confined us to foxholes in daylight. Once we had a bath, clean clothes and tetanus shots. Stupid American attack played into German strength and gave up our air and armor superiority.

Hurtgen could have been sealed off and ignored. Battle started in September and continued until March. Battle of the Bulge came and went. Censors kept grim details from the press. Worst losses of WWII, yet it is unknown to most people. Ten U.S. Divisions tied up there in the longest single battle in the history of the U.S. Army. Thirty thousand U.S. casualties.

Became experienced in combat, wary, scared, professional. Realized it was fair to pray for souls on both sides and still fight hard. [Recollections of Jonel C. Hill]

Capture and Prisoner of War Experience

On November 29, 1944, the remnants of Company F entered the village of Merode, a few miles from Aachen, after a daylong attack. Jonel and five other men took shelter in a house. Jonel was the only man who was not wounded. They gradually realized that they were alone without officers, sergeants, radios, food, water, and with empty rifles. Around midnight, the Germans counterattacked through Merode, searching each house and calling for Yankees to surrender. Out of options and expecting to be shot, Jonel's group laid down their arms and surrendered.

PVT Hill was added to a group of 40 to 50 other prisoners from the 1st Infantry Division and marched eastward into Germany. The destination was Stalag XIIA, Limburg an der Lahn, one of the biggest prison camps in Germany.

Interrogation — cigarettes offered as answer bait. Then uniforms taken, possibly for later use in Bulge. We were issued old Balkan army ill-fitting clothes and wooden shoes, to prevent escape. No overcoats or gloves-ersatz socks. First shave since capture. Icy water from a horse trough. No soap. No bunks, just dirty straw on the floor. Cigarettes very hard to get. Bartered with guards — smoked tea in pipes. Boredom was stupefying. Day after day nothing to do. Hunger constant. [Recollections of Jonel C. Hill]

Stalag XIIA was not Jonel's final destination. He was added to a large group of captured officers and shipped with them to Oflag 64 in Szubin, German occupied Poland. He was to work as an orderly. The train journey took a week, arriving in Szubin on December 31, 1944.

Jonel's time in Oflag 64 would be brief. He was put to work sweeping the officer's barracks and serving in the mess hall. He was able to send letters to his girlfriend Lois and to his mother, Marguerite, who had gone to work for the United Service Organization (USO) and was running a USO Club in Ventura, California. On January 19, 1945, he became violently ill and was hospitalized. Thus, on January 21, when the Oflag evacuated and the long march began, Jonel was left behind as unable to walk. The next day he was feeling better and the Soviet Army arrived in Szubin. Approximately a week

later he and the remaining Oflag 64 Kriegies were loaded on trucks and driven to a Displaced Persons (DP) camp outside of Warsaw.

Large six or seven story buildings. Guards, Barbed Wire. Formerly Polish Army OCS, then SS Headquarters, now our home. No news or information given us, but assigned a space literally on the 4th floor. No beds — and told when we'd be leaving. Two outside latrine buildings. Horrible. Thousands of DPs. Dysentery common in DPs. Identified nationals from 21 countries. Meals twice a day on rigid schedules. Groups marched in, ate, marched out, Picnic type tables sat 20. Sat down — uniformed Soviet giant females served. One lacquered spoon handed to each DP. Serving ladies seized wooden poles, 10-12 feet long, and lined up at kitchen. Large 31-ounce tin cans, each with a wire loop handle lined up at serving bar and filled with soup — more or less. Serving ladies ran pole through 10 handles and went to end of table, swung pole length of table, set cans on table, and withdrew pole — Voila-10 DPs served. Bon Appetit. Whistle blew at end of meal — DPs raised wire handle on can. Serving ladies ran pole through, took cans back to serving line for refill for next seating. Cans not dumped or washed. Oh — no napkins either! Soup was hearty — once I got a nice piece of meat. I hoped it was horse. Was I envied! Thank God for our shots. No Americans died. [Recollections of Jonel C. Hill]

Boredom set in again and the February turned into March. Sometime in March, PVT Hill and other Kriegies were marched to the railroad and loaded into boxcars. They were told they were going home. The train took five or six days to reach the port of Odessa, where they were marched to a large, empty mansion. Boredom again with no real news, only rumors. Finally, at the end of March, after days of delays, the Kriegies were marched to the harbor and loaded on a ship, a British ship. The ship cast off and the Kriegies could finally believe that they were on their way home.

Captain came on loudspeaker and offered prayers of thanks for our deliverance. Then angrily recited obstacles and delays Soviets had put in his way. Voice rose. Bitterness spilled out about dealing with Soviets lack of trust pettiness, etc. [Recollections of Jonel C. Hill]

The first ship delivered PVT Hill to Port Said, Egypt. Two days later a second British ship took him to Naples, Italy, where he was returned to United States Army control and received some back pay, which he used to enjoy the city. An American ship took him to Boston. He was at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, undergoing Army processing, on April 12, 1945 when President Roosevelt died. He remembers getting 90 days leave and used it to go home to Minnesota, to Wyoming to see Lois and become engaged, to Oregon and California to see relatives, including his mother. In San Francisco, his relatives took him to the Top of the Mark, a famous night club on the top of the Mark Hopkins Hotel. Drinks were ordered. Alas, the manager introduced himself, then ordered them to leave because Jonel was still too young to legally drink alcohol!

Post War Life

On August 30, 1946, Jonel C. Hill married Lois Annette Kanable in her home town of Basin City, Big Horn, Wyoming. He had been discharged from the United States Army and had chosen to remain in the Army Reserves. He worked for West Publishing Company, a publisher of law books, and attended Saint Paul College at night, earning first a bachelor's degree, and then a law degree. He was admitted to the Minnesota bar and promoted to case editor by West Publishing. At the same time, he and Lois were raising a family of four children.

In 1953 he became Court Administrator for the Supreme Court of Oregon and the family moved to Salem, Oregon. In 1959 Jonel was appointed Public Utilities Commissioner for the State of Oregon, overseeing regulated utilities for the next eight years. In 1967 he worked briefly for the American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) legal department in New York. In 1968 Southern California Gas Company hired him for his regulatory expertise and the family moved again. Over the next sixteen years he moved from executive assistant, through the vice president ranks, becoming president of the company in 1985. He retired from the Southern California Gas Company in 1990.

In retirement, Jonel and Lois traveled and spent time at Lake Tahoe. He attended some Oflag 64 reunions and was a contributor to the postage fund for the *Post Oflag 64 Item*. He remained active in business groups and clubs. In 1995 he was persuaded to chair the brand-new City of Los Angeles Information Technology Agency for a year. Jonel Cuddy Hill died in Pasadena, California, on April 19, 2016.



Sources

Hill, Jonel C. “*Company F, 26th Infantry Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division, Recollections of Jonel C. Hill*”, Oflag 64 Association Homepage

“Jonel C. Hill Obituary”, *Pasadena Star-News*, April 23 to 24, 2016

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Anne M. Trujillo