Bill Hodges, Witness to History

Bill Hodges is often called “Mr. Democrat” in Beaufort County.

By Stephanie Clark and Tempie Phelps

Introduction

By Stephanie Clark

We read about people like Stalin, President Eisenhower, and General Patton, but very few of us have had the opportunity to meet them. Mr. Bill Hodges of Washington, North Carolina, had that exciting pleasure during his long service with the U. S.
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military. But then I think maybe it was their pleasure knowing such an amazing man!

In February of 1998 Mr. Armstrong, Tempie Phelps, and I went to meet Mr. Hodges. We were very impressed and fascinated from the beginning of our conversation with him because Mr. Hodges has seen and done more things than most people could do in ten lifetimes.

From 1932 to 1935 and 1940 to 1961, Mr. Hodges served in military service. He first served in the Army Air Force, 1932-35, reaching the rank of sergeant. After a break from the military, Mr. Hodges in 1940 joined what became the U. S. Air Force, retiring in 1961 with the rank of lieutenant colonel. During Word War II, he participated in the invasions of Sicily, Normandy, the Rhineland, and the Ardennes. He assisted in seven airborne drops and four glider missions, including the evacuation of U. S. troops. A high point of Mr. Hodges’s World War II service was his serving as special military envoy as an escort officer for President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the Cairo-Tehran Conference. In September, 1946, he served as a United Nations observer in Cairo, Egypt. From 1951 to 1954 Mr. Hodges was a top secret courier and diplomatic military attache courier.

During his military career, Mr. Hodges received many decorations, including the Bronze Star, the Air Medal, the Purple Heart, the Army Commendation Medal, the Air Force Commendation Medal, and the Medal for Human Actions for his efforts in the Berlin Airlift in 1948.

Mr. Hodges’s military credentials and decorations are dramatically impressive, but, after talking to him, his eyewitness memo-

ries of legendary events in World War II are what we will never forget. During that epic conflict, he served in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, Germany, France, and London. Mr. Hodges not only met President Roosevelt; he saw to it that technicians refitted the seat in the jeep in which the President rode to ease the physical discomfort of the great FDR. Mr. Hodges was involved in the Cairo-Tehran Conference and the invasion of Sicily. He was right there on the same platform with Stalin, Winston Churchill, Chiang Kai-Shek, and, of course, Roosevelt!

In addition to his military service, Mr. Hodges has been vitally involved in the Democratic Party in Beaufort County, North Carolina, and throughout the nation. He was a charter member of the Young Democrats of North Carolina upon its organization and founding in 1928. He was one of the organizers of the North Carolina Democratic Club of Washington, D. C., and served as its first treasurer from 1936 to 1938. He was a delegate to the County, District and State Democratic Conventions in 1932, ’34, ’36, ’38, and ’40. He attended every County, District, State, and National Democratic Convention from 1964-1992. Mr. Hodges was elected a member of the North Carolina State Democratic Executive Committee, from 1966-1993. He served on 12 North Carolina State Committees for the Revision of the Democratic State Plan of Organization from 1967 to 1991, as chairman in 1987 and 1991. He has served on North Carolina State Platform, Credential, and Rules Committees. In 1974-75 he worked on the Delegate Selection and Affirmative Action Plan. Mr. Hodges worked on the National State Delegate Selection Committee in 1983, 1987, and 1991. And finally he was elected Beaufort County Democratic Party Chairman in 1974-79 and 1981-83. Now you know why he’s called “Mr. Democrat” around here!
Mr. Hodges put his considerable organizational and administrative skills to work in county and state government. He was organizer and first Director of the Beaufort County Civil Defense Agency, 1962-64. At the state level in 1965 he was Assistant Director of State Department of Administration. In 1967 Governor Dan K. Moore appointed Mr. Hodges the Director of the N. C. State Civil Defense. And in 1979 President Carter appointed Mr. Hodges the director of the Greenville Office for 24 Eastern N. C. counties of the U. S. Census Bureau for the 1980 census.

This list of Mr. Hodges’s positions and accomplishments is staggering, and we congratulate him for a life dedicated to public service. But what we found more impressive was the real Mr. Bill Hodges: friendly, intelligent, knowledgeable, and dedicated to preserving the world of history to which he was witness. And he’s still quite young at age 93!

Life: Our librarian [Betty Ferrell] at the college said that you would be an excellent interview. She referred us to Mitchell Norton, who called you.

Mr. Hodges: Yes.

Life: Mr. Norton mentioned to us that you were in the Air Force, I guess, probably the Army Air Force?

Mr. Hodges: I was in the Air Force way back in the beginning. In the late ’20s.

Life: Oh, really!

Mr. Hodges: I did 33 years in the Air Force. I actually first went in the Army in January, 1926. My first assignment was in Hawaii. Of course, later on I had a big skip. I got out of the Air Force in ’33. And I went to Washington [DC], and the late Congressman Lindsay C. Warren, who later became Comptroller General of the United States, got me a job at the General Accounting Office. When things began to break out in Europe, I was in a reserve [unit]. I went back in the Air Force in 1940. So I had that skip in between there. I worked with county government, the state government, and the federal government and the military government.

Life: You covered the whole field!

Mr. Hodges: Yes. Of course, when I came back here after [military service], I went to Raleigh and Governor Moore’s administration. I was State Civil Defense Director, and after he went out of office, I came back here and bought a motel, which is now called Sunset. It was called Travel Lodge during my time. I sold it in 1986 and moved out here [to Washington Harbor]. I’ve been out here ever since.

Life: When you were in the Army Air Force, were you a pilot?

Mr. Hodges: No. I first went in just the Army. It was called the Ordinance Department. I was in the ordinance, and then I came on back after that hitch in Hawaii. I loved the military because of its organization. My mind was always set on organization. I reenlisted in 1940.

Life: We heard that you drove General Eisenhower during the World War II. Is that correct?
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Mr. Hodges: No. [This is] the story he’s [Mr. Mitchell Norton] talking about there. I went to a troop carrier command in the [Army] air force. That’s the group that hauled the 82nd and 101st Airborne. We dropped the paratroopers in the old C-47’s [planes]. So I went to North Africa—what’s called North African Theater in ’43. I was in Fort Benning, Georgia, and I flew a plane here for one night, then went to West Palm Beach. There were only five of us on the airplane and everything had been taken out and we put extra tanks in for gas because we think one flight was about thirteen hours and that was to [an island], from there up to North Africa. Anyway, we went to North Africa. Now what she’s talking about with Eisenhower—people got to remember that we fought in North Africa, and we sent fighters and things there. The deal I had connected with General Eisenhower was that the 1943 Cairo-Tehran summit with Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin, and Chiang Kai-Shek. That was the big four that met there. And Eisenhower was theater commander, and in the Air Force I was under Troop Carrier Commander General Paul Williams. That was in November. And what the whole out was, was I was assigned as military liaison with the White House secret service as escorting Roosevelt to the Cairo-Tehran Conference.

Life: Oh, boy!

Mr. Hodges: So I had a letter signed by General Eisenhower. It was a one-sentence letter. It said Major William M. Hodges, and my serial number, is designated as my personal representative, the word “personal.” He signed it, and I carried that letter because I ran into colonels and generals and everything. I remember one brigadier general [who was uncomfortable with my position]. My job was with the Secret Service. We started working in November, and this conference wasn’t until December. We had made all

these stops for security layouts and everything like that, and I’m in the military. Most of these people were all Secret Service. The first group, I think, had about five or six of them, and we went off on all this territory with one brigadier general. He didn’t like something, and he started telling me he had to know [what was going on]. Well, we couldn’t talk about who was going to be at the conference or anything, and that’s a heck of a thing going into planning. The only thing I could use was “Mr. Big.” I referred to Mr. Roosevelt and anybody in that group as “Mr. Bigs.” This brigadier general wanted to know who they were. He had to know who they were! And I pulled out that letter from General Eisenhower and I said, “I’m forbidden to say any more than this, ‘Mr. Big.’” Here I was a little major! But we cleared that thing, and that was a great historic thing that conference.

Life: Did you see them face to face?

Mr. Hodges: Oh, yes! There’s a picture in the January 1944 National Geographic. Sitting on the platform in that in this order were Churchill, Mr. Roosevelt, Stalin, Chiang Kai-Shek and his wife sitting about two places down from him.

Life: Madame Chiang Kai-Shek?

Mr. Hodges: Yes. She didn’t sit right next to him, something with protocol. Now, with all these people at the conference, I’m here in the back, busy lying low with the Secret Service. So I had nothing to do but to see them. After Roosevelt wrapped up the conference, he flew to Sicily to the base where I was stationed. The base had the longest runways in Sicily. That was the closest he was ever involved with the war. General Mark Clark was still fighting up in Italy. He flew down there after the conference, and
we had a great big thing out on the parade grounds where everybody went out. So you had every general there was in Europe and every general that was in Washington was there. I was real busy! For instance, at every place and base we went to, Mr. Roosevelt had to ride in a jeep. Overnight we had to take the jeep seat out and cut the legs off and raise that seat up because Mr. Roosevelt's legs, you know, were not moveable.

Life: [Talking about President Roosevelt, Mr. Hodges remembered an attempt to tape record Mr. Roosevelt that reminded him of recent tapings, including those involving President Clinton.]

Mr. Hodges: That brings up a story that is current today in the news. Going out to that parade ground, someone in the press somebody wanted to put in some kind of tape thing [to tape the President]. Mr. Rowe, who was head of secret service, walked up to me and said, “No” just like that, very quietly. I said to them, “Rip it out!” Now here is this man now in [1998] Washington that is putting a recorder on a girl’s back, who will go in and tape the President!

Life: Back during Roosevelt’s days you couldn’t do that?

Mr. Hodges: Right.

Life: Did you ever actually see Eisenhower?

Mr. Hodges: Oh, yes, I saw General Eisenhower! The night that we made the invasion into Sicily and my outfit dropped the 82nd Airborne, he came to the briefing, and I was a briefing officer then. My job was to [call up the briefing officers]. It angers me [today] a bit to watch some of these people on the air. For instance there was a weatherman, the intelligence man, and the operations man that were briefing the pilots. There was a group commander, and my job was to call them. The intelligence man went first, then the weatherman. I watched this CNN and you get that guy talking about the weather and sometimes he talks an hour. I gave him three minutes!

Life: Three minutes!

Mr. Hodges: We didn’t have much weather information anyway. So I gave him three minutes and put him on last. We had little time for the weather. We were concerned with Eisenhower, who was going to be in a great big tent way out in the desert in North Africa in Tunis. I met General Eisenhower then and after the Sicilian and Italian [campaign]. Then we moved back to England. I flew back to England December 26, 1943. We stayed in England in ’44, getting ready for the invasion. I can’t read any more, but I watch the history channel, and the other day the “Battle of the Bulge” [movie] was on. We were very much involved with the Battle of the Bulge. But I saw General Eisenhower on several occasions.

Life: Did you ever talk to him?

Mr. Hodges: Oh, yes!

Life: What did you think of him?

Mr. Hodges: General Eisenhower was a great man. General Beetle Smith, his chief of staff, was my greatest friend. Eisenhower was on the go all the time. He didn’t do a lot of talking. I think what happened in W.W.II, the people behind the scene, the captains and the majors and the sergeants, had to lay out all the plans and
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bring it all together. One of the smartest things Eisenhower did [was to assemble a great staff]. The man behind all that throng, my great hero, was General Marshall in Washington. He picked the people.

Life: I guess Eisenhower also had a great talent for picking the right people?

Mr. Hodges: Yes, but every decision was okayed by George Marshall, including the selection of Eisenhower himself. Roosevelt found that he couldn’t spare Marshall [from Washington, DC]. And after Marshall retired from the military, he later on became Secretary of State.

Life: He had the great Marshall Plan after the war.

Mr. Hodges: Oh, yes! It was one of the great things they put in, that Marshall Plan [to restore the destroyed areas, even in Germany]. Americans didn’t do like a lot of other people had done, including the Japanese, who when they won something, they went in and slaughtered everything. But we put Germany back on its feet, and, of course, I went back to Germany after the war. I was in the Berlin Airlift. The Berlin Airlift stopped the so-called Cold War, because we showed the Russians that we could feed and clothe the people in divided Berlin for eight months [in 1948].

Life: [After World War II, Germany was partitioned into four zones: American, British, French, and Russian. Berlin was in the Russian zone, but it too was partitioned into four zones. The Berlin Airlift was necessitated when the Russians closed the roads leading into Berlin.]

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Mr. Hodges: The Russians had blocked the roads off. So everything that Berlin got during that period of time was flown in from Frankfurt, Germany.

Life: You had a narrow air corridor?

Mr. Hodges: Yes. We flew in C47s, and later on C46s, about three feet apart. Flew out there and just dumped [supplies] out and went right back to Frankfurt to pick another load up 24 hours around the clock. The Airlift was the [climax] of the Cold War. And to me winning the Cold War was as big as beating the Germans. The Russians thought they could take Berlin and make it communist.

Life: Did you ever see General George Patton?

Mr. Hodges: Yes. That was a good story. A couple of days before Roosevelt was to fly into Sicily, we were going to have lunch, and Roosevelt liked a martini and I had the recipe that the secret service had give me for the martini, a dry martini. And we were trying to get [the ingredients] and Patton said, “Well, I’ll bring the gin.” I had already planned for the gin, and the boy went outside. He said, “General Patton is bringing the gin.” I said, “You gonna get the gin? If Patton brings gin, we’ll have that after he leaves.” And, of course, Patton never did bring any gin. That was the end of that story!

Life: [Laughs] Was Patton as boisterous as you hear?

Mr. Hodges: Oh, yes, big show off. He particularly liked to show off in front of us little people. He’d walk around, “Where you from, major?” and that kind of stuff, you know. He liked to show off. But there are lots [types of] greatness, and you must have all
kinds of men, but when they turned him loose! I remember we were in England, and we were doing resupply work. Patton got up to the Loire River [which flows through Orleans, France], and there were 30,000 Germans on one side, and it’s not a big wide river. On this side Patton had run out of gas, and we had a couple of days of bad weather. I remember that day we had turned loose 1,300 C47s loaded with gas up there and he started running again! He was a gambler. A lot of generals won’t gamble on that thing. Patton was a gambler, and luckily he always came out pretty good.

Life: You hear stories, like in the movies about him, that he was kind of insubordinate to even his superior officers.

Mr. Hodges: Oh, yes! Well, of course, remember in Sicily Patton was over Bradley. You switch around and one day you may be king and the next day you may be a peasant.

Life: [Laughs] He had that incident which really hurt him. Were you there when he slapped the soldier?

Mr. Hodges: Yes. I was in Sicily when that happened; of course, there was very little publicity put out about it at the time. There were things that happened like that. If you were in the military then, you didn’t go around like you do now with a microphone telling everybody what happened. I think that he would have got away with that first slap, but in six or seven days he slapped another one. He had gone to visit in the hospital, and he found that some of his soldiers that were in the hospital didn’t have any patches and there wasn’t anything wrong with them. Back in that day you go on sick call and they put you in the hospital a couple of days to check you. And so he slapped him and told him to get his rear end up and get out. Then in about six or seven days, he did the same thing and that was about the end of it. The great history, you know, in the later days there in Sicily all he commanded was a paper headquarters. He had a band and a few things like that. They came back to England, and they prepared a big army [existing only on paper] that was going up into the other end of England. And that was a decoy. And the Germans bought that. And, of course, this is part of a military strategy, but they had a decoy and he was going in up there. They’d always leak enough information [for German agents]. Of course that was very valuable as part of intelligence and part of how you run things. But when he struck out and started to cross Europe, he was something! Remember that a great bulk of our soldiers at that time where 18, 19 to 23 to 24 year-old-people, just come out. And Patton was the first general they saw; he walked around with that swagger stick and everything. And that was one of his great ways of doing things.

Life: Some people thought he was too rough, too profane.

Mr. Hodges: I think as history’s going on, Patton’s getting a better name now.

Life: Yes, sir. After the war was over, you remained in Europe in the army?

Mr. Hodges: No, I came back in late May right after the war [in Europe] ended, and I came back here. They sent me back because, you see, we were still at war in Japan. I was sent back and I went to Laurinburg, Maxton, N. C. It’s a great huge base that was built for gliders and everything. It’s closed now. But it was where we trained glider pilots and things like that during the war. Well, I
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came back to begin to work there because we thought we were
going to redeploy people out of Europe back there to the states and
then on over to Japan, because at that given time everybody
thought the Japan war would probably take a couple of years. I
went up to Maxton. Then the minute after they dropped the atom
bomb, redeployment was out of the picture. I think it was a great
rush to judgment, but everybody was rushed to get out of the
military and close it down. I think we made a lot of mistakes in
closing the military down. But I did stay there but just a little while
because a man [General Duke] I had served with had gone to
Bergstrom Field; that’s off in Texas. He had asked for me to be
there. I went down there as the director of personnel administra-
tion. I stayed there [in Texas] almost four years. I also went to the
Air University [in Tyndall, Fla.] for two schools. In 1949 I just got
out of command staff’s college, and they talked to me into doing
a lot of recruiting of the aviation cadets because of the Korean
War. So I went to New York City. I had one sergeant, myself, and
we had our office in the big federal building there. We had all the
New England colleges and everything. We’d go out and make a
speech to them and some of them would get up and leave. It was
a volunteer thing. Probably start out with a hundred people in the
morning in a group and you’d wind up with eight or ten. I got
dissatisfied with the job because I knew enough about the military
to know to climb the ladder; you had to be where everything was
going on. So I finally got out of there and went back to Germany.
I got an assignment back in Germany at Landstule, Germany.
That was a brand new base we had just built there.

Life: When did you get out of the military?

Mr. Hodges: I retired the last day of September of 1961.

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Life: Where you in Korea?

Mr. Hodges: No. I never did go. When I came back here, I took a
couple of short tours in the Pentagon and different places like that.

Life: Oh. When you were in Africa and Sicily, what do remember
as the most exciting, dangerous thing that happened to you?

Mr. Hodges: The invasion of Sicily, for one reason because it was
the first [combat] for me and for all the people around me. It’s easy
to talk about a war, but you get a different perspective when you
get involved with the mechanics of it.

Life: [Mr. Hodges told us about the relief planes in the Battle of
the Bulge.]

Mr. Hodges: If we’d lost the Battle of the Bulge, we would have
had another year or more in Germany. The US troops were
surrounded about four days around the 24th, 25th of December
right on into Christmas. Everything was closed in down right
around in England [because of the weather]. But we started
shooting the airplanes up, and we threw things right out of the C-
47’s and 46’s. We threw things right out the doors of the things.
And maybe 40% of the stuff got to the places they were intended
to. But this is the thing we had to do to resupply. Once we won the
Battle of the Bulge, everything then was just kind of clean up and
mop up.

Life: Did you ever have any contact with German prisoners?

Mr. Hodges: Oh, yes, we had prisoners. I had contact with
prisoners. First one I had contact with was from Sicily. You know
the old saying about Italians. They love women, spaghetti, and wine. When we put them to work, I had them as barbers. We had a lot of Italians that had been over to America and spoke English. I went down to the prisoner camp that second and third day in Sicily. A guy was holding his hand up and talking, wanting to find out what they could do. So we used them for everything. To make it [work] legal, for instance, cutting an enlisted man’s hair was five cents, because you didn’t want them to do it free. So it was five cents. We had them working in the mess halls and doing all that kind of stuff. Then later on in England we had German prisoners.

Life: Were the Germans tougher to deal with?

Mr. Hodges: German prisoners were a whole lot tougher to deal with.

Life: [Mr. Hodges told us that after the invasion of Sicily, he went to Rome].

Mr. Hodges: We went on up to Rome. That was a big day with me. I just went Rome sightseeing.

Life: When you got out of the military in '61, what did you do then?

Mr. Hodges: I came back here to Washington [N. C.] October 1st, and I stayed around for a while; and then, just at this time, the Cuban crisis thing came up. They had a big meeting at the courthouse, and one of the county commissioners that used to live out here on highway 264—I can’t think of his name—he came out to my place and got me to take him to the courthouse, and there was a whole bunch of ladies and everything out there. Everyone was talking about the shelters. You remember where all the bomb shelters were around Washington and everything. And, anyway, I didn’t know anything about civil defense; I had been in the military. But, anyway, January 1st I was named county civil defense director. I had to start out and write a plan. Of course, they had a draft plan. They were very much interested. So I stayed here as county civil defense until I went to Raleigh with Governor Moore, and I was named Director of Emergency Planning. North Carolina was one of the few states that didn’t put the emergency planning and civil defense together on paper. So I had that office for about two and a half years, and then the civil defense director retired, and the governor made me director so then I started wearing both hats then and I stayed here. First and only time I’ve known that they used the emergency plan was during the Martin Luther King [assassination]. We set up headquarters, all the communications and everything. The governor [had an underground office set up]. So we were about 16 to 18 days under the ground. We didn’t have much trouble down here in Washington. We had a little trouble in the Greenville area and Tarboro and places like that. That first night when Martin Luther King was killed, a mob ran all over the mansion grounds in Raleigh because there was no fence. I’ve learned a whole lot about the government because I traveled during my four years in that state civil defense emergency plan. I went to every county in the state, because a lot only had a few volunteer people.

Life: What did you do after that?

Mr. Hodges: Moore went out of office in January of ’69. Bob Scott came in. The day they were having inauguration I had my letter of resignation. I carried my letter over and put in over on
Governor Scott’s office. I guess it was the second day, and he called me and said, “I got your letter, but I’ll talk to you later on.” So I stayed on there till about August, but I didn’t want to make another government career.

Life: [Mr. Hodges told us that he adopted two boys in Germany]

Mr. Hodges: I adopted two boys in Germany. I had two young boys then eight and 10 years old, so I didn’t want to take on [government duties] and then this motel thing came open. I managed to get together a little bit and bought that motel and moved back here. I sold that motel in October of ’86 and I moved out here [Washington Harbor]. So I’ve been right out here ever since.

Life: You’ve been right prominent in Democratic politics.

Mr. Hodges: Well, yes. I’m very much a political thing because one of my great master heroes of the time was the late Lindsey Warren. Sometime when you young people are down at the courthouse, if you look behind the jury box, the first three people on the jury box are Lindsey, his father, and his grandfather. Of course, I knew him when during that period of time I got out the military and went to Washington. He went to Congress in 1926. President Roosevelt made him Comptroller General of the United States.

Life: He’s from Washington?

Mr. Hodges: He’s from Washington. Right up here on Main Street.
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Conclusion

By Tempie Phelps

I thoroughly enjoyed my interview with Mr. Bill Hodges. He is a very knowledgeable man about the history of World War II, especially North Africa and Italy where he was in the Army Air Force. I learned about his adventures with very famous people in the military and world leadership during that epic era, such as General Eisenhower, Winston Churchill, Chiang-Kai-Shek, President Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, and General Patton. One particular story fascinated me. Mr. Hodges was an escort officer for President Roosevelt at the Tehran Conference. Mr. Hodges told us that President Roosevelt liked a martini before dinner. The Secret Service people had given Mr. Hodges the recipe. General Patton was there and offered to help by supplying the gin. Laughing, Mr. Hodges told us, “Of course, Patton never did bring any gin!” General Patton was a captivating figure, remembers Mr. Hodges. He was rough, abrupt, intimidating, but also friendly. The general asked Mr. Hodges, “Where are you from, son?”

My colleagues from *Life on the Pamlico* and I would like to thank Mr. Hodges for taking time to share with us his recollections of his involvement in Democratic politics, World War II, and later civil defense under Governor Dan Moore. He is winsome, humorous, and still lucid at age 93, as his recollection about some Italian prisoners of war shows: “You know the old saying about Italians: they love women, spaghetti, and wine.”
Mr. Bill Hodges welcomes Tempie Phelps (left) and Stephanie Clark to his residence in Washington Harbor.