

Osos man recalls 42 years of friendship with Wesley Clark

Ted Hill went to West Point with Wesley Clark and is now a 60-year-old retired math professor.

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LAURA DICKINSON



TED HILL WAS WEST POINT ROOMMATE

BY RYAN HUFF
THE TRIBUNE

Where most people see only a starched four-star general in presidential hopeful Wesley Clark, Los Osos resident Ted Hill knows a prankster who was willing to bend the rules in their years together at West Point.

But don't take that to mean that

Hill doesn't think his good friend and former military academy roommate isn't the man to lead the country.

"He can relate to the average American better than (President) Bush," Hill said. "He wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth. If you just listen to what he has to say,

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Wesley Clark as a cadet at West Point.

Hill

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there should be no question in your mind he's the best choice for president."

In a recent interview, Hill — a 60-year-old retired math professor — talked about the strengths he sees in Clark and recalled memories of their four-decade-old friendship.

Clark and Hill met in 1962 as freshman cadets at West Point, the U.S. Army's prestigious military academy in New York.

Clark was a 17-year-old high school swimming team captain from Little Rock, Ark. Hill was a Brooklyn-born 18-year-old who had hoppedscotched across the United States in a military family.

Keeping with the strict rules of West Point, their room had no posters, radios, phones or other civilian belongings. Their closets housed dozens of uniforms; their shoeshine kits rested in an abandoned fireplace.

"You could walk into a room and tell if a pencil was out of place," Hill said. "It was a lot like prison."

They enjoyed studying together on facing desks and traveled to Ivy League schools as members of the debate team. Like the 850 other students in their class, the duo experienced the typ-



Wesley Clark is in the third row down of seated cadets, second from right. Ted Hill is on the top row of standing cadets, far left.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TED HILL

ical hazing from upperclassmen.

When Clark and Hill were presented with a steak-and-potatoes dinner, upperclassmen would slide the food into a trash can and say, "you can help yourself to some nice ice cubes."

With tricks like these, Hill lost 40 pounds from his 6-foot-2, 210-pound frame.

"They were trying to break people," Hill said. "And they broke a lot of people; we lost 150 (cadets) in the first month."

Eyes on No. 1

The tactics didn't faze Clark and Hill, though, and both moved

to the top echelons of their academic class. Clark carried his class' top grade point average to graduation, the same spot that five-star World War II Gen. Douglas MacArthur held decades before.

Clark "always wanted to be No. 1, and he knew he could do it," Hill said, himself ranked No. 13.

The beginning of their friendship was filled with pranks.

They posted cardboard over windows in a West Point lounge and snuck in their girlfriends, a forbidden act at which they never got caught. And Hill almost convinced Clark he could pretend to be the priest at Clark's wedding.

After their first semester, the Army assigned Clark and Hill to separate roommates, hoping they could help out poorer-performing students.

Hill and Clark graduated from West Point in 1966 and went on to graduate school — Clark on a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford and Hill to Stanford University.

In 1969, the soldiers were sent in separate units to Vietnam. Hill served as an officer for a unit that built bridges and removed mines. Clark commanded a 100-man mechanized infantry company.

Over the years, they would meet up again. In 1970, after Clark

was seriously wounded in an ambush in Vietnam, he was taken to a base in Japan for surgery.

Hill was also there and, while eating at the base's officers' club, heard about his friend. That night, he said, he went to the infirmary and found Clark, then rolled his bandaged and aching friend in a wheelchair to the officer's club for drinks.

Friendship endures

After the war, the men took separate paths in their lives of public service. Hill retired from the army as a captain, earned a doctorate degree and started his career as a Georgia Tech University mathematics professor. He moved about four years ago to Los Osos, where he dedicates himself to math research.

Clark moved up the military ranks, teaching at West Point, directing strategic planning at the Pentagon and becoming NATO's supreme allied commander.

He served in the NATO role from 1997 to 2000, ending with his abrupt firing by then-Secretary of Defense William Cohen over what was seen as a questionable order to deploy a helicopter assault team to block a surprise Russian advance into a major airfield in Kosovo during military peace-keeping actions there.

Clark "took it hard, but not too hard," Hill recalled. "He's really

resilient."

Since their teenage days at West Point, the two have kept in close contact, serving as each others' frequent house guests from places such as upstate New York to NATO headquarters in Belgium.

Now, the retired general finds himself campaigning for the nation's highest office. After an essential tie for third place last week in New Hampshire's primary, he looks forward to the seven-state Super Tuesday primaries.

And Hill finds himself cheering his buddy's bid for the Democratic Party's nomination.

"He's good at forging alliances and listening to all sides of an issue," Hill said. "He's one of the smartest, hardest-working people I know. He sleeps four or five hours a night. If people get to know him, I think he's got a very good chance."

Either way, the decades-long friendship between the general and the mathematician will endure.

"I consider myself an average person; he went on to become a four-star general," Hill said. "And through it all, we've remained close friends."

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