Bill Jason Priest, Community College Pioneer

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While a junior in college, Priest had been invited, along with most of the community, to the wedding of a rather prominent couple. He attended, and at the reception, he saw her again—the beautiful girl who used to ride horse back by his house, Marietta Shaw. The difference in grade-level had separated them in high school, but now he was close to being a college graduate, and she was an elementary teacher in French Camp. The chasm had closed, and she seemed approachable. The conversation was engaging and the attraction was mutual. They stepped outside the flurry of celebration and spent the remainder of the evening talking. Bill and Marietta stayed so late getting to know each other that Priest’s ride left and he had to hitch-hike home.

Priest discovered that although he and Marietta had been separated by two grades in high school, there was in reality four years difference in age since he had skipped a grade, but years were irrelevant because the common interests and intellectual compatibility were so strong. They dated through his college graduation and his stint in professional baseball. As the relationship reached the point of commitment, he was teaching at Modesto Junior Col-
lege and she, a music major, was teaching in elementary school. The local school board where she taught did not allow its female teachers to be married, so on March 8, 1941, Bill and Marietta eloped to Minden, Nevada. It was a small private ceremony held in the living room of a friend. The nuptials were presided over by a Lutheran minister. Marietta was Catholic and Priest believed in a supreme being but without affiliation to a particular denomination. The religion of the event was not as important to them as the legality of the lifetime vow they were making to each other.

Their jobs were sixty miles apart, and Marietta would be fired if the school board knew of her marriage, so they kept it a secret. Each Wednesday night, they would meet at a midpoint to have dinner and talk. The secret was kept until Marietta was offered a contract for the following year. She did not intend to continue teaching there, but she could not afford to have a firing on her record if she ever intended to teach again.

Life directions were a bit uncertain for the newlyweds. There was a war raging overseas and Priest felt that the United States could not continue its laissez-faire attitude much longer. He not only believed the U. S. involvement in the war was inevitable, but also that it was imminent. He was aware that he was of prime age to be drafted and felt that the likelihood of his returning from the war alive was slim. He decided that he should live as though he were going to be killed in a couple of years.

This abandonment of all that seemed rational and well planned might have frightened most young brides back to the safety of their mother’s home, but Marietta shared Priest’s spirit for adventure and love of the outdoors. They rented a cabin near a river just outside Stockton. She helped with the income by substitute teaching and he once again turned to his baseball skills for income. Priest pitched in the California State League on Sundays. He rested on Mondays; went trout fishing Tuesday through Friday, and rested on Saturday in preparation for Sunday’s game. It was a Tom Sawyer summer.

Priest’s prognosis proved right. By October 1, 1941, he was recruited and commissioned an Ensign in the Navy. He was assigned
to Naval Intelligence and given two weeks of training in San Francisco in early November and returned home with open orders that simply directed, “If war begins, report here.”  

Continuing to live life as if in his last weeks, he played out his love of sports in every day’s activities. He was quail hunting in Sonoma, California on December 7, 1941. He was bringing in his kill for the day, one bird, when he ran into his father-in-law, who was the poultry man at Sonoma State Home. He told Priest about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. America was in the war. Priest reported to the office in San Francisco by seven p.m. that night. He was told to go home, get his things, and report back at eight a.m. the next morning. Priest arrived at his house in Mountain View at eleven p.m. where he had only a brief time to change from freelance sportsman to dedicated naval officer and to bid farewell to his wife of nine months, not knowing if they would ever see each other again. 

Always punctual, he was back in San Francisco the following morning at eight a.m. His assignment was as officer in charge of Mackay radio operations. The duty station had two officers and nine men. Initially the work shifts covered seven days a week. A day off was assigned to each man, Priest’s was Saturday. With the schedule being staggered eight-hour shifts, Priest ended up with fifty-six consecutive hours off-duty. Never one to be content with only one task, with approval from his superior officer, Priest enrolled in classes at Berkeley. This required loss of sleep, but it was for a limited time and the outcome would be worth it. His goal was to earn a Secondary Administrator Certificate. In his bachelor’s degree he had majored in history and minored in Spanish. As he began his course work leading to a master’s degree, he switched from letters and science to education.  

After eight months, Priest was transferred to an instructor job in the Navy’s Pre-Flight Program. Naval aviators were doing so well against the Japanese, Priest was soon reassigned again to Intelligence. Word came that he was being shipped to the Philippines; therefore, he did not enroll for a third semester at Berkeley. In a goodbye session, the head of the romance languages department
encouraged Priest to pursue a doctorate. His plan for Priest was logical and efficient. In the Philippines, there would be a great opportunity to gather research on the war’s impact on the educational system there. The Philippine education system was not a heavily researched topic, but one of interest to academia. Priest wanted to earn a master’s degree first and was advised that the master’s thesis could be the first chapter of a doctoral dissertation. In a truthful jest he was told that at the time of the defense of his dissertation, who but Priest would know more about such a distant and discrete subject? This should allow him to face the questioning by his committee and other university professors with confidence. The plan sounded strategic and quite doable, and Priest began the early steps in his pursuit of a doctorate.

During his stateside duty, Priest became friends with a man whose name he lists when asked who have been his heroes and mentors. Lt. Commander Curtis Peck was Priest’s commanding officer for two years in Naval Intelligence. Peck did not have a formal education, but had an aptitude for understanding technology and had learned a great deal during a hitch as an enlisted radio man in World War I. In civilian life, he was the head engineer of RCA. Peck was proof that a liberal arts bachelor’s degree was not the only route to a successful career, nor did the lack of a four-year degree indicate a lack of intelligence. He and Priest engaged in long philosophical discussions. The topics had no boundaries and covered everything from military personnel management to daily living in civilian life. Ensign Priest felt he was the recipient of valuable information and much wisdom from the Lt. Commander. Peck subsequently gave Priest a letter of entry to take to RCA in New York City and learn about the development of television in its infancy. At that time television was little more than a potential, but people in the field were forecasting long range and knew color broadcasts were just a few years away. Perhaps this early glimpse of things to come planted the seed for Priest’s early exploration into televised instruction.

Most of Priest’s overseas duty in the war was spent in the Philippines and Japan. While given assignments that kept him off the
front lines, Priest, however, was not spared the visual horrors of war. His duties took him into areas where the population center had been wrested from the Japanese. His task involved ferreting out the location of guerrillas and assessing the damage to communication systems. This included being part of the advanced intelligence party that entered Hiroshima in 1945, shortly after the atomic bombing.

His first tour of overseas duty was in the Philippines. This was a mix of military duty, the hideous sights of war, and personal good fortune. The positive aspect was the incredible access he had to the educational leaders and their willingness to provide information. He took canned turkey to several Filipino leaders who had been incarcerated in a Catholic Church by the Japanese. The prisoners were Filipinos that the Japanese had held in high regard and had not thought of as threatening. This group of national leaders who had been liberated by the Americans included the senior educational officer of the Philippines, Santa Tomas. A Harvard graduate, Tomas was an internationally famous ethnologist. With his permission, Priest was given the freedom to interview people, ship files and materials back to Priest’s address in the United States, and to disseminate a survey. Anyone who has done research is very pleased with a fifty percent return on a survey. Priest received a 106 percent return. Filipino educators who heard about the survey asked for copies in order to be able to participate, thus expanding the return. These surveys were sent to Tomas’ office; from there he mailed them to Priest, after he returned to the states. Priest was overwhelmed and humbled by the desire of these people to assist American research of their educational system. Perhaps there was a hope it would bring improvements for them from the wealthy nation that now occupied their impoverished country.

The interviews and surveys took many weeks. A cliché often attributed to the military is “hurry up and wait.” So it was for Priest. He had been given what was described as a hazardous assignment, but it was not known exactly when he would be deployed to carry out the plan. His superiors told him to just wait. He waited twenty-five days checking in each day only to be told it was not yet time.
He used that waiting time to interview and collect data for his thesis. After twenty-five days, he was told the plan had been changed and the Americans were no longer involved in that operation. His new assignment would be to go to Zambawango to hire and train a team of Filipinos in the censorship of communications. Again they were uncertain as to when he would leave. Again he waited. For another fifteen days, he was able to collect data for his research.

Even in the routine of daily life was the ever-present reminder of the terrible world trauma that had brought him there. He once saw a man walking down the beach carrying another man’s head by the hair. The man told Priest he was taking it to the authorities to collect the bounty “on the man’s head.” The American English idiom of using the part to represent the whole had been taken literally in translation. After the fighting had ended, the devastation continued. Priest witnessed a group of Filipino fishermen who had found an unexploded torpedo and were gathering the powder from it to use in killing fish. These innocent fishermen knew little about explosives. While they were working on it, the torpedo exploded leaving no identifiable body parts. The events were gruesome and innumerable, forever etching in his memory sites and emotions difficult to discuss.

The experience in Japan was worse. Priest was part of the advance party to Hiroshima after the atomic bomb had been dropped on August 6, 1945. The members of this select team were the first Americans to enter the city as soon as the radio activity indicated it was safe. He recalled traveling down a road lined on each side with Japanese soldiers, their backs to the road. They were looking outward, protecting the Americans, who were their captors. The Emperor had issued an order and the Japanese were highly disciplined. Americans were no longer the enemy, but the honored victors. During the routine survey of the area, Priest saw people with indescribable injuries. He was struck with sorrow, apprehension, and empathy knowing that just days before, his countrymen used the most formidable weapon on earth on their city and within five minutes annihilated one-hundred-and-thirty-thousand people and destroyed ninety percent of the city. At the same time, Priest was
filled with pride in being an American and knowing that by his country’s action, many more lives had been saved. In President Harry Truman’s radio address to the American public just sixteen hours after the bombing of Hiroshima, he explained, “The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid manyfold. . . . It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam. Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum.”

As Priest went about his duties in Hiroshima, each person he saw or with whom he spoke was injured, had lost a loved one, or was close to someone who was critically wounded. He saw a man who had been looking out a window from miles away at the time of the bomb and the window shattered in his face. Like most who have served their country during a war, Priest was profoundly affected by the experience. It seemed to him that with all of the intelligence and problem solving mechanisms available to mankind, there should be a less violent means for resolving philosophical differences. He also was deeply disturbed by the poverty of the Orient, Philippines, and Manila. The suffering of these people in their daily struggles to live washed against the backdrop of the horrors of war, death, and destruction, underscored for Priest that one must do what is important each day. Life is temporary and fleeting, and to make a difference for your fellowman, later is not a time option.

The end of the war came and Priest mustered out of the Navy on February 16, 1945, but continued in the U.S. Naval Reserve. With his combined full-time and part-time duty, he retired as a captain with twenty years of service. Like baseball, his military career, most specifically his immediate arrival in Hiroshima after the atomic bomb, gave him a certain notoriety throughout his higher education career. It was the end of the war and the return of the G.I.s to the United States that caused the surge of the junior college, that wave of the future Priest had visualized in the mid-1930s.