

## MY RECOLLECTIONS OF MY TIME IN CHATEAUROUX: BY DON HILLEY

I was 16 years old and enjoying life in sunny Southern California (Redlands - my father, William A. Hilley, was stationed at Norton Air Force Base) when my Dad was assigned to go to Chateauroux, France. I was desperate not to go. My life was playing basketball in Redlands. I did not want that life to be disrupted.

I got my driver's license when I was 16 in California, and was enjoying the "freedom" that wheels brought. It shocked me when I found out that the driving age in France was 18. I was bummed out about that.

I was enjoying some success with basketball in California, and when I found out that our family was moving to France, I wasn't sure they even had basketball teams there. As it turned out, going to Chateauroux in 1962 turned out well. The base at Chateauroux Air Station had a nice gym. So, that's pretty much where I lived. My brother, John, was playing then and between the two of us we began to play with other boys at the gym and think about building a team.

The '62 - '63 season was fun. We were Com-Z Co-Champions. The team did well enough to make it to what we referred to as the European Tournament (USAREUR). It was in Heidelberg, Germany. We didn't win, but made a good showing.

The '62 - '63 season set us up for the next year, our '63-'64 season. I was a senior and my brother, John was a sophomore. It turned out to be amazing as we went undefeated through the regular season and the European Tournament held in Kiaserslautern, Germany. We were cocky with our red berets and chants during warm-ups for games. One of the funniest things that happened — well it wasn't funny at the time — was when our regular undefeated season was on the line in a game against Toul. We were down 17 points at halftime. In a high school game, that's a lot. The halftime locker room was sullen and quiet when Bob Holmes spoke up and said: "Don't worry coach, we got 'em". I was afraid Bob was going to be thrown out of the gym. But as luck and determination would have it, we did manage to win.

Playing basketball overseas had its advantages. We traveled, enjoyed some of Germany and England. In England we expanded our horizons visiting the Soho district, seeing things we had never seen before including the play "Oliver". It was there that I developed an instant appreciation for Beatles music when I was watching a stripper in a Soho bar while this great new music was playing. Momentarily ignoring the stripper, I thought to myself -- that's great music. Each time I hear "I Want To Hold Your Hand", I think of that scene. We also met some nice people, military and civilian alike. One such person was a man named Chappie James, later to become the Air Force's first black four star general. He was a Colonel in London at the time, his son playing on the Lakenheath team. I remember him treating our team to breakfast after the day of the game at the base. His son, Danny James, went from Lakenheath to the Air Force Academy.

My best friend, Bob Holmes, called me "Stick" because I was so skinny. I called him Blob. I

guess it's what kids do.

There were some memorable non-basketball times in Chateauroux as well. Things I remember include how much I didn't like having a French friend — a program that Mom set me up for. It didn't last long, just long enough for me to be the Ugly American. I was having dinner with my French friend's family, when they explained to me in French that I didn't need to eat all of the asparagus spears. They saw me trying to chew the stalk end which, because they didn't trim it, was basically wood. But I stuck to it and I insisted in my best broken French that in America we eat the whole thing. Now the truth is that the only asparagus I had ever eaten was from a can, and I could definitely eat all of those because they were soggy green slogs. So there I was basically chewing wood and telling them how good it was. They must have thought I was an idiot.

I also remember being one of the “angels” in the senior play, “My Three Angels”. So much for my acting career. Going to DeMolay meetings after I got my driver's license. We figured out how to shorten the ceremony portions of the meeting without the adults noticing (by paraphrasing). That gave us an extra half-hour after the meetings and before we had to be home. We used the time wisely at the “Bar Centrale”.

One of the other funny stories that is part of Hilley lore arose from a party at Bobby Hoke's house which was across a field outside of the housing area where we lived (Brassieux). The 1964 basketball season was over and brother, Bill, was home from college. John, Bill and I went to Bobby's party. Now in those days it was pretty easy to get one of the GI's to buy liquor, so this party was well equipped. I don't remember much about the actual party except that I thought Bobby was a good dancer. But, when it came time to go home, John had had a little too much. So with Bill on one side of him and me on the other, we crossed the field and strategized on how to get John past our parents' door which was along the hallway before my brother's room. So when we got inside, it was my job to find the dog, and ask our parents if they wanted the dog in their room — and regardless of the answer, to stick the dog in and close their door. Our plan worked like a charm, except when we were getting John in bed, we realized one of his shoes was lost somewhere in the field. Now, growing up, we only had one pair of shoes, so there was no putting on another pair of shoes the next morning kind of solution. I can't remember if we got a flashlight and went back in the field that night or got up early to find the shoe, but the shoe was found and the day was saved -- parents none the wiser.

After the end of the basketball season, and after I could finally drive again (I turned 18) my friend Bob Holmes and I treated ourselves to a trip from Chateauroux, over to Switzerland, down to Rome and back by way of Paris. It was a very low budget affair – of course we had almost no money. We borrowed my parents VW Beetle and off we went. Our first night on the road was an experience. I got so tired driving and sitting in that cramped Beetle that I pulled over on this very narrow road and just tried to stretch out on the ground and sleep. No sleeping bags, no nothing. I can't remember what we did for lodging for most of the rest of the trip except when we got near Rome. We went on the military base at Livorno and went to the gym. We played around a while and then hid until the gym closed. We had a glorious night of sleeping on wrestling mats and had a bathroom with showers and toilets. Kings of the road! I do remember

one harrowing experience when I thought I could pass a bus in the Beetle — going up hill. About half way past the bus, another bus was coming from the other direction. It was a narrow two lane road. I thought that was the end of us, but we squeezed over next to one bus and the other bus squeezed in the other direction and we survived without a scratch. I was more respectful of the Beetle's lack of acceleration after that.

In those days, in Rome, we could just drive right up to the famous sights, Trevi Fountain, the Piazza Navona, St Peters were all navigable by road map – just stop, park and look. One of the best meals I have ever eaten was at a little restaurant on that trip. I asked the waiter what it was and I swear he told me it was “Cardinale”. Although I have searched, it has never been rediscovered by me. The return trip through Paris introduced us to the Pigalle district. Enough said. We then drove over to the Champs Elysee and because we had little money, we endeavored to get into the officer's club. I may have had a check or something or perhaps we could have charged it – I don't remember, but we were pretty intent on eating there. The only problem was that I didn't have a tie and that was necessary for entry. So I took off my belt and tied it around my neck and they let me in. I guess they didn't have a rule about not having a belt.

We made it back home to Chateauroux safe and sound and later that summer, 1964, I was winging my way to Lackland Air Force Base. I was accepted to play basketball at the Air Force Academy Prep School, and basic training was required.

My time at Chateauroux was some of the most meaningful time in my life. The friends and experiences has enhanced my life thereafter. After Chateauroux, it was the Air Force Academy Prep School, the Air Force Academy, Florida State University (BS & MS) and a law degree. Notwithstanding my life after Chateauroux, there will always be a part of me there.