

Interview with Bill Malkemes
SESSION 1 (4/29/2021)
Timed Log

[00:00:00]

Bill Malkemes was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1948. As a result of his father's military career, the family moves frequently, living briefly near Fort Eustis in Newport News, Virginia. His father entered the army around age seventeen and served worldwide, including in Vietnam and the Philippines. His father's assignment as a transportation officer at the United States Military Academy at West Point during his last two years of high school allows him to see the campus firsthand [1965-1966].

[00:03:55]

Graduates from Highland Falls High School [New York] on June 25, [1966] and reports to West Point on July 1. Being considered for West Point involves a holistic review of students' academics, athletics, extracurriculars, and leadership skills in addition to a recommendation by a [United States] senator or congressman and medical clearance. The attrition rate between his entering and graduating class is thirty percent. However, the rate has improved over time in part due to increasing selectivity.

[00:07:19]

Several well-qualified cadets are ultimately admitted as alternates after others drop out, as senators and congressman are limited in their number of candidates.

[00:08:23]

Frequent moves prevent his participation in high school Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC). However, his parents instill discipline and values at home.

[00:09:43]

He's ultimately admitted to West Point as a well-qualified alternate; the frequent moves prevent him from building rapport with the congressman from his home state of Pennsylvania. His friend's father, General [John R.] Jannarone, the one-star general and Dean for Academics at West Point, learns he hasn't received an appointment in May [1966], and he receives one a week later. Graduates from West Point on June 3, 1970.

[00:12:17]

Though more familiar with West Point than some, it's still an eye-opener when he enters in 1966. Cadets spend the first day under pressure, running around to different locations [to check in], and by five o'clock that evening, they're in uniform and taking the oath of office over the Hudson River.

[00:15:47]

The commitment when he graduates in the Class of 1970 is five years. Class rankings are used to determine first assignments and priority selection for branches. The last people rank into infantry

and go to Vietnam. Class rankings are used to choose housing while stationed on posts as well. Today, cadets can sign up for additional years to get their choice of branch.

[00:19:42]

Demographically, the class includes several foreign cadets though less than one percent (six cadets in total) are Black. The most famous is Gary Steele, who's in the Army Sports Halls of Fame. The officers seem to enforce the standards for all cadets equally. Surviving the challenges as a class forges a common bond that remains today.

[00:22:36]

There are few Black and Hispanic officers during his cadet years. Though several of the officers are veterans who survived heavy combat in Vietnam, he only learns about the extent of their heroism later. General [William A.] Knowlton is the superintendent, and General Jannarone is the dean when he graduates. While those positions are relatively permanent, the commandant, who's in charge of discipline, rotates every year or two. The current superintendent of West Point is General [Darryl A.] Williams [the first African-American to occupy the position.]

[00:25:39]

Women teach in several departments at West Point, including athletics. Women eventually [enter as cadets] in 1976 and graduate in 1980. Currently, the first captain (the number one cadet in class leadership) is a woman.

[00:27:40]

Begins playing tennis around age thirteen or fourteen while at a week-long day camp near Fort Eustis, Virginia. Makes the [varsity] tennis team as a sophomore when he moves to northern Virginia and improves by playing more advanced players. Plays last two years of high school at Highland Falls, ranking eighth in the state during junior year and third during senior year. Also plays basketball and runs cross country and track.

[00:29:56]

Initially scouted by Coach Crowell to run cross country at West Point, but he chooses tennis instead, seeing more opportunity. Not highly recruited for tennis and has to fight to get a position on the freshman team due to the competitiveness. Arthur Ashe provides the instruction which allows him to improve significantly.

[00:31:54]

Arthur Ashe comes into West Point in 1967. Though Malkemes has heard about Ashe in northern Virginia, he never expects to meet him. He follows Ashe's career at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), but only learns about him being in the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) when Ashe gets his commission to serve two years in the army. (The West Point cadets serve at least five years.)

[00:33:57]

Malkemes meets Ashe for the first time when he visits a joint plebe (freshman) and varsity practice in spring 1967. Ashe is dressed in blue Davis Cup sweats. He's very humble, telling the cadets to call him Arthur but allowing them to call him Lieutenant Ashe if they feel

uncomfortable while other officers are around. The team learns Ashe will be spending a lot of time with them and helping coach whenever he doesn't have to fly out for Davis Cup. Everyone tries to impress him, but Ashe accurately identifies the order of the team lineup after a few minutes of watching them hit. He splits his time between the varsity and plebe teams in fall 1967. After hitting with the plebe players individually, he always gives them just one thing to improve. The team also sees a lot of Ashe in spring 1968.

[00:37:44]

Malkemes is number five on the freshman team, and Ashe spends extra time working with him in fall 1967. Ashe gives Malkemes some of his first instruction, which notably improves his game. He changes Malkemes' forehand to make him more competitive at the college level. By spring 1968, the top three players (on varsity) are seniors Barry Conway, Dick Bowers, and Billy Campbell. Malkemes, a sophomore, is number four, having passed Steve Strom and Joe Reeder, who ranked higher than him on the freshman team. He plays number one during junior and senior years, and he is ranked fifth in the east. The players on the team are evenly matched, and they compete well in the Ivy Leagues.

[00:41:23]

Malkemes spends most of his time working with Ashe during fall 1967, hitting with him at least once every ten days. Ashe teaches through demonstration. When Malkemes forgets to defend the line after hitting to his opponent's backhand, Ashe rips a ball past him, then smiles, exposing the vulnerability he wants him to correct.

[00:43:56]

Ashe leaves time after practice to talk about anything with the cadets, including his brother serving in Vietnam and race relations involving [Dr.] Martin Luther King [Jr.] and Stokely Carmichael.

[00:45:06]

The major topics of discussion are Vietnam and race issues. Dr. King is assassinated [on] April [4,] 1968, and Robert "Bobby" F. Kennedy is assassinated on June [6,] 1968. Race riots occur across Detroit, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Ashe plays in the U.S. Open at Forest Hills amid everything [in summer 1968]. Tommie Smith and John Carlos give the 1968 Olympics Black Power salute in Mexico City on [October 16, 1968]. Cadets are largely isolated, having only newspapers, radios, and professors for information about current events. After King's assassination, Malkemes asks Ashe about his criticisms from some Black leaders who say he's not militant enough. Ashe expresses a vision for things he wants to do in his own way.

[00:51:05]

When Ashe talks about his goals for the world, his main focus is South Africa. South African Cliff Drysdale correctly predicts the government won't give Ashe a visa.* Later in life, Ashe meets Nelson Mandela [in 1990].

* The first South African Tennis Open is held in 1968; Cliff Drysdale warns Ashe the apartheid government won't let him play. Ashe's visa application to South Africa is first denied in 1969,

then again in 1970 and 1971. Ashe is finally granted a visa and makes his first trip to South Africa in 1973.

[00:53:40]

After giving his first public speech at the Church of the Redeemer [in Washington D.C.] in March 1968., Ashe is verbally reprimanded when he returns to West Point. Ashe uses his experience to teach the tennis cadets to be cautious about what they say while in uniform or acting in an official military capacity. Several weeks after leaving the army, Ashe returns to Church of the Redeemer and speaks again.

[00:59:30]

Stokely Carmichael visits Ashe at West Point [likely in 1968]. Malkemes doesn't know about the visit at the time but later learns from Joe Reeder. A misunderstanding at Tony's Pizza in Highland Falls, NY, prevents them from being served. Though Carmichael initially believes it's racially motivated, it's ultimately revealed to be an issue of going to the wrong place to order.

[01:03:03]

Other public figures, like [New York City mayor] David Dinkins, may have visited Ashe at West Point. The cadets are most excited during the preparation for their Harvard match in 1970 when Ashe, Charlie Pasarell, Herb Fitzgibbon, and Ron Holmberg attend practice. The players enjoy trash-talking each other during the practice, including Ashe, who is usually quiet but has a wry sense of humor.

[01:07:35]

Ashe's humor is on display at the U.S. Open (sometime between 1980-1983) when Malkemes organizes a trip for his West Point colleagues in the math department. Malkemes introduces Ashe to his colleague, and Ashe jocularly comments on his unshaven appearance by inquiring about the department relaxing its standards. The last year Malkemes organizes the U.S. Open trip, the group visit a restaurant that Ashe recommends in Harlem.

[01:11:54]

Ashe wins the 1968 U.S. Open while stationed at West Point. Several other figures, who eventually became well-known, are at West Point simultaneously, including football line coach Bill Parcells and basketball coach Bobby Knight. Ashe and Knight seem to have been friends. After the U.S. Open, everyone at West Point knows Ashe.

[01:14:22]

In preparation for the Open, Ashe hits with some people at West Point, including Bill Cullen. Rod Laver is seeded first, and Ashe is seeded fifth. Once Ashe sees the draw, he hopes Cliff Drysdale will eliminate Laver. Ashe beats Tom Okker in the finals. West Point holds a special luncheon for Ashe after his win.

[01:18:27]

Ashe is honored at the place for dignitaries, colloquially called "The Poop Deck." Ashe gives a speech to the Corp of Cadets wishing them luck in Vietnam and talking about his brother,

Johnnie, being stationed there. Ashe also expresses pride for representing the army at the U.S. Open and the U.S. at the Davis Cup. He receives a standing ovation.

[01:22:46]

Malkemes graduates from West Point in 1970. Ashe completes his army service in 1969. When Malkemes asks Ashe about the Smith and Carlos' Black Power salute [October 1968, one month after his Open win], Ashe argues that he will use tennis in a "gentlemanly fashion" to question a lot of the racial assumptions being made, both in the U.S. and South Africa.

[01:25:03]

Malkemes watches on a television display in a Sears store as Ashe wins Wimbledon. En route to West Point from Fort Knox, Kentucky for the Inter-Service Championships, Malkemes parks at a Sears store to watch Ashe beat Jimmy Connors in Wimbledon. A persistent sales clerk attempts to encourage his purchase of the set as he's watching, but he declines. After the win, Malkemes sends a congratulations card, which Ashe answers. The two exchange letters and annual Christmas cards until the end of Ashe's life in 1993.

[01:28:36]

Malkemes teaches in the math department at West Point (1980-83), and he invites Ashe and Jeanne to West Point for Black History Month so Ashe can speak to the Corps of Cadets. While speaking with the army dignitaries, Ashe excuses himself to greet Malkemes, introduce Jeanne, and bring him into the circle of dignitaries. Jonathon Bell, an African-American and the top-ranking cadet on the tennis team, serves as Ashe and Jeanne's escort [Please see the Jonathon Bell interview for additional information]. Ashe also speaks specifically to the tennis and squash teams and responds to a plebe who asks him about John McEnroe's behavior on the Davis Cup team. Ashe explains he's working with McEnroe, but he'll always have his back due to his willingness to play Davis Cup.

[01:33:59]

Ashe's distaste for playing squash.

[01:36:26]

Overview of Malkemes' military career from graduation in 1970 to retirement in 1996. Chooses armor as his specialty, and completes a basic course at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Spends a year and a half in Germany. Completes flight school in Fort Wolters, Texas, and goes to Fort Rucker, Alabama for [UH-1] Huey [helicopter] training. Flies with the air cavalry as an aero scout in Vietnam and stays to keep the peace after the cease-fire. Returns to the U.S. on April 1, 1974. Completes an air safety course at the University of Southern California (USC). Returns to Fort Knox, Kentucky, to complete an armor advanced course in 1975. Goes to Fort Hood, Texas. Attends graduate school at Georgia Tech and returns to West Point [in 1980] to teach for three years. Goes to Naval War College in New Port, Rhode Island. Returns to Germany until 1987, then Fort Knox to be the battalion commander as a Lieutenant Colonel. Promoted to inspector general and Full Colonel goes to Huntsville, Alabama for Space and Missile Defense Command. Retires in 1996 and works as a contractor for Camber and Boeing before retiring to Palm Beach Gardens, Florida.

[01:41:38]

After retiring from the Army, Malkemes' father uses his transportation core expertise to work on ports first for [Emperor] Haile Selassie in Ethiopia, then in Nigeria. Between 1976 and 1977, he and Ashe meet up after Ashe does a tennis exhibition in Lagos.

[01:45:29]

A lifelong relationship follows those from West Point. The COVID-19 pandemic prevents the 1970 class from returning for their fiftieth reunion. Traditions such as the ring hop link the classes of 1970 and 2020 together. The 1970 class also organizes a letter-writing campaign for the 2020 graduating class.

[01:49:20]

Looking forward to the final oral history project.

[01:50:52]

Shifting from the current public health crisis to the public health crisis around human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) in the 1980s and 90s. He receives a postcard after Ashe's diagnosis, but he doesn't divulge anything specifically about it. Ashe sends a final Christmas card around December 1992 and mentions health issues. [Ashe announces his HIV/AIDS diagnosis in April 1992].

[01:53:25]

During his time at Fort Knox (1990-1992), an officer tests positive for HIV. While serving as inspector general and identifying potential systemic issues, Malkemes and the officer test the Fort Knox blood bank system to assess protocols for detecting donations from those who are HIV+. The pre-donation test successfully detects the officer is HIV+ and prevents him from donating blood.

[01:58:39]

Final reflections about Ashe as tennis leader, worldwide ambassador, representative for his race and the United States. Malkemes remembers Ashe as a mentor and friend, and even Malkemes' wife (Melinda) and children (Taylre and Mackensie) know how meaningful this relationship was with him.