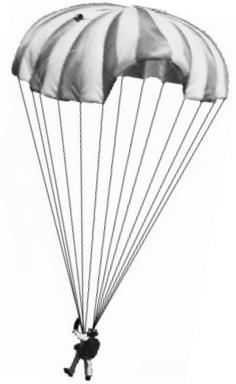


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Pre-1956 ... My Life Before Mexico



For starters, my name is James Carl Hall—"Jim"—and I was born in the small town of Muckelrat in the coal fields of Western Pennsylvania at the start of the great depression in 1926. I was the seventh son of seven boys and three girls.

My dad was a coal miner and a union organizer for John L. Lewis, the big boss of the United Mine Workers. He started working underground when he was twelve years old and was one tough guy. All he knew was work and sleep and getting drunk on the weekends. He was up at four o'clock in the morning, worked around the house, then walked three miles to his coal mine or five miles if he was working at the steel mill, then came home, worked in the garden, and went to bed. As far as I know, he never owned a suit or a tie or a dress shirt. We never had a one-on-one conversation. He talked, or commanded, and I listened.

During the election cycles, he worked for the Democratic Party. As a ten-year-old kid, I accompanied him as he went from mining town to mining town to buy votes in exchange for a half pint of bootleg whiskey. I carried the whiskey in pockets my mom sewed in a long overcoat to keep the booze out of sight of the union members, as they would try to roll the old man after he had drunk too many of the bottles reserved for the undecided voters.

My mother was a gracious and gentle southern lady who worked 24 hours a day raising ten kids during very difficult times. She was the kindest and most generous person I have ever known, and I would do almost anything for her. My dad had married

far above his station in life and how he and my mom ever got together is a mystery to me.

I attended school off and on while working, along with my brothers, in a bootleg coal mine operated by my old man. The coal we stole provided my family, and several others who were too poor to buy it, with fuel to keep us warm during the cold Pennsylvania winters.

I also worked in a garage, which gave me excellent experience with engines and all things mechanical. In 1943, at age 17 and at the height of World War II, I joined the Army Air Corps to be a fighter pilot. At basic training in Biloxi, Mississippi, my ego received a severe shock when the sergeant who was interviewing me for my assignment after basic laughed when I told him the recruiter who had signed me up said that I could go to pilot training.

"Kid, the Army already has a long line of grown men who want to go to pilot training, and you have quite a bit of growing up to do before you can join that group," he said. "How about being a gunner, a radio operator or, maybe a flight engineer?" I left that room feeling that perhaps the Army really didn't think that I was as special as the recruiter had led me to believe.

After basic training, the new recruits were permitted to choose a career field, and if they passed the qualification tests and the Air Force thought it would be in the best interests of the service, they were sent to a technical school to sharpen their skills. I chose the career field of flight engineer and passed the qualification tests with flying colors, chiefly because of my work in automobile garages plus the hours and hours I spent fixing the old junkheaps I drove to school.

The Air Force thought that it was in the best interests of the service that I go to flight engineer school, so they sent me to their best.

One day, after a couple of months of training, I was directed to go to the first sergeant's office for an interview. I was informed that it was no longer in the best interests of the service that I remain in flight engineer school, although I was doing well, and that now it was in the best interests of the service that I be sent to radio operator's school. In radio operator's school, the promise was made that if you graduated in the top ten percent of your class, you could choose the type of airplane you would work on

and where you would serve. I graduated first in my class and I chose the B-17, and I said that I wanted to serve in the European Theater of War.

The Air Force decided that it was in the best interests of the service that I serve on the new B-29 and that I go to the Pacific Theater of War. So it was off for training in the brand new B-29s at a place called Pyote Army Air Force Base out in the wastelands of western Texas. I was matched up with ten other guys, and we became a top-notch bomber crew. After intensive training in the art of delivering ten tons of high explosives to a target located fifteen hundred miles from our base and then returning to our base, we picked up a brand new B-29 from Fremont, Nebraska, and headed to the Pacific Theater of Operations for the good of the service. The place from which we delivered the high explosives was called Tinian Island and the place to which we delivered the high explosives was called the Empire of Japan.

The Air Force had decided that the job we were doing was in the best interests of the service and the job we were doing resulted in the defeat of Japan and the end of World War II, and we were sent back to the United States. I liked what I was doing in the Air Force and, with the encouragement of recruiters, I reenlisted to serve one more year in the United States Army.

Again, the Army asked me what I would like to do and where I would like to do it. I told them I would like to fly on a B-17 aircrew, and I would like to do this in the European Theater. The first sergeant informed me that the Army decided it was in the best interests of the service that I fly on B-29 and C-47 aircrews and I do it in the Pacific Theater. I asked the first sergeant, "What about my best interests?" He replied, "Sarge, the service's best interests are your best interests. Shove off."

The next year turned out to be a pretty good deal. Everybody was pushing to get home, so there were never enough flight engineers or radio operators to man the airplanes, and I got to fly as much as I wanted. I racked up hundreds of hours of experience flying all over the Pacific Theater to places I had read about and to places I had never heard of, and I learned a lot about places and people that would prove invaluable later in life.

One of the missions that my crew was assigned was making the monthly "Rum Run" to the Philippines, where we would pick

up a C-47 load of booze for the officer's clubs on the island of Guam. During this time I established a friendship with a young captain who was on the general's staff and was in charge of the liaison airplanes assigned to the Wing Headquarters. These aircraft were small, single-engine prop jobs that were used to deliver paperwork throughout the islands and also to train new pilots. I had always wanted to be a pilot and I saw a way to accomplish my dream with my friendship with the captain. I traded a case of Scotch whisky for flying lessons and flying time in one of the headquarters L-5 aircraft. By the time I left the islands, I had racked up over a hundred hours of stick and rudder time, some of it in tough weather conditions.

When I returned to the States, I was asked to reenlist in the new Air Force Reserve. I had been offered a direct commission from staff sergeant to second lieutenant during the war, but I had turned it down. The step up from the enlisted ranks to that of an officer was one I did not want to take at that time.



Lt. Jim Hall

Things were a lot different now. The service had made me grow up and I saw that if you worked hard, you could rise above your lowly beginnings. If the new Air Force would honor the offer they made me during the war, I would reenlist. The new Air Force decided it was in the best interests of the service that I become a second lieutenant, so I did.

When I returned to Pennsylvania in 1947 after my second tour in the Pacific, I found I was the last of the servicemen to return to the old home town. It seemed as if everybody was married and having children and settling down into the same rut they were in before they went off to war. My six older brothers and two remaining sisters were all married and having kids, left and right. My oldest sister, Mary, died when she was three years old. My

parents couldn't afford to have a doctor come to our rural home to treat her during the flu epidemic in the early twenties.

I loved my mother with all my heart and thought of her as a saint for living through hell being married to an alcoholic and raising ten kids. She was an oldschool Catholic mom. "A man should be married and raising kids or in the priesthood," and that was her firm and loudly-stated opinion.

From the moment I tossed my duffle bag down on the floor of what used to be a storeroom—my old room was now occupied by one of my married brothers and his pregnant wife—mom's main objective in life was to get me either married or shipped off to the seminary. The girl next door was her closest and first target. But even two tours in the south Pacific without seeing many females couldn't convince me that Betty was the mate for me. She was short and overweight, and I could see that it was only going to get worse. (Three years later, when I came home on a visit, I saw that those years of Polish cooking had proven me right.)

When I told mom that this match was not going to work, she shifted her efforts to the pool of remaining eligible females. This was a small town, and that pool was extremely limited and the pickings were poor, and it looked like mom was going to have a hard time finding me a mate.

Some form of possible relief came when a friend of one of my brothers announced that he had passed all the tests to qualify for a new program that the Catholic church was putting into place. A seminary in the northern part of the state was offering a program that would enable a young man to sign up for a nine-month, or shorter, trial to see if the priesthood was for him. You would take all the same courses and live the same life as a regular seminarian, but you could quit at any time if you saw that you didn't like it, no questions asked. And you could use the time as credit toward college.

Ever since my discharge from the Army, I had been trying to get into college, but I did not have a high school diploma, and I saw that this program might be a way around this problem. I took the tests, passed, and in due course found myself in a cell—that's what they called it, and rightly so—in a small seminary in the little town of North East, Pennsylvania.

From day one, it was worse than Army basic training. The physical part was OK, but the mental chicken crap was perfected

by guys whose intelligence and cunning were several steps above the backwoods D.I.s we had in basic training. We were up at 0400 and scrubbed floors or anything else that needed to be scrubbed until 0600, then religious service until 0700, then wait on tables and other kitchen chores until 0900. It was a welcome relief to have studies from 0900 until 1600 and then kitchen duties and study until lights out at 2200.

During the war, I had contracted a painful disease called "jungle rot" while I was serving in the South Pacific. It caused running sores on the legs and feet and the only known cure for it at the time was to sit under an ultraviolet lamp for several hours a day. That was out of the question under these monastic conditions, so whenever I could during the day, I would sneak away from my chores or studies and sit in the sun and let the sun dry up the sores. It was not long until the novice master, a little weasel of a 4-F, and I were on a collision course. Not only did he put a stop to my visits outside, he piled on extra duty after lights-out. I began to spend more time figuring out how I could put his lights out than I did in studying the Bible. This routine got old real quick, but I needed time to receive replies to the letters I was sending to colleges I thought might admit a guy without a high school diploma—preferably a college far away from Pennsylvania.

I had to get away from mom, but I had to have a good, solid reason. I got excited when I received a letter that said I was accepted by the University of Melbourne in Australia, but my hopes were dashed when I learned that since that school was south of the equator, their school year didn't start until next year.

Finally, I got a letter from the admissions director of the University of New Mexico, and it said that their school year started next month and I was accepted. The University needed the money the GI Bill would bring and they would worry about the lack of a high school diploma later.

Now I had to find a reason, other than this was a dead-end position, to resign from this place. A reason came the very next morning when our seminary was hosting a group of priests and a bishop from a nearby diocese. We novices, or people on probation, were serving breakfast to the group, and we were not permitted to eat what was left over until after the guests had departed. I was serving the bacon, and I really liked bacon, and

the last person to be served was the bishop. The four of us servers were looking forward to a hearty breakfast as nothing was left for us to eat after last night's meal, and we went to bed with empty stomachs. I was following the novice who was serving the fried eggs—it looked like there were four or five left—and I gulped when I saw the bishop exchange his plate with the plate the server was carrying and wave him on. Well, there was enough bacon left on my platter to give each of the novices four pieces each, and that was enough to make my mouth water.

When I presented the platter to the bishop, I damn near dropped the dish when he scraped the entire mess of bacon on to his already full plate. I stopped in my tracks and looked at him. He looked at me and said, "Yes?" When it sunk in to my hungry brain what had just happened, I uttered an un-Christian like epithet, threw the platter to the floor and stomped out to the kitchen and out the door. I walked to my cell, picked up my overnight bag and was outside the gate of the seminary waiting for a bus when the novice master ran up, breathing hard, and said, "We must learn obedience. That test was part of our vow of poverty, chastity and obedience, and you have failed."

As I boarded the bus, I replied, "I never believed in the first two and I'm damn glad I flunked the third and, you had better get the hell out of my way or I will kill you."

So ended my brief encounter with the life of the religious. My mom was not happy when I walked into our house and dropped my overnight bag on the floor of the store room. My brother and his wife and new baby were still living in my room. Living accommodations remained tight for returning GIs, and my brother was not very pleased that he could not afford his own home. I could see that this was going to be a sore subject and this gave me an added incentive to get out of town as soon as possible. I immediately confirmed that I was accepted by the University but was told that classes didn't start for three more weeks. That meant that I still had to dodge mom's last-ditch efforts to get me married off to one of the locals, so I took a night job as a laborer on the Union Railroad in East Pittsburgh and stayed out of sight until it was time to leave for New Mexico.

Before I left my hometown for good, I did get close to the marriage scene, but as a spectator. My best friend since childhood,

Bud Plack, had just returned from service as a Marine in the South Pacific. I had last seen him on the island of Saipan about two years ago and over a couple of beers we had discussed how we were never going to give up our freedom and get married. Well, old Bud had found the girl of his dreams and had changed his mind and mom said, "See every one is doing it. Why don't you stay home and start a family?" I didn't take her advice, and I was glad that I managed to escape what would have probably been a very mundane life.

I spent the next four years at the University of New Mexico and my World War II service earned me a double degree in engineering and geology under the GI Bill. The years passed quickly and although there were lots of dull periods, I had more than enough activities to keep me busy. I played some sports, but they were too regulated to excite my interest, unlike the sandlot brawls back in Pennsylvania. I was accepted into the Sigma Chi Fraternity and found out that rich guys, most of them, can be just as nice as poor guys. I did a lot of growing up and growing out of the shell of being a poor boy from a little coal mining town.

During my first year at the university, I was introduced to parachuting by a former paratrooper who was my roommate at the student housing project we were both assigned to when we arrived in Albuquerque. He taught me to parachute, and we made very good money making exhibition parachute jumps at county fairs, rodeos, open houses and sporting events in New Mexico and Texas during my years at the university. I spent a lot of my time with the Air Force Reserve unit headquartered at Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque.

The unit was commanded by a lieutenant colonel, but the guy who controlled the day-to-day operations was a tough old master sergeant named Mitch O'Brian.

Sgt. O'Brian had been a squad leader and later a platoon sergeant with the 82nd Airborne Division and had the distinction of having made all four of the combat jumps the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment participated in during World War II—the low-level jump in Sicily, the jump at Salerno, Italy which culminated in the bloody battle of Arnone, the D-Day jump at Normandy and the capture of Ste. Mère-Église in France, where he was awarded the Silver Star, and the Operation Market Garden jump

in Holland where he received the Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry while capturing the Nijmegen bridge from the elite German SS troops. He also had five Purple Hearts to go with his other medals.

This old soldier had done it all. He was out of his element assigned to "babysitting" a bunch of young officers. He never missed a chance to apply for any first sergeant's job that became open in a combat Airborne unit. I thought I had experienced some close calls while flying combat missions over Japan, but I was not in the same ballpark as this trooper. When we started telling "war stories" at beer call, I kept my mouth shut, as should have the rest of the group, when Sgt. O'Brian, after several rounds of Coors beer, began to tell of the hand-to-hand battles he had fought with the best of the Nazi storm troopers.

Our reserve unit was made up of about 150 lieutenants and captains from the southwestern part of the United States, most of whom had avoided overseas duty during World War II by virtue of being in ROTC or other education-related programs. The old sarge disliked them for their lack of guts, just as he disliked any other serviceman who avoided combat. So we got along just great. We had a special bond because of my parachuting activities, and he treated me as the little brother he never had.

These were exciting times. All reserve officers had to spend at least two weeks every year, usually more, on active duty attending some sort of technical school, and Sgt. O'Brian was in charge of these quotas. He would show me the list and let me pick out the schools I would like to attend and when I would like to attend them. I, of course, chose the special schools the Airborne forces were establishing for counter-insurgency operations. This enabled me to keep up with anything new in the parachuting world in the United States.

This fit in perfectly with Sgt. O'Brian's plans to be aware of any new advancements and developments in the parachuting field. He put me in for secret military and government clearances, appointed me as the unit's intelligence officer, and I was off to school. These technical schools and the different types of parachute jumping I was exposed to were a real eye-opener, and I quickly discovered that the day-to-day life of an ambitious officer was much different from that of an enlisted man. As an

officer, even a lowly second lieutenant with a secret security clearance and several glowing letters of recommendation from Sgt. O'Brian to old combat buddies now in key leadership positions in the paratroopers, I had access to classified reports from military attaches in embassy offices in France and Russia, as well as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, who were the world-wide leaders in innovations in parachuting.

I eagerly read these reports from front to back, and I learned that a new sport called skydiving was becoming popular in Europe, and France and Russia were leading the way in developing procedures to control the parachutist's body in long delayed freefalls. This was of special interest to me, as I had experienced problems with my body sometimes rotating rapidly after I had reached what I called "the wall," or the airspeed that I felt was where I was falling as fast as I was going to fall and the air became "heavy." Sometimes I would start spinning one way and when I reached in to pull my ripcord, I would start to spin in the other direction.

On several occasions I felt I was going to black out and I had to pull the ripcord before I wanted to and screwed up what would have been a good jump and missed my target. Later, whenever I had a chance to try some of these freefall procedures, I would experiment—sometimes they worked and sometimes they didn't. But I did discover that the more I practiced, the easier it became to obtain a face-to-earth position when doing a long delayed freefall.

My attendance at these schools, and an occasional ankle or leg injury, caused me to miss some classes and my grades to drop somewhat, but my association and training with the elite paratroopers of the 82nd and the 101st Airborne Divisions gave me the experience and credibility to earn a very good living making exhibition parachute jumps while attending college, and I still graduated with my class in 1952.

At school's end I didn't even stop to pick up that piece of paper that said I was an engineer before I headed north for Butte, Montana, to take a job as a junior mining engineer for Anaconda Mining Company—a plum job for a kid just out of college.

When I was mustered out of the Army, I used part of my pay to buy a big old used 1941 dark green Cadillac. It was a sturdy, well-built machine. Four doors and a V-12 engine. Lots of room

and power—and I spent many a night sacked out in the rear seat, my home away from home. I, and my friends, affectionately called the beast the “Green Hornet.”

I had stored my civilized possessions, good clothes, books, papers and the like—also my parachutes and associated equipment—in the basement of my landlady’s house, so all I had to do was toss my traveling gear in the “Hornet” and take off. After driving all night, I rolled into Butte about 7:30 the next morning and the place was jumping. The miners from the night shift were crowding the streets, some already well on their way to getting drunk. It was like a scene from an old 1880s western. I’m going to like this place, I thought.

I scored a room at the local “Y,” ate breakfast, and checked in at the Anaconda headquarters. It was a busy place. I was told to report at the mine shaft at 6:45 the next morning. I met the engineer I was supposed to be working with at the appointed time. He was a short, pudgy guy, not too much older than I was. He looked like a nerd, with new boots, pressed pants and a clean shirt. He glanced at his watch and said, “You’re late. Grab that surveying transit, and let’s get going.”

We crowded into a packed elevator, the gate clanged shut, and we dropped like a rock. Five thousand feet later, we jerked to a stop.

This was a first for me, a mile underground. I didn’t know if I was claustrophobic or not, but I sure was impressed. It was pitch black—the only light was that from the head lamps on the miners’ hard hats. The heat was suffocating and the air was heavy with the smell of sulfur and sweat. There was a mad rush to get off the elevator, and the equipment I was carrying got tangled with some of the bodies.

After much cursing and shoving, I finally broke out of the pack. The engineer was waiting for me, clipboard in hand and tapping his foot. “Hurry, hurry, we don’t have all day. There is work to be done.” The shift hadn’t even begun and this clown was about to have this transit shoved up his rear end. I could see that darkness was going to be my friend.

The rest of the day was about as exciting as watching a checkers game—basic surveying that I had mastered my first week in Engineering 101 and other routine crap. In fact this stuff was so routine that in college I spent most of the outdoors classes watching,

through the instrument, the sorority girls sun bathing. The only saving grace is that I did have a chance to talk to miners as they did their jobs and I learned a lot about the life underground.

After three days of this, I was sure that this was not what I wanted to do the rest of my life. The next morning I stopped the shift boss and told him that I came here to get some experience and any dolt could do what I was doing. He suggested that I partner up with one of the old miners and get into the more dangerous and interesting parts of mining.

Great idea, but I didn't know any of the old guys, with the exception of a Polish guy I had met on my first day on the job. The shift had ended, and there was a rush for the elevator. This old fellow had stumbled and was in danger of being run over. I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him into the elevator and pushed him into a corner. He had trouble standing up. I thought, "The poor guy, he is working too hard." Then I smelled his breath. He was dead drunk. He said to me, "Boy, get me my lunch bucket." I shoved aside a couple of bodies and picked up his bucket. The damn thing weighed about 20 pounds. He grabbed it and held it tight.

"What the hell ya got there?" I asked. "Dynamite?"

His face twisted into a sly grin. "Yep," he said.

Damn! This drunk had enough explosives in his lunch bucket to blow himself and the other forty miners in this elevator, me included, to hell and back. My first reaction was to back away from him as far as I could, in this case, only about a foot or so. That wasn't going to work. I reached out and hugged him, and the lunch bucket, as tight as I could. Don't drop it! Please don't drop it, I screamed to myself! The old miner gave me a funny look. "What's the matter, boy? It won't go off. I have the blasting caps in my pocket. At least, most of them are in my pocket."

The ride to the surface seemed to take a long, long time. When we stopped and everybody got off, I was still holding on to the old man.

"Let me go, boy," he said. "Come, let me buy you a drink."

I turned down his offer, but after my talk with the shift boss, this guy seemed like a good place to start looking for a partner. The next morning I waited for the old miner to show up and got

on the same elevator with him. I said I would take him up on the offer to buy a drink after work. He said, OK; meet him at the New Moxom Café this afternoon.

We met and I explained to him, as best I could, as he was half drunk and spoke very limited English, what I would like to do. After about six beers, my limit, we finally came up with a rough idea of what we would do. A handshake, and we were partners. He was the brains, I was the brawn. Split the profit 50-50.

At the beginning of the shift, before he started drinking, we would go to our work location, he would tell me what we wanted to accomplish and how to do it. We would set up the drilling machine, he would retreat to the relative safety of a bend of the drift, and I would start to work. From time to time he would check on how I was doing. We would make a few corrections, he would go back to drinking, and I would go back to drilling.

About an hour before quitting time, the dynamite cart would roll by and my partner (his name was Stanislaw Vodeak) would wake up, take the number of sticks of explosives he thought we would need to blast the correct number of tons of copper/silver/lead ore from the ceiling for this shift, plus a number of sticks of dynamite he would need to work his bootleg mine this weekend, and send the cart down the line. The powder monkey (the boy who was responsible for the explosives) took no note of the amount of explosives we off-loaded and trudged off into the darkness.

Stan crimped the caps on the fuse, punched a hole in the sticks of dynamite, inserted the combination, and handed the finished product to me. I placed the dynamite in the drill hole and, using a long wooden pole, rammed it home. The tighter you can pack the dynamite, the better results you get when it explodes. This I understood, but it always gave me a thrill when I hammered this high explosive stuff into the hole. What if? I'd close my eyes and wouldn't start breathing regularly until we had backed off and lit the fuses.

This setup worked well for the next three months. I learned a lot about the basics of mining—stuff you could never encounter in the textbooks—and practical geology my teachers never heard of. I also made very good wages. Old Stan and I made an excellent team. We could really move the ore and make the money.

One cold October morning, Stan did not show up at the mine shaft. Later that day, the timekeeper said that they had found him over the weekend inside the entrance to his mine. He was dead. Face down with a shovel in his right hand and his lunch bucket tucked under his left arm. He had worked his last shift.