

WARFIGHTER VIEW

The Word from the Front

CSM Marvin Hill, the International Security Assistance Force command sergeant major, had arrived in the United States a few days earlier to give a Warfighter perspective to those attending the USASMDC/ARSTRAT annual senior enlisted leaders training conference.

He agreed to sit down for an ASJ interview with Michael Howard, an old classmate from the Army's Sergeants Major Academy and Rachel Griffith, who recently joined the ASJ team.

His answers flowed, but the most telling was in his response to why he continues to Soldier on, responding "this is much bigger than me." Hill felt there was only one answer he could give with GEN David Petraeus, commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, asked him to continue in the fight. "I often tell people I don't have an itch that needs scratching, but I tell you that you still feel you need it for something as important as this."

The complete interview with Hill follows. [→](#)



BY MICHAEL L. HOWARD & RACHEL L. GRIFFITH



A News reports indicate you're making progress with Coalition forces in Afghanistan. Tell us about the challenges to our military.

HILL The challenge we're facing is one of having an Afghan counterpart that's capable of keeping up. They're capable of building capabilities, but to keep up and sustain that momentum is the challenge. We've built a lot of capacity, and to sustain that pace is going to be a concern. Their challenge is in building the capabilities so that they can take care of themselves – the support and combat service support pieces of their military. For every infantry Soldier in the United States Army, there's probably about five or six Soldiers who support and sustain us. We built an infantry unit in the Afghanistan military, and building the combat service support to sustain it is challenging.

A What is your number-one worry about all that in the long term?

HILL The sustainment of it. If it's not user friendly, it won't be used. We have to make sure we are building something they will use and not just throw to the side and then we lose all the ground that we've gained there. Whatever we provide, it has to be an Afghan solution to the Afghan problem and not a United States solution.

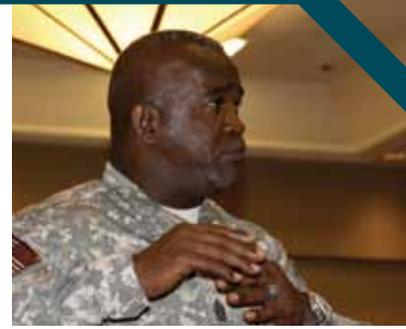
A What is your assessment of the men and women who are being called to the fight today?

HILL I'm not just talking about us here as I've had the great opportunity to be the command senior enlisted leader for the international force, for the Coalition force. The young men and women who are joining our formations now are the best that their countries have to offer. These are young men and women who can do anything they want. Some say the economy is pushing them toward the military. I say different. These are the guys and girls who know their country is at war, and they join. And then while they're over there, they raise their right hand to stay and they reenlist



CSM Marvin Hill, ISAF CSM, is interviewed by Mike Howard, editor-in-chief of the Army Space Journal during the conference.
Photos by Rachel L. Griffith

CSM Marvin Hill discusses how he came to be the ISAF CSM.



by the number. It's incredible knowing there's going to be more of whatever they're getting right now, there's going to be more of it time and time again. More deployments, more time away from family, more hardships.

★ There are people who aren't deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq who are touched by the war. What is the most important thing you'd like them to keep in mind?

HILL Everyone contributes to the fight. You may not be in Afghanistan, but you might be training for Afghanistan and not even know that you're going to be deployed. I would say just stay focused. We have a saying in the Army to keep your powder dry; that's the bottom line. You don't know when that call is going to come. It's the preparedness you have to have. We're paying you to be prepared. I would say just continue to focus and be prepared.

★ Some would say that our nine years of continued fighting has matured our fighting force. Would you agree?

HILL Yes. I mean, we're a very seasoned and very mature fighting force. There are some things that we're not seasoned and matured at – things we have to get after. I don't think we can wait until this is all over because we don't know when this will all be over. We have to get better at taking care of each other. We have to get better at recognizing the signs and symptoms of depression. We have to get better at resiliency. We have to get better at our military and civilian education. We've got to get better at taking care of our families.

★ Those are good examples. What would you say are some tangible examples of us being a mature force?

HILL Our leaders. I mean, we have seasoned leaders. Leadership that can assess situations quickly. Leadership that makes decisions on the spot. Leaders who know how to move the formation. Even leaders who know how to counsel. They might not be doing it formally, but these are leaders who know to pull someone in. We have grown a center of leaders who only know war. At the end of the day you say why do we exist as an Army? Why do we grow leaders? So they can lead troops in combat. That's not a bad thing.

★ You mentioned some of the negative results. What about stress on family?

HILL Families are deployed in place. If you think about it, they're deployed, but they're back at the home station. Every time their service member dons his helmet and dons his gear and gets on that aircraft, they're deployed as well. They're feeling it and sometimes much worse than the Soldier, because they are the ones who are there when the chaplain comes to knock on the door. At that point they're alone. I've been doing these things for a while, and my family's still not used to it. No one gets used to that. It's tough. I salute my Army bride every opportunity that I get, because it's tough for her.

★ So why do you do it?

HILL This is to overuse a cliché – this is much bigger than me. I do this because the President of the United States asked my boss, GEN Petraeus, to step down if you will from his position as the commander of U.S. Central Command and go to Afghanistan to take on that. And there was only one answer he could give. Then GEN Petraeus looked to me and said, "Are you up for another one?" There was only one answer that I could give. I think it's a huge honor to serve. I often tell people I don't have an itch that needs scratching, but I tell you that you still feel you need it for something as important at this. You can't help but feel good about yourself. I have no doubt that there is another Soldier, another service member who can put on this uniform and drive on, accomplish the mission. To have the confidence of GEN Petraeus, you feel confident you're making a difference over there.

I feel I'm making a difference every day. It's like driving a car with a GPS. If you make a wrong turn, that GPS starts giving you all sorts of feedback. It freaks out trying to get you back on track. But when you make a right turn a little ding goes off. I get that ding factor every day that I'm over there. That I'm on right path and that I'm making a difference.

★ Some of the concern areas you were talking about are suicides, post-traumatic stress disorder, ethical and moral use of force, and junior leaders taking on more and more responsibility. Can you give some examples of what the command is doing to address these in place while you're in combat?

HILL That goes to knowing the troops. I'm not simplifying it, I'm just saying when leaders know, when peers know, they can see the differences. They can identify some of the symptoms. It's hard. It's really getting involved deep into the counseling piece and the suicide prevention and awareness

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training. And we're talking it over. We're encouraging them to talk openly and freely about suicide. The things that the Department of Defense is doing as far as removing the stigma for seeking help. PTSD, again, we have to after-action report everything we do. And reporting also means talking to the young men and women as they see things that are dramatic, and they experience things that are tougher conditions day after day. Stress training.

And then as far as the young men and women just taking on more and more and more, that's been the key to our success. We only have so many pairs of boots on the ground. We're only allowed to have so many pairs of boots on the ground. The mission and the responsibility keep growing every day. We look at something that we can do better or something that we can be more of. I heard it here in the conference today, where someone said, "Find three more things Soldiers can do every day." That's really the bottom line. We have guys and girls who are really doing two or three missions, and they enjoy doing it. My concern is when they get back to their home stations. I mean, we built the monster that can really do some things, and they multi-task. So how do you nurture that when they get back?

★ You're here to give a Warfighter's perspective to senior noncommissioned officers. What is your key message?

HILL My key message is really going to be about getting the inputs right. For what we're doing in Afghanistan to work, first you have to start with getting the inputs right. Get all the right people, the right resources, the right concepts. We have to get that piece right, the right strategy, and the right command structure. The other thing is about some of the urgent projects and programs that we're working, especially the partnerships that we're working today. They were talking about partnering with nations around the globe. My piece is about partnering with the Afghan national security forces. We call it Shohna-ba-Shohna, shoulder to shoulder. What that truly means my focus as a command senior enlisted leader, some of the things that keep me up at night. What I'm also going to do, at the end, is to challenge them a little bit to help me manage some of the talent that I find over there. I asked Chief Roy, when it comes to the Air Force, how do you get someone prepared to take my place with the amount of time they're allowed to stay in the Air Force? My challenge to them also here in the conference is help me manage that talent. Because I'm going to find it. I'm going to recommend to you,

here's where this troop can serve better and grow. I saw some things in this young man or woman that if nurtured right, is going to grow up quick. I'm trying to get these young men and women where they belong, because, maybe we found an itch while they were over there.

★ What's your advice for Space and Missile Defense NCOs as they continue to provide capability to the forces in Afghanistan?

HILL Keep in mind that if Joe wants that GPS to work, there's protections. Someone has to protect the satellites that are up in Space. We just rely so heavily on intelligence, surveillance, so just protect those things that provide those capabilities, because we use them every day all the way down to the troops on patrol.

★ It's been 14 years since we served at the Sergeants Major Academy. What's your take on the focus of lifelong learning in the Profession of Arms?

HILL I really think for one, I am applying lessons I learned at the Sergeants Major Academy almost every day. I'm glad that when I attended the academy I was open-minded. I don't think the Army would spend this money and time and resources on me for nine months to give me something I'll never use. So I put it all in the bag. It might be Army writing style. It might be conflict management. Or it might be understanding the strategic level of things. It's tremendous. However, I think that the process should still continue. For the most part, if a command selectee doesn't attend this keystone course run by the National Defense University for a command selectee who is moving to a joint task force, the Sergeants Major Academy is the last piece of school. Some leaders get in at the 17- or 18-year mark. With a 32-year career, that's a long time between retiring and your last school. We need to create opportunities to reinforce the lifetime concept of learning. The concept is solid. ★

