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Mark Hamilton

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Jeannie Phillips, interviewer

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Jeannie Phillips introduces herself and Mark Hamilton. Mark Hamilton talked his personal background. He was born in Hackensack, New Jersey in 1935 and was there until second grade. He then moved to St. Petersburg. He was a football player and was recruited by many colleges. He was recruited by Alabama, but had the opportunity to go to West Point. He said West Point was a formative period in his life. They took the time to try to prepare you to be a leader through opportunities. They preached the values of the military. He has often told people that it is a profession that is badly treated. He said it made it clear to him that there is no such thing as a born leader. It is something that has to be pursued, studied, practiced and analyzed. He enjoyed this. He was more and more comfortable about being a leader. Phillips commented about the wonderful liberal arts education received at West Point and how he got into poetry. Hamilton said he had written poetry, but was always interested in it.

Later in his life after Vietnam he was invited to go back to West Point to teach. The Spanish, English and Physical Education departments wanted him to return. He chose English and wasn't prepared for it. He didn't have an English major education. He took a graduate class on a subject he had never had. He wanted to get into poetry. He was in graduate school at Florida State. He turned in a group of poems and the professor told him it was crap. The professor told him to write what he knew about. The first day of class the professor was showing one of his poems as a good example of a solid poem. He returned to West Point. Hamilton and a friend of his, Denny Coates, wrote a book of poetry. They wanted to try all the different types of poetry. They tried to pick images of West Point. He talked about their writing process. The majority of the poems were collaborative. He has continued to write poetry. He said he has written a poem for Darlene Myers. Phillips said she remembered hearing his poems while she was working for him when he was president of the university. Hamilton said when he was in eighth grade he had a beautifully aimless life. He was told that the next year he would try out for the basketball team and would join the speech team. The following year he made it to the state finals in speech competition. He learned that public speaking counts. Phillips asked him what position he played on the football team while he was at West Point. Hamilton said he play halfback in his sophomore year. In his junior year he was a fullback. He said in his senior year the best thing he did for Army football was during the Penn State game. He got a hairline fracture in his leg and the second team guy, Charlie Jarvis, had a chance to play. Jarvis went on to break records. He said it was a better team because Jarvis was playing. Phillips asked when he met his wife. Hamilton said they met in

junior high school. Her name was Patty Barrens. When he saw her he said he was going to marry her. They were married right after he graduated West Point. All of his friends married their high school sweethearts. He said it was a different world that he grew up in. He said they had freedom to fail. He said you could be yourself.

Phillips said he has had an incredible military career and asked him about his progression and postings. He said virtually everyone in his graduating class opted to go to Vietnam. This was in 1967. There were 585 in his graduating class and they lost 25 people. He couldn't understand the hatred of the people. Those who stayed built the greatest army. He was an observer. He helped direct artillery fire. He said he was an officer, but not in the chain of command. The soldiers were a lot more open with him. He said they were about the same age and they knew stuff. They knew how to take care of their equipment and how to make a fox hole. He said he had respect for the enlisted soldiers. He could go to his specialists and rely on them. He became a battalion commander. He said he was prepared for the job. He was a division artillery commander in Alaska. He was in Fort Greely, Alaska and was called by Max Therman, a four star general. He was asked to go to El Salvador. His job was to make peace in El Salvador. He spent six weeks before leaving practicing his Spanish. He spent two years down there. He said it was the best thing he ever did. His work did result in peace. He went to Santa Marta. He was in civilian clothes. There were people in the village who indicated they might want to talk about peace. They went to a stable to wait. Two hundred of the guerilla force came to meet them. They met in an underground bunker. They met with Raul Hercules. They sat together including the ambassador. At the end of the table was a man with an eye patch and a gun. They met a couple of times. They finally met without body guards. They met in Hamilton's house. He was keeping the Salvadorian government informed about his actions. His wife and children came down after the first year. They had a safe room. His wife met Hercules and they sat down for dinner together. The state department became involved as well as a few other countries. They were finally talking at the United Nations. He was called down to the ambassador's office and was told that the talks had broken down. They were trying to negotiate when they would end the cease fire. He was asked to go to the United Nations by both sides. He arrived in Newark at two in the morning and went immediately into negotiations. He went over the list of demands and they listened to his suggestions. Thomas Pickering was the ambassador to the United Nations. They worked for eight and a half days. It came down to one single item, the immediate reaction infantry battalion. They were large and controversial units. They wanted them taken down. The guerrillas wanted them taken down in two weeks. They agreed to do it the way the government wanted it done. This was in 1992. The FMLN formed a political party and elected two consecutive mayors of San Salvador. Columbia University has decided to take a look at this history. He will be going to Columbia and discuss what went right. He feels good about what he did. He said Hercules came to their house with his daughter and said for fourteen years he felt like an animal. When Hamilton's wife sat him down with their family he decided then to make peace. Hamilton said one act of kindness trumped a year and a half of his efforts.

Hamilton said he went to Somalia. The chief of staff of the Army, Gordon Sullivan, believed in him. He gave them a distinguished service medal as a colonel. Sullivan had assumed that he would make general. Sullivan was encouraging. He couldn't get him promoted. The independent board had a different view. Sullivan had him assigned as a general officer billet. The position of Chief Staff to the Alaska Command was coming up in the spring.