

# WWII veteran was 14 when he jumped into Sicily with the 82nd Airborne Division



World War II veteran Jim Schmidt was 14 when he jumped into Italy with the 82nd Airborne Division  
FACEBOOK

By AMANDA DOLASINSKI | The Fayetteville Observer, N.C. | Published: March 7, 2018

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FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. (Tribune News Service) — By the time Jim Schmidt was 16 years old, he was a seasoned combat veteran who'd fired dozens of mortars at German tanks before he was kicked out of the Army and the Navy.

Now 90 and living in Fayetteville, Schmidt's hearing and airborne wing tattoos have faded a little, but not much else has changed. The surly veteran who jumped into Sicily with the 82nd Airborne Division during World War II at the age of 14 doesn't understand what all the fuss is about as he recalls his service.

But his grandson, Henry DeHoop – who turns 14 this year – marvels at how his grandfather was jumping into war when he was Henry's age. His grandfather's stories made an impression. So instead of birthday presents, Henry launched a surprise letter-writing campaign, asking people to share their war memories in letters to Schmidt.

"I think it'd be pretty cool to get mail from across the world," said Henry, who lives with his family in Alaska.



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In January, Henry posted his request on Facebook. So far, his grandfather has received 18 letters from Alaska, North Carolina, Texas, Oklahoma, California and Belgium.

"I was amazed I started getting these letters," Schmidt said. "You kinda enjoy it."

Henry said his grandfather enjoys his daily walk to the mailbox where he may find cards filled with memories of war. No matter his age, his grandfather holds onto his airborne persona -- tough and patriotic, Henry said.

"I get really proud," Henry said. "I can't believe it myself sometimes. It just makes me so proud of what he's done for our country."

Schmidt joined the Army just as the Great Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps was disbanding. His father had already joined the Army, and Schmidt knew he needed a job to help support his family.

He had seen "Parachute Battalion," a 1941 war film starring Nancy Kelly, and knew he wanted to be an airborne soldier.

At 6 feet tall and 200 pounds, no one questioned the age of the 14-year-old recruit.

He went through basic training, then jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia. He was taught how to fire mortars, assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division and sent to Fort Bragg in 1942.

## GALLERY



World War II veteran Jim Schmidt at the age of 14.

FACEBOOK

In June 1943, Schmidt and the other paratroopers of the division's 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team set sail for northern Africa. Not long after, Schmidt remembers preparing to jump into Sicily.

"I noticed there was a lot of shooting going on," Schmidt said, remembering the gunfire just outside the aircraft.

The nighttime jump made it difficult to determine which aircraft were in the sky over Italy. U.S. Naval ships below assumed they were enemy aircraft, he said, and fired as the American paratroopers were exiting the aircraft. It was one of the greatest friendly fire tragedies of the war, according to historical reports.

Schmidt remembered something wet hitting his face, but didn't realize it was blood until he hit the ground.

Schmidt landed in a vineyard.

Once on land, Schmidt pulled out his cricket signal clicker, a small steel device that made a distinct "click" sound when pressed. The paratroopers used them to find each other in the dark.

They marched all night, he said.

"We had to pick up our mortars and start moving out," he said.

Because Schmidt had injured his shoulder during the jump, he was eventually moved to a medical tent for a few days. His mother, unaware he had enlisted in the Army, was notified of the injury.

She wrote a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt asking why her teenager was fighting in the war. Not long after, troops located Schmidt and shipped him back to the United States.

Undeterred, Schmidt went to a Navy recruiting office the day he after he returned to the United States. Again, no one questioned his age because of his large stature.

He was assigned to an ammunition ship.

In a few months, the Navy discovered his true age and he was booted out.

Finally, after he turned 18, Schmidt re-enlisted in the Army. He was given the rank of sergeant and assigned to the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment.

He went to Germany and remained there until 1946.

Schmidt was next sent to Japan to be part of the campaign in Korea. He served as a platoon sergeant for an infantry unit.

After his retirement, Schmidt would say Korea was the most difficult war because of the frigid temperatures.

When he returned to the United States, Schmidt asked to join 7th Special Forces Group. In 1962, he deployed to Laos as part of efforts in the Vietnam War.

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Schmidt was responsible for planning patrols through the thick jungle and recruiting tribesman from the mountains. He also advised the indigenous commanders.

On one patrol, his unit was ambushed. The indigenous commander lost control, so Schmidt exposed himself to the enemy and threw a hand grenade, destroying a machine-gun. He took control of the patrol.

Schmidt was the sergeant major of all 7th Special Forces A Teams in Vietnam until he was reassigned to 5th Special Forces Group in 1964.

Among his awards and decorations, Schmidt received the Silver Star with one Oak Leaf Cluster, Bronze Star Medal with two Oak Leaf Clusters, Purple Heart Medal with one Oak Leaf Cluster, Air Medal with one Oak Leaf Cluster, World War II Victory Medal, European-Africa-

Middle Eastern Campaign Medal and Army of Occupation Medal with Germany and Japan Clasp.

He returned to Fort Bragg in 1965 and was promoted to a job at a college.

A desk job would never satisfy Schmidt, so after 22 years of service and three wars, he retired.

Sort of.

Schmidt began working as a civilian for the Department of State as a foreign service officer, which sent him back to Vietnam. He spent three years working missions as an air operations officer for the CIA's Air America. It was his responsibility to memorize landing strips so airplanes could get to the isolated infantry troops in the jungles of Vietnam.

He returned to the United States in 1969 to focus on his family. Schmidt and his wife, Peggy, have two daughters.

"It's been an exciting life," Schmidt said.

During a trip last year, Schmidt, who was 89, toyed with the idea of getting a pilot's license. If he had his way, he'd still be in uniform with a parachute strapped to his back, jumping from an aircraft.

"Oh yeah, I was proud to be airborne," he said. "You always think you're with the best."

For now, Schmidt strolls to the mailbox hoping for anything other than bills. He sits back in his recliner as he enjoys reading the war memories scribbled in his cards.

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