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“HELLO” U.S. ARMY—

During late Summer of 1944 a big, sturdy high school boy reached the magic age of eighteen years old. In those days, a boy had to register for “the draft” within a few days of reaching that magic age. World War-II was raging at it’s height with battles in Europe and in The South Pacific. That high school boy wanted to join the service, but he was prevented because of a severely broken left arm. That boy had a large plaster-of-paris cast on his arm.

The Kenosha county Wisconsin selective Service Board sent that young man to Milwaukee for a “G.I. Physical” exam. The result was a three-month deferment from service. The arm injury was not healed by the end of that deferment, so a second deferment was issued.

Early in 1945 when the war in Europe was about three months from ending, my warm body was finally given to The U.S. Army. They sent me to Camp Rucker, Alabama where I “enjoyed” basic army infantry training. During the infantry training, four very handsome paratroopers came from Fort Benning to speak to our battalion of trainees. “YEE-GAW-DH”, those paratroopers were great looking with their bloused pants, spiffy boots, and white silk scarves at their necks. Those four troopers also had silver airborne wings, and glider/parachute hat emblems. WOW—I WAS HOOKED!

JUMP SCHOOL HERE I COME

When our basic training was done, a handful of still green soldiers, including me, left Camp Rucker and traveled directly to Fort Benning, Georgia. There at Jump School we learned about “A”-stage, “B”-stage, and “C”-stages of airborne training. Each stage was a two week time period during which training was taught leading to the final week which included five actual parachute jumps.

All of the jump school training stages included heavy doses of physical training that bordered on physical abuse. As I remember, the drill sergeants did not mind if a trainee wanted to quit the training. That “quitter” would be hustled from the training location instantly. Later, when we all got back to the barracks at the end of that day, there would not be any signs of that man having been there. He’d be gone, and his mattress would be rolled on his bedspring. I don’t know HOW, but someday I made it through jump school. Now, I was facing what we called jump-week. It was that final week of jump school.

WE EARN OUR JUMP WINGS

Monday of jump-week dawned with great expectations. We would make our FIRST parachute jump and, IT WILL BE TODAY! Our group was taken to the parachute rigger building. I was issued the chute that I would use that afternoon. The parachute was unpacked and checked with care. There was a small book in a snap pocket on the backpack of every parachute. The book had spaces for one hundred uses to be recorded. Those WW-II parachutes were scrapped after one hundred jumps with them. My first jump with this chute would be number ninety-seven in that little book. Was I curious about that number? Nope!

It has been many years, but I recall that our jump school parachutes were packed by two trainees working together. This meant that we usually asked a good friend from our squad, or platoon to be our rigger teammate. We packed my parachute with care and made the preliminary notes in the book for jump numbers ninety-seven.

Finally it was time. Early that Monday afternoon we marched to the airfield and donned our own unique parachute. We checked, and re-checked every hook and D-ring, and then it was into the big C-47 airplane. I was to be number four man in the “stick”, i.e. the fourth man out the door that day. It was time to put all the training into use. We heard the command, “STAND UP”, “HOOK UP”, “CHECK YOUR EQUIPMENT”, then “STAND IN THE DOOR”! We all squeezed forward. I remember that I was excited, but NOT scared! There were three lights close to the open door. One bulb was bright red color. Soon it went off and a yellow one shown. That yellow light messaged the sergeant Jump-master that the pilot was nearing the spot where we’d have to leap out that open door. The C-47 was purring along at about one hundred miles per hour, at twelve hundred fifty foot altitude.

That yellow light blinked a couple of times, and then went off as the bright green bulb lit up. The jump-master yelled loudly, “GO”! He gave number one man a strong THUMP! Out the door went trainee number one. In just an instant the number two man kicked his right foot outward and stepped out too. THEN—incredibly the man ahead of me quickly sat down—put his feet out the door—and tumbled outward and down. That man did that so fast that the jump-master didn’t even have time to give him a boot! I had squeezed right behind that man so I gave my own right foot kick outward, and I zoomed out the door too.

THAT FIRST JUMP..”WOW”

We had been taught to hold our tongue well inward, tightly grit our teeth, snug our chin onto our chest. We also held both hands tightly on the reserve chute on our chest. You can be sure I did all those steps—perfect! I didn’t feel the falling away from the plane, but I do remember hearing the engines as their sound faded. THEN I felt the hardest body slam one can think about! I recall that it felt like a city bus had smacked me dead center with a big “WOO-MPFF-FF”

O.K. Now, I must quickly reach up and grab the four risers (straps) and try to do a chin-up. While that chin-up is being done, you are suppose to look up and check the canopy to be sure all is O.K. I was shocked at what I saw. One of the wedge shaped panels was

blown out. Air was escaping through the big opening. The tattered silk was flapping as air rushed out. There also were two suspension lines broken. Those were draped spaghetti-like among the rest of the shoelace like silk lines. For a moment I thought perhaps I should “pull” my reserve chute! However, I didn’t! My landing was a solid “thump”. Today I don’t recall that first landing being any harder than those that followed. We gathered the chute into a large zippered gym-bag and scooted across the jump field to waiting G.I. trucks. I recall vividly, during the truck ride back to Fort Benning proper, several young men loudly saying they were going to quit! I showed it to those guys. I WAS NOT GOING TO QUIT, and I didn’t. There were a few other “close calls” during the three day jumps, and the one night jump BUT—we earned our own Paratrooper Wings later that week!

The A-BOMB was dropped on Japan during early August 1945, while my trainee group was in final weeks of Jump School at Fort Benning. World War-II was finally over. I passed my nineteenth birthday. My first assignment to the 11th Airborne Division in the Pacific was cancelled. I enjoyed a furlough at home, then was sent to Fort Bragg and became a member of Company-E, 2nd Battalion, 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment, of the 13th Airborne Division. The 13th Airborne Division had come back from Europe and was stationed in “Division Area” of Fort Bragg.

Chapter Two: “A Private Meets A General”

In the Fall of 1945 I was a handsome, physically strong, proud paratrooper. I didn’t have combat experience like some of the guys in Company-E of the 517th did, but I was still proud to be “airborne”. In late November 1945 I slipped away from Fort Bragg (AWOL-ahem!) for one day, and was married to my high school sweetheart. Mildred Ann and I rented two rooms in a lovely old home on Fayetteville’s Rowan Street. LIFE WAS GREAT!

Early in 1946 the famous 82nd Airborne Division came back from Europe. They were set to arrive by ship at New York and to march in the official WW-II Victory Parade there. The 13th Airborne Division was only about half strength. Half of the 13th troopers were directed to sew 82nd patches on their dress blouses and go to New York to march in the big Victory Parade. My Company Commander allowed me to remain as one of the few Company E guys to stay at Fort Bragg.

The big Victory Parade was on a Saturday in New York City. That same day a special order was received back at Fort Bragg. The order called for the 13th Airborne Division to field six hundred troopers for a demonstration jumps there at Fort Bragg. That would not be easy since half the division had gone to New York. A motley bunch of troopers were assembled. It included motor pool staff, mail clerks, cooks, supply clerks, division office people, and M.P.’s and ME! Most in that bunch had not made a jump in a long time.

The group did that demonstration jump that day. I was assigned to jump from a newer C-46 aircraft. These planes carried two sticks of jumpers. Each stick used one of the two

doors toward the rear of the aircraft. All went well, till I hit the ground. I recall hearing a loud snap at the same time as I felt the ground thump! I sat up to see my right leg with a curious S-curve off to the right. The ride to Fort Bragg Hospital was very bumpy. That ride was very difficult for a young first Lieutenant with his mangled body bounding in the same meat wagon.

Great doctors there at Fort Bragg Hospital matched up all the bone fragments and, dressed me in a large amount of plaster-of-paris. I was wheeled to Ward-31 of the base hospital where I met about twenty-five other busted up soldiers from throughout the base. Our ward medic was a big WAC Corporal named "Laura". Our ward nurse was Lieutenant Wooten.

Several weeks went by. The 82nd Airborne Division moved to "Division Area" and absorbed the men and equipment when the 13th Airborne was de-activated. Then one day we noticed a small group of officers in the office area of our ward. There was muffled conversation, and Nurse Wooten and Corporal "Laura" were soon leading the knot of officers toward my end of the ward. The officers were all wearing those light tan color fingertip length winter coats. Rank insignia are not worn on those coats. The sleeves have a dark brown band around the wrist, which might be different for different rank? In any event, Corporal "Laura" stopped at the foot of my bed.

That dumb medic looked at the lead officer, ran her eyes down to his feet, and fully back upward. At the same time she motioned with her arm in my direction, and she blurted out, "Here he is", and she paused for an instant and she continued, "Captain, or whatever you are!" That corporal was speaking to two star General James Gavin. EVERYBODY in the room heard that corporal's gaffe. Many flinched. General Gavin never batted an eyelash. He smiled, and came around beside my bed. We had a pleasant chat for several minutes.

So far as I remember, no critique was ever given to that medic for her slip of etiquette. Me? Well, this now very old PFC still holds General Gavin in great esteem. He came to see me in the hospital—ME, a lowly PFC.

➤ [Go to Next Chapter](#)

➤ [Go to Table of Contents](#)

➤ [Go to Photo Section](#)