BLESSED...TRULY BLESSED

D-Day veteran reconciles his military experiences by volunteering on behalf of veterans who have passed.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY FLOYD K. TAKEUCHI

An Army bugler's playing of Taps echoes across the green hills. A sergeant in dress uniform stands at attention, repeating the time-honored tradition of remembering a fallen comrade. A carefully folded U.S. flag is presented to a teary-eyed widow, and words of condolence from a grateful nation are expressed for Sgt. 1st Class Walter L. Takamori, U.S. Army, retired, a disabled veteran who received the Silver Star and Bronze Star in the Vietnam War.

The ceremony is one of many at the Hawaii State Veterans Cemetery on the lush eastern coast of Oahu, where the rugged Ko'olau Mountains serve as a dramatic backdrop for more than 9,200 men and women, along with their spouses, who served their country and state in uniform. For the families of those at rest in this hallowed ground, the Hawaii State Veterans Cemetery is home to a legion of heroes.

Many who visit the cemetery in the quiet community of Kaneohe don't realize that their likely first point of contact also has heroism in his veins. D. Zane Schlemmer would decline such a characterization, of course, because survivors of the Normandy invasion during World War II will tell you that heroes can only be found beneath the grave markers. He'll dismiss any accolades and go about his business, moving quickly and precisely around the cemetery's administrative office. As the office's staff volunteer, the physically fit 87-year-old Schlemmer helps visitors find the graves of relatives, hands out information on burial eligibility, or answers telephone calls.

Stitched on the left breast of a knit shirt Schlemmer wears with pride are the words "508 Para Infan Regt, WWII" and the image of a devil wearing an open parachute carrying a rifle. Above all that are the symbols of a parachute qualification insignia and the combat infantryman's badge.



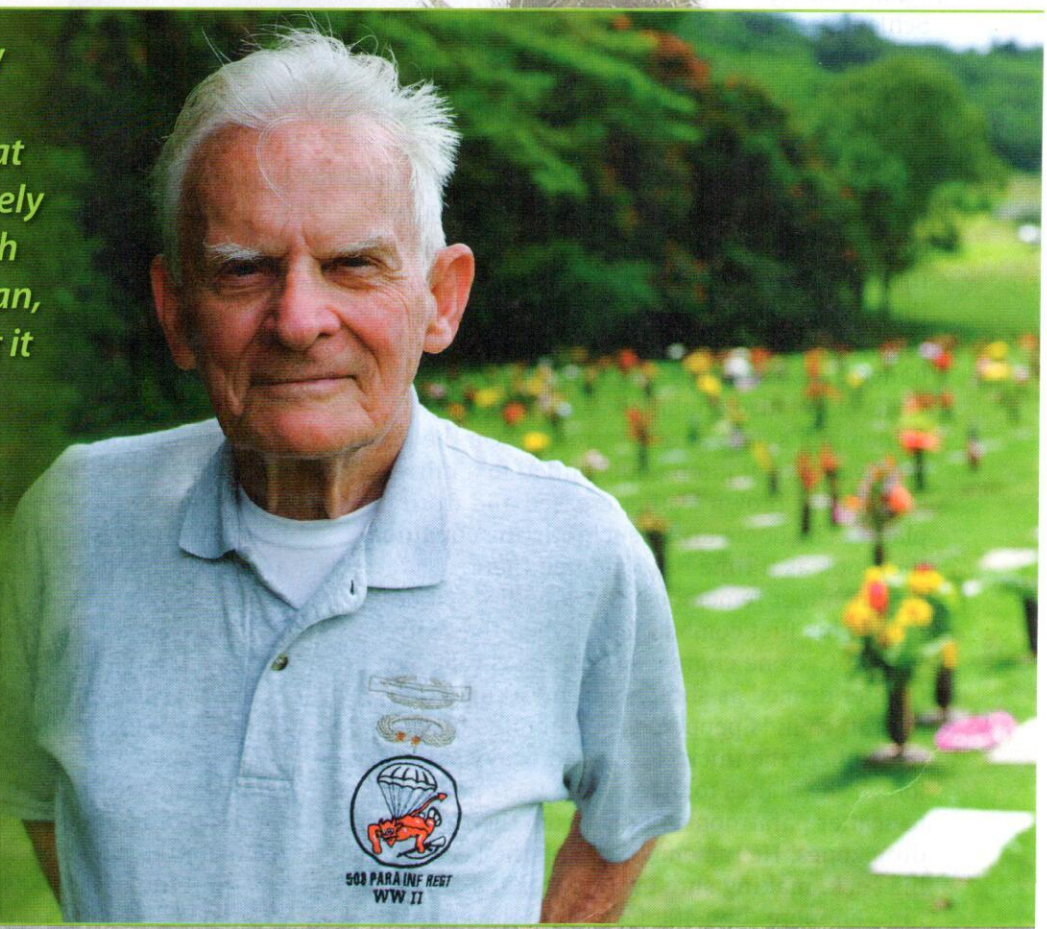
WWII. 82nd Airborne Division. CIB. These are code words for Operation Overlord, D-Day, June 6, 1944. And for Operation Market Garden, the less successful jump into the Netherlands three months after D-Day. And for the Battle of the Bulge and the 82nd Airborne's bloody defense of Bastogne in December 1944.

Tech. Sgt. Schlemmer participated in all three operations. An advanced observer for an 81mm mortar squad, he was badly wounded in Normandy, France, on July 3, 1944, nearly a month after parachuting behind enemy lines. Being an advanced observer meant that Schlemmer was out front, and that's where he ran into friendly fire that rained down on the position just hit instead of opening up on the next hedgerow. He and four others were where they were supposed to be; the incoming U.S. shells were not. Later, during the Battle of the Bulge, he was wounded in the knee.

When Schlemmer and the rest of the 508th PIR jumped on D-Day, the unit had a complement of 2,056 troopers. When it was pulled out of France

"I was so bitter by that time for being recalled that I wanted absolutely nothing to do with the military. I mean, I was bitter about it for 30 years. And then I suddenly realized, 'Hell, it's history, there's nothing I can do about it.'"

ZANE SCHLEMMER, on his recall to active duty during the Korean War





Schlemmer wasn't yet 20 when he began serving in the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment.

on July 13, 1944, the regiment had 918 men who weren't killed, wounded, captured or missing.

No one would complain if, after seeing that much combat, Schlemmer felt that he'd done his duty. He has the scars and a 20-percent service-connected disability rating to prove it. But that's not him, and his story didn't end when peace came in 1945. Still, his is not the story you might expect from a D-Day veteran.

I'm visiting with Schlemmer in his studio apartment on the shore of Kaneohe Bay. He's got a million-dollar view of the Pacific Ocean from his room, situated above a garage. The place is immaculate. Not a paper out of place. The bed has a yellow coverlet that's drum-tight, with hospital corners tucked in neatly, the way Schlemmer was taught in the Army. I notice that the doors to his closet are open, and inside, each neatly pressed shirt is on a hanger. His is an apartment ready for inspection.

His closet also doubles as a shrine to Schlemmer's days as a paratrooper. On the floor are two pairs of jump boots buffed to a mirror-like shine, their brown leather creased and worn in places. The boots are in such pristine condition, they look as if time has forgotten them.

Schlemmer remembers the way they felt on D-Day, his first combat jump, when the twin Wright Cyclone engines of a Douglas C-53 Skytrooper droned as shrapnel from German antiaircraft rounds peppered the aircraft's fuselage. He remembers the thick clouds and heavy skies that forced the planes to divert from their paths, forced to scatter paratroopers miles from their designated drop zones. He remembers being the last man in his stick, making sure everyone exited ahead of him, no more than 400 feet above the ground.

The memories are still vivid. He can reel off dates, places and details without effort. And although his hair has gone gray and his trim 5-foot-6-inch frame is slightly stooped, his weight has not changed since World War II, and he still fits comfortably into his old Army uniform.

He stands up and points to his rear end. "The paratroops love little people because that meant they could put more stuff on us when we parachuted, more weight," he explains. "My nickname in the service was, 'No Ass At All.' And it became my radio and telephone name, too. I became known as 'No Ass At All.'"

A child of the Depression, Schlemmer is convinced his parents couldn't afford to feed the family much, thus contributing to his slim frame. His hopes for college were interrupted by a draft notice in 1942. His two brothers also served, one in the Air Force and the other in the Navy. Once Schlemmer knew he was headed into the Army, the snappy uniform, shiny jump boots and an extra $50 a month for hazard pay made volunteering for the paratroops an easy decision.

Two combat jumps within three months, and holding off a determined enemy backed by tanks in Belgium three months later, took their toll on him. When the war ended, like so many other returning veterans, he left the Army and returned to college. It wasn't long before he had a degree, and a job in finance for a large company. A wife and a growing family completed the picture. He decided to stay in the U.S. Army Reserve but was sure that his active service days were over.

The Korean War changed all that. In 1950, Schlemmer, to his shock and dismay, was called back to duty. The mobilization disrupted his family and career. At the time, he was comptroller for a Motorola unit that made electronic components for the nuclear-weapons testing program. He spent the next year stateside serving in an ordnance division, not exactly happy about the detour his life had taken.

"I was so bitter by that time for being recalled that I wanted absolutely nothing to do with the



Decades later, Schlemmer can still wear his jump jacket, and he keeps two pairs of jump boots polished and ready for inspection. Schlemmer wore his uniform during Normandy D-Day anniversary ceremonies last June. Photo by Jeff Stoffer

military," Schlemmer recalls. "I mean, I was bitter about it for 30 years. And then I suddenly realized, 'Hell, it's history, there's nothing I can do about it.'"

That's about when the 30th anniversary of D-Day was approaching in 1974, and he decided to return to Normandy. He found the apple orchard where he landed. He met several French villagers who were there when the 508th liberated the town of Picauville. They welcomed him with open arms and took him into their homes.

"Going back was the release for me," Schlemmer says. In the process, he felt a new sense of pride for what he and his fellow soldiers had accomplished in 1944. That trip marked the beginning of a strong bond between Schlemmer and the people of Picauville, and with himself and his memories of service to his country.

Picauville has responded in kind. In 1977, residents placed a marker near the apple orchard where he landed, and renamed a street Rue Zane Schlemmer. Pierre Cotelle, a Picauville farmer, calls his collection of World War II memorabilia Museum Zane Schlemmer. And in 2009, Schlemmer received the Legion of Honor with the rank of chevalier from French President Nicolas Sarkozy for his role in liberating France. On that trip to Normandy, President Obama mentioned him by name in his remarks, and Schlemmer traveled by train to the battlefields with other D-Day veterans. They were accompanied by VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, a retired four-star general who formerly served as U.S. Army chief of staff.

As important as his war experience was, Schlemmer's service to his country in more recent years could be considered just as important.

He and his late wife moved to Hawaii in the early 1970s. He became vice president of a real-estate development company that boomed and then busted. In the process, he lost his home.

Schlemmer's business failure is a reminder that the greatest generation became great because it dealt with adversity with courage and conviction. In his case, in the postwar years, he not only lost his business and home, but two wives and a daughter. Any of those tragedies could have broken a lesser man. In Schlemmer's case, he looks back on his life and is grateful for all he's had. "I'm blessed," he says. "I'm truly blessed."

He began volunteering for military-related agencies in 2002, as a VA volunteer at Tripler Army Medical Center in Honolulu, on the opposite side of Oahu from his home. When that drive became more costly in 2008 as gasoline prices soared, he began volunteering closer to home, at the Hawaii State Veterans Cemetery only a few minutes away by car. He puts in a full day, five days a week, working with Cemetery Operations Manager Willie Hirokane and Cemetery Operations Assistant Margaret Okabayashi.

At a time when the state of Hawaii is dealing with drastic budget cuts, and for about a year put most workers on regular furlough, Schlemmer's full-time volunteer work is all the more valuable to the state's veterans community. He figures he's logged about 5,000 hours for VA and the cemetery, with more to come.

"I plan to work here as long as I can," he says.

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