

Soldier for Life: Herrington still enjoys thrill of jumping at 83

By Yvette Smith, Courier staff October 28, 2013



SHOW CAPTION +

1 / 6

FORT CAMPBELL, Ky. -- Typically, when people think of "golden years," they think of a time in life to sit back, relax and reflect on life. Retired Sgt. Maj. Dayton Herrington is anything but typical.

Instead of spending his retirement days in warm climates, enjoying tranquil past times, 83-year-old Herrington would rather do PT with the Soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division, encourage students at the Sabalauski Air Assault School or place his "knees in the breeze" on an Airborne jump as a member of a World War II Airborne Demonstration Team.

No pain, no gain

"Everyone on Fort Campbell has seen him," said Sgt. Antonio Hayes, a Soldier in Golf Company, 526th Brigade Support Battalion, 1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division.

"The first time I saw him was in the Division Run back in 2010," said Hayes. "He was running and I was like 'who is that?' He caught my attention -- I was amazed."

Herrington, who has run in more than a dozen Division Runs, is dedicated to his daily morning PT routine.

"I try to get up there every day and a lot of weeks I make it five days," said Herrington. "I do PT with anybody and everybody. I just jump in a formation and go."

Hayes sees Herrington almost daily, running with and motivating at every turn.

"He's out there moving around with the Soldiers," Hayes said. "I've seen [him] jump in formations and run with them, and I see the looks on their faces -- they're amazed at him -- that he's still out there doing PT, and of course it motivates them."

"I use him as an example to help my Soldiers push themselves," Hayes said. "If he's out there, still running faster than a lot of these young 20-something year-olds, they really don't have an excuse. If [he] isn't falling out, what are you doing trying to fall out?"

Welcome to Fort Campbell

While Herrington can be seen just about anywhere on the installation, at any time, there is one particular unit he especially likes to visit -- the Kalsu 20th Replacement Detachment. It is the first place Soldiers go when assigned to Fort Campbell.

"When I was assigned to 20th Replacement, he would come over, talk to Soldiers in-processing," said Staff Sgt. Donald Davenport, a cadre member at the Air Assault School. "Once he talked to a group of us. He just came over, took time out and welcomed the Soldiers and let them know they were becoming part of the best division in the United States Army. He definitely made himself known and really pushes the 101st Airborne Division.

"From the outside looking in, when he comes around, he definitely shows the Soldiers around here what the 101st Airborne Division is suppose to be about," said Davenport. "He carries that in his heart, and I think he just sets a great example for the other Soldiers that are up and coming -- of what they need to be and what they should be."

Air Assault School

Herrington spent 16-and-a-half of his 30 years of service in the 101st Airborne Division, volunteering for assignment at Fort Campbell in order to fulfill his lifelong dream of being a paratrooper.

"I volunteered to go Airborne," said Herrington. "I had always wanted to be a paratrooper, ever since I was a small boy. My brother was a paratrooper and I wanted to be just like him, so here I came to Fort Campbell on Aug. 21, 1956."

Herrington was in the sixth Airborne class and graduated, Oct. 10, 1956. Sadly, he was also witness to the end of its era at Fort Campbell.

"The 101st Airborne Division ran the Airborne School from 1956 to 1965 and stopped when Division deployed to Vietnam," said Dan Peterson, director of Fort Campbell's Don F. Pratt Museum.

"While in Vietnam, they received the designation of Air Mobile."

In 1974, four years prior to Herrington's retirement, the Fort Campbell Air Mobile School opened its doors; it was officially renamed Air Assault School some months later.

Three months prior to his retirement, at the age of 46, Herrington attended Air Assault School and was awarded his wings.

"I was not retiring without my Air Assault Wings," said Herrington who showed up at the school house on day one of the course, had himself placed on the student roster and didn't leave until he graduated.

Fast forward almost 40 years -- Herrington is still "showing up" at the Air Assault School.

"Sergeant Major comes down here pretty frequently -- he has an open invitation to the Air Assault School," said Capt. Jamie L. Neely, Sabalauski Air Assault School commander.

"He usually comes down in the morning, does PT with us and he'll come around to observe training and then interact with the students and instructors, sharing his experiences [from] when he was here and his experiences in the Army."

As the school's honorary first sergeant, Herrington has free reign at the school grounds and can be seen walking about in early morning hours in his Air Assault School instructor shirt and uniform.

"I'm just like the ambassador," said Herrington. "There have been probably a dozen times that I've gotten up at 2 o'clock in the morning and go up there and I'm off and running with the troops for the 12-miler -- the last time I did it I came in eight minutes before the commandant."

Herrington's honorary status at the school is not something he takes lightly, which is evident in the amount of time spent with the Soldiers and cadre.

"You can tell that the school means a lot to him, his military service means a great deal to him," said Neely. "Seeing someone of his age, with that much time in service, still come down here ... and with the level of care and concern that he has for the 101st Airborne Division and the school specifically, it's really a treat for the current instructors and chain of command down here."

"He's someone who gave blood, sweat and tears, through his service, to help build the Air Assault School, and to see how far it has come in his time here. I'm sure it has to be a sense of pride for him, a great sense of accomplishment," said Neely. "And now there's history involved in it -- the first Air Assault badge was awarded in 1974, so we are coming up on the 40th anniversary of the Air Assault badge."

"His presence here really puts things in perspective, especially for some of the younger instructors that have been here for a short period of time, when he's describing how Air Assault School use to be during his time here at Fort Campbell -- it's fascinating to hear some of the differences," said Neely.

Sergeant Alexandria Brown, an Air Assault instructor at the school, always looks forward to Herrington's visits, especially when he attends graduation.

"When he shows up in his dress uniform, like -- that's snazzy, you know?" said Brown. "I think he's pretty awesome. When he comes down here in his uniform for the graduation -- you can just tell he just loves the military, this Division ... he loves the Army."

His frequent visits do not go unnoticed to this young noncommissioned officer, who appreciates the time he continues to serve.

"His visits make me and the students feel like anyone can do it, no matter of age or anything," said Brown. "Eighty-three years old and he's still doing it. Words can't describe how that feels for me, being in the military. He gave his time and he's still giving even more time. It makes me respect him even more, coming here all the time. It makes me want to do the same thing."

WWII Airborne Demonstration Team

On Wednesday, Herrington departed for Florida -- not to escape the cold as many retirees do once winter nears, but to participate in yet another passion of his.

"You know what -- I jumped twice on Saturday," said Herrington in a phone interview. "It was great!"

In 2008, Herrington became part of the World War II Airborne Demonstration Team. Based at Frederick Army Airfield in Frederick, Okla., the team operates an Airborne school and also conducts jumps as part of various events throughout the year.

"We run two jump schools every year in January and July," said Herrington. "It's a regular Fort Benning-style school; we just don't have the same equipment that they do because we don't use the same aircraft that they do. Also, their school is two weeks. Ours is 10 days straight, regardless of holidays or weekends."

Herrington first found out about the WWII Airborne Demonstration Team at a 101st Airborne Division reunion five years ago.

"I saw this guy with this little blue and white ring on his T-shirt and I asked him 'what's that all about?'" said Herrington. "He said, 'Let's get a cup of coffee and we'll talk about it.' Little did I know, this guy was a pilot that flew jets off an aircraft carrier, now worked for Delta and also flies C-47s for the team."

"That was five years ago," said Herrington. "I was very interested and that May, I drove out to Oklahoma and had an interview."

Although Herrington was a former paratrooper with plenty of jumps under his belt, the team initially did not want to accept him.

"They felt I was too old," said Herrington. "I was 78 years old at the time."

But if there is anything Herrington hates, it is being told he cannot do something.

"I told the colonel and the first sergeant of the team, 'Just give me a shot and I'll tell you what I'll do -- I'll come out here day one [of the next class] and go through your whole course -- just like any other non-airborne students, who have never seen a parachute and I'll do the whole thing,' which I did, and I was accepted and I'm going on my sixth year as a team member now."

The WWII Airborne Demonstration Team Foundation was formed to remember, honor and serve the memory of those men and women who fought and died to preserve America's freedom during World War II, particularly as members of Airborne units of the United States Army, according to their website.

The foundation serves this purpose through the participation of its members in active parachute jumping in the style of the World War II Airborne Soldier utilizing the C-47 Skytrain, an aircraft that actually participated in the invasion of Europe in 1944. Additionally, the organization holds and maintains World War II artifacts and equipment and has restored the last two remaining wooden hangars for use as its training facility.

Herrington jumps quite frequently, as he is required to remain current by jumping at least once every 90 days. Prior to Saturday, he last jumped in July, and in Herrington fashion, it was another close call.

"It was a demonstration jump at a Virginia Beach air show," said Herrington.

"It was miserable, raining. We got up in the air and I was first man out the door. Eight guys followed me out and five of us ended up in the trees -- only two guys hit the drop zone."

"The winds came up, which I could tell because the number three man zipped by me along with the number two man and then I was going down," said Herrington. "I hit a tree and ended up with a suspension line around one of my legs and I was hanging [upside down]. A while later, the guys came through and [helped me get untangled] and then I released my reserve and shimmied right down the tree, in good shape."

For Herrington, it was just another day.

Reflecting on his service, his life and his current endeavors, Herrington has no regrets.

"It's been rewarding, I had fun," said Herrington. "You only have one life."

More memories than "Forrest Gump"

With more than 30 years in service, Herrington has amassed a wealth of stories. Here are just a few:

Morning wakeup in Vietnam

"You know, when the troops get up in the morning, the first thing they do is yawn and head out to get behind a tree to relieve themselves. Well there weren't all that many trees where we were at. We were kind of halfway in the woods and half way out of the woods.

"Anyway, this Soldier went out to the forward tree and got around on the other side of it so we couldn't see him, but they could see him. All of a sudden shooting started from the [Viet Cong] and he came running out from behind that tree, holding his pants, trying to hold them up around his waist, just running! And that's when we started shooting, to support him. You know, he must have ran probably 50 to 60 yards, and bullets flying all over the place and he never got hit. Everybody talked about it for a long time."

Hungry tiger

"Have you ever been in a position where someone screams and they scream at such a pitch that it makes the hair on the back of your head curl up? Yeah, well, that's what happened. That's how we got woke up that one morning in Vietnam. This Bengal Tiger had grabbed a hold of one of our Soldiers by the foot. He still had his boots on and his pants on but he didn't have a shirt on above that, and this tiger -- from his shoulders, like a proud peacock, had this guy's foot in his mouth, trying to drag him away. Then of course there were several shots fired.

"The tiger got hit ... and word spread. We reported it on the radio, [then] we measured that guy. From the nose end to the tip of his tail he was [more than 10 feet]. And if anyone ever tells you there are no Bengal Tigers in Vietnam, they are full of it."

Bumped off a Flight

"[Coming back from R&R] when you get there, they load you on one of the division Chinooks, but when the Chinook gets full, it's always the R&R guys that get bumped and I got bumped.

"Well, the Chinook that [flew out] had crashed into the mountains, no survivors. The next day is when I made the trip, we flew up and when I went back in to battalion area, the sergeant major came out and said, 'what the hell are you doing here?' I said, 'what?' and he said 'well you're supposed to be dead!' and then he told me the story about the Chinook crashing."

"I've been pretty damn lucky," Herrington said.

Editor's Note: This is the second of a two-part series detailing some of retired Sgt. Maj. Dayton Herrington's experiences as a Soldier for life. Visit www.army.mil/article/113451/ to read part one.

RELATED LINKS

World War II Airborne Demonstration Team [<http://www.wwiad.org>]

World War II Airborne Demonstration Team - Facebook [<http://www.facebook.com/pages/WWII-Airborne-Demonstration-Team/182289781794428>]

World War II Airborne Demonstration Team - Twitter [<http://twitter.com/WWIIADT>]

Fort Campbell [<http://www.campbell.army.mil>]

101st Airborne Division [<https://www.army.mil/101stairborne>]

Fort Campbell Courier [<http://www.fortcampbellcourier.com>]

Fort Campbell - Facebook [<http://www.facebook.com/FortCampbell>]

101st Airborne Division - Facebook [<http://www.facebook.com/101st>]

Fort Campbell Courier - Facebook [<http://www.facebook.com/fortcampbellcourier>]

Fort Campbell - Twitter [<http://www.twitter.com/FortCampbell>]

101st Airborne Division - Twitter [<http://www.twitter.com/101stAASLTDIV>]

Fort Campbell Courier - Twitter [<http://www.twitter.com/CampbellCourier>]