

Clarence Schmidt

In December 1941 Clarence Schmidt was married and working for the YMCA in Chicago. He remembers getting the news of the Pearl Harbor attack and feeling a sense of anxiety among the people in Chicago. He had noticed it in the prelude to American entry in the war but it became more pronounced once the United States was involved in the war.

By the fall of 1942 he was drafted into the army and attended basic training at a camp near Chicago. Schmidt was fairly unique in that, as he puts it "...wanted to do my army service but objected to being one who would be in a position when I would have to kill someone." His father had been a minister and had instilled strong Christian values in him and he felt it was wrong to kill. He explained this to the Draft Board and received a 1-AO or conscientious objector classification.

He had one fond memory of his training. He remembers being in a line with other soldiers and moving between two rows of doctors. Both rows were giving the soldiers shots as they passed by. Schmidt was so distressed by the experience that he fainted when it was over. In the end he was glad to have fainted since he got out of running with the rest of the trainees.

After completing his basic training he was sent to clerk school to learn basic office duties such as typing, maintaining record and handling payroll. This school was also located near Chicago and he was able to get passes to visit his wife occasionally.

Once done with clerk school he was shipped, with other soldiers, to a camp on the east coast of the United States in preparation for being sent overseas. It was at this point that all of the 1-AO classified soldiers were pulled out of the group and put on a train for transfer. Schmidt had no idea where they were going until they got to New Orleans. There they embarked on a transport ship for movement overseas. It wasn't until they were at sea that they were informed they were going to be stationed in the Panama Canal Zone. In the Canal Zone he was attached to the 310th General Hospital as a clerk. The hospital handled casualties from the fighting in both the Pacific and Atlantic though Schmidt didn't have much contact with patients. In the voyage down none of the men were allowed to write home. When he arrived in Panama Schmidt cabled his wife to tell her where he was but the cable was garbled. She didn't know where he was until he got a chance to write a letter later.

He found duty in Panama to be pleasant. The hospital was located on a scenic spot overlooking Gatun Lake and there was plenty of golfing, swimming and fishing for the soldiers. Fruit was also in plentiful supply. There was a huge stock of bananas that the soldiers could help themselves too with only one rule; a soldier had to properly throw away his banana peel when he was done. There were also excursions to nearby islands to collect pineapples during pineapple season. With the exception of visits to Balboa, Schmidt mostly stayed in the Canal Zone during his off hours. He did have a friend in

Balboa who ran the local YMCA affiliate and he would visit the man and his family occasionally.

Fortunately Schmidt's duties did give him a chance to travel in Central and South America. He was part of a training team that traveled to Peru and Guatemala to teach local army officers in English. This was part of the Good Neighbor Policy the U.S. had instituted to improve relations with Central and South America. They deployed to each location for 6 weeks and while in there they enjoyed very hospital treatment by their military hosts. He recalls in particular one delicious Guatemalan dinner that was assembled in the traditional layered manner and then cooked in a firepit in the earth. During a trip to Peru he and some fellow soldiers took a railroad trip up into the Andes. They went as far as they could go and still back in a day. On their last stop they met an American who managed a local silver mine. They had dinner with him and his family and returned to their quarters.

When the end of the war came there was a great deal of celebration in the Canal Zone, it was "quite a bit of welcome news" to Schmidt and his fellow soldiers. However the end of the war did not mean they were going home immediately. The military had a system in which soldiers earned points based on length and type of service. Schmidt had not earned enough points yet and served on until 1946 when he finally returned home to Chicago.

After the war he returned to his job with the YMCA in Chicago. From there he and his wife followed his YMCA career to Lansing, Michigan then to Los Angeles, California and finally to Jerusalem where he worked at the International YMCA. They also had two children after the war and took them to Jerusalem.

Of his experience Schmidt says he learned a lot. Among the most important lesson was a tolerance of other people's views and cultures. Serving in the army had taken from Chicago and exposed him to other cultures and peoples. This taught him to be tolerant of other people's views and respectful of different cultures.