

# CIVIL AIR PATROL



## ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Maj Johannes J. Schmitz, CAP

WMDW 01.09-01

03 September 2009

**CIVIL AIR PATROL  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

Interview of

**Maj Johannes J. Schmitz, CAP**

by

SM Colleen M. McCormick, CAP

Date: 03 September 2009

Location: Laurel, Maryland

Number: WMDW 01.09-01

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## **FOREWORD**

The following is the transcript of a digitally recorded oral history interview. Since only minor emendations have been made, the reader should consistently bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken rather than the written word. Additionally, no attempt to confirm the historical accuracy of the statements has been made. As a result, the transcript reflects the interviewee's personal recollections as remembered it at the time of the interview.

Editorial notes and additions made by CAP historians, as well as any additions, deletions and changes subsequently made to the transcript by the interviewee, are enclosed in brackets. Researchers may wish to listen to the actual interview tape prior to citing the transcript.

## **SUMMARY OF CONTENTS**

In this oral history interview, Major Johannes J. Schmitz, CAP, discusses his youth in Germany before and during the Second World War and his subsequent life experiences as an engineer in the United States, including his participation in Civil Air Patrol.

The interview begins with his childhood in the Rhineland and covers events up until the summer of 2009, when the interview was taken. Major Schmitz speaks about his affiliation with the Hitler Youth Signal Corps and the German Air Force. He also discusses his immigration to the United States and describes his career and family.

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## CAP ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Number: WMDW 01.09-01  
Interviewee: Major Johannes J. Schmitz, CAP  
Date: 03 September 2009  
Location: Laurel, Maryland  
Interviewer: Senior Member Colleen M. McCormick, CAP

**M: SM McCormick**

**S: Maj Schmitz**

**M:** [...] So, first, I wondered if you would start and say a few words about growing up in Germany and maybe your early experiences and childhood.

**S:** Okay. Of course, I was born in 1927 [as a third son to a shoemaker] so I'm 82 years old now. I was born in Bonn in the Rhineland, which is like Bavaria a very Catholic region while the rest of Germany is Lutheran or, they call it Protestant over there.

**M:** Mm-hm.

**S:** Having grandparents which were very strict with us to go to church and CCD [... I] joined the Catholic youth [at nine]. But then in 1938 Hitler abolished all religious organizations and made us join the Hitler Youth. So when I was 10 years old I became a Hitler Youth. When I was 12 years old I went into the advanced group of Hitler Youth and since I was an apprentice electrician I joined the Signal Corps, to learn all about radio and signaling and things. But after about a year I found out that there wasn't much more to learn so I switched to the Aviation Corps. Because I always liked flying and I was interested in airplanes. So [...] in 1943, I started glider training and actually had several hours of glider training, but then the war took over and this was disbanded, and I couldn't continue, but at least I had my nose in the wind.

**M:** \*chuckle\*

**S:** Which was very interesting, of course. Well in [...] 1944 I was drafted. I don't know if you're familiar with the story of the current Pope. He was drafted as a Hitler Youth to help in the – in the German Air Force, at the [...] anti-aircraft [installation near his home]. Well I was drafted [also]. [...] In 1942 when I was in the Signal Corps, somebody came from [the] Berlin [...] headquarters of the Hitler Youth and looked for volunteers for an electronic course. Well I thought you can learn somethin' so I signed up for the electronic course. No sooner had I signed up, I but was informed that I was not allowed to tell anybody, except for my parents [...]. For two years, I didn't hear a word about the electronic course I had signed up [for] – I had forgotten all about it. So in the mid of 1944, suddenly in the morning

[...] mail I got my draft notice for the German Air Force, as a soldier. In the afternoon I got a draft notice from the Hitler Youth for [...] the Signal Corps. [Since] I liked the second one better than the first but I thought, I'm sure the armed forces have precedent over the Hitler Youth, so I sent both of them back, and would you believe it, the one from Berlin, with the Hitler Youth came back. The Air Force was canceled. And I thought ah-hah, there's more to that than your Signal Corps and sure enough. When I reported, we had four weeks of boot camp. They had pulled sergeants and lieutenants out of the front lines which needed an R&R, and they gave us a boot camp. Oh man they [...] go through the mud and everything. But when we graduated, we had our boot camp, we were just like soldiers but nevertheless we were Hitler Youth. We had a Hitler Youth uniform. But then I [...] was sent] to Ludwigsburg near Stuttgart at [...] an] Air Force Signal Corps installation. And there I got training in electronics and radar. And I became a radar technician. [...] This outfit [...] serviced all the [German] radar [...] installations] along the Atlantic coast, [...] from France to Scandinavia]. If they had a problem or if it had to be updated, we would do this kind of work. But I was a Hitler Youth, I was not a soldier. Which was very interesting. Then suddenly—right here I was 16 when I was drafted, [...] suddenly in December 1944, we were given a furlough to go home and leave our Hitler Youth uniform at home, and report in civil clothes to Weimar the headquarters of the Hitler Youth. So late December I reported and we were shipped [...] to Dresden, which is in east Germany. In Dresden, [in early January, just before it was destroyed] we were given an Air Force uniform, and were sworn in as soldiers at 17. [Then] we were sent right back to the installation where we had worked as a radar technician. Now I was an Air Force radar technician. So, I went right back to Stuttgart, and worked there. [...]

**S:** [...] Then in March 1945, [as] the Allied troops had occupied most of Europe and came close to Stuttgart [...] we moved out on the [south] side of town while on the [north] side, the US forces entered. And we were moved to Bavaria, to continue our radar technician job. In [...] late March, about the 28 of March 1945, the German Air Force was abolished and everybody had to report to the infantry [...] as a cannon fodder. And so we [were sent] to an infantry base, and in order to do that we had to use the back roads, so the SS, the political, organization – black, the black coats...

**M:** Mm-hm.

**S:** ...would not grab us because they would grab anybody they could get and put them in the front line. So we went from the back roads and through the woods, to that installation where we would become an infantry soldier. Well we didn't quite make it. On the [...] twenty-second of April I was at a farmer house, stayed overnight and they had French POWs, that is POWs of the German armed forces. And they said, well look, we were

treated well, but tomorrow when the US forces comes through, you're gonna raise your hand and you give up. And they will treat you nicely too. And so I did, on the twenty-second I became a POW, of the [...] American forces [...]. Then they took us by truck back toward the Rhineland. We were in Bavaria at that time they took us all across north, toward near Frankfurt, they were [...] establishing a POW camp. When we arrived there, [there] were huge fields of fresh, planted potatoes. No fences, nothing. So what we did we would lay on the—the ground and stretch our arms and feet, and claimed this portion for us and then we dug out the potatoes, because that was the only food we had. See the German armed forces destroyed all provisions to leave nothing for the Allies and of course that caused quite a shortage of food. And that was not easy to live with. So then, [...] the US forces came and had to feed us but everything they feed us had to be brought in by ship from the United States, so therefore we weren't getting any much food, just enough to keep us from starving. Which wasn't [...] very much you know. Anyway, they did not mistreat us per se. Uh, then...in the middle of April '45, the [...] war ended and zones were established in Germany, there was the British zone, the French zone, the American zone [...]. Since I was from Bonn and the Rhineland, this was the British zone, [...] we were shipped [...] by train, [...] open freight car[s], down the Rhine river, to Belgium [...]. Would you believe it, we stopped at Bonn, at home, and my parents came and saw me as a POW in the train, and they signaled to me – don't you want to jump off the train or what? Some people did. I said no, we are going to be discharged and I want discharge papers, I don't want to be an illegal German there. So I went to a POW camp in Belgium, but it took another two months before we were discharged. Well and then I came home, starved. When mom saw her son starved, she fed him. And what was the result? I got yellow jaundice. Which I'm still suffering today from, I cannot donate any blood or anything because of that. So, but I got over it. That was '45. Well, then I continued my apprenticeship as electrician and [...] graduated, and I took a job [...] as an electrician then. Then in 1950, I got an invitation from my mother's brother, [a professor] who lived in [Ohio]. He was a professor at the Presbyterian College of Wooster, Ohio. [...] He invited me to come [as] he realized what was going on in Germany, [...] to come to the United States and I gladly accepted [...]. [As] I was rather disenchanted with Germany, so I was glad to come [...] in April 1950 [...] to the United States. Fourteen days on an old freighter, of which ten days I was seasick. \*chuckles\* Well this old freighter just... Matter of fact that freighter a year later was, uh, uh, scrapped. Well, that was 1950. And then of course after I'd been in the United States I immediately applied [...] for citizenship. And I got my first citizenship papers 1951. And in 1956 I became a US citizen, in Wooster, Ohio. I lived in Orrville, I don't know if Orrville rings a bell with you? Smucker's? I knew the family [...]. When I lived in Orrville, I worked [...] as a maintenance electrician. [...] The whole

plant was in my charge. [...] I lived with a family with a retired [...] local physician. They were elder people and I would chauffer them around. But the benefit was, I learned all the upper class of the people in Ohio. This I became a Republican of course, since Ohio was strongly Republican. And, uh but I knew all the upper echelons in the state and everything, personally. That I knew the Smuckers personally, and things like that you know, because I would take the doctor and his wife [...] to their weekly lunches [...] and would sit with them and talk to them all, you know that was very interesting. And it sure helped me quite a bit. Well, [...] after I had been a citizen for one year, in 1956, I took a year's leave from my job and went back to Germany to make a master's degree as electrician [...]. There I met my wife, and we got [married] in a civil ceremony [...] so she could come to the States as my wife. And then when we got back to Orrville [and] we married [on December 22] in church. [...] So, since 1956, she is my wife. [...] We have three children, two girls and one boy and they're very nice young people, they of course have families too. [...] I was still the maintenance man in this little plant [and] Roswitha realized that, with my master's degree as electrician [...] I could have an engineering job. So I applied with Westinghouse, and General Electric [...]. Westinghouse from Pittsburgh came and hired me, as an associate engineer, since I didn't have a college degree as an engineer, but I had a master's degree and they realized the capability I had. Would you believe it [...] within a year they sent me for one year to India to install a steel mill, as a supervising engineer. [...] I sent Roswitha back [home] to Bonn [...] to have [our first] child [Sonia] and then they came to India and [...] lived a happy year with us [...]. Then in 1959 we came back to the States, [...] there was a downturn in our employment and in our work [...]. So I was shipped by Westinghouse [...] from Pittsburgh to [Sunnyvale, California]. [...] At Sunnyvale I [...] join[ed ...] the Polaris missile job [...]. There I was made a full engineer, with Westinghouse, and was sent to [various] shipyards [...]. In 1964, while I was in Portsmouth, New Hampshire working in the naval shipyard there, to make atomic submarines, I learned to fly [and ...] made a pilot [...] license [...]. As a young boy I was always fascinated with airplanes. [... While] in the Hitler Youth [...] I joined the Air Force [branch] and [...] got the first structure on glider flying, so I got my nose full of air. So then when I, was at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, I realized that I could now make a private [...] pilot's license and I did. So that's when I became a licensed pilot. Then, would you believe it in '64, Westinghouse sent me to Germany as the liaison to the German Air Staff, because Westinghouse had sold some radar equipment to the German Air Force. And I had to be the liaison between Westinghouse and the German Air Staff, and had to travel to the various [...] installations and make sure they would have spare parts and all the equipment and whatever they needed. And of course our children, we had three children by then, they loved it. They loved being with the grandparents because, I took Roswitha to Bonn [...] where we lived, and the grandchildren

lived there with the grandparents for two years. Oh they loved it. Then we came back to the States [...] to Baltimore. And there we bought our current residence. [...] I worked [...] at Friendship [...] and later [...] at Hunt Valley [...] as an engineer. Of course, working as an engineer for Westinghouse and had the foreign experience, I was shipped all over the United States [...], the Pacific [...] to supervise installation of radar equipment. And of course whenever I would go, I would lease an airplane and would to continue my flying, because I just love to fly, and that was a lot of fun. Well, let's see. Oh yeah in '68, Westinghouse got a job, in [...] Malaysia. And I wasn't about to go back to Asia, so I transferred to the nuclear division here in Baltimore [since I did not want it]. And this worked out really well. So, then I worked at the nuclear department at Hunt Valley and in 1974, being here in Baltimore, I joined the Civil Air Patrol. So I been a member since 1974. [... 36] years [...]. And I enjoy every day and I still do my job. And as a senior of course I come here to check you all in, and then when you're all there I can go home, I don't have to stay to the end. And I really enjoy that. But I'm being appreciated by our staff. So that is basically what happened. I became a major in [... April 2000 ...]. Then I was supposed to go to officer school to become a lieutenant colonel, [but] I wasn't about to become a general, so I stayed a major ever since.

**M:** \*chuckles\*

**S:** And that's as far as I will go. This is my story.

**M:** And you said later you're going to talk about your flight experience...

**S:** I, yeah, I talk about my flight experience for the group, yeah.

**M:** All right! Well, I will record that.



Headquarters  
Howard Composite Squadron  
Civil Air Patrol  
United States Air Force Auxiliary  
5936 Trotter Rd.  
Clarksville, MD 21029



Letter of Invitation

23 August 2009

Maj Hanz Schmitz:

As part of the Civil Air Patrol's historical effort, an oral history program was instituted to acquire first hand tape-recorded information not available from conventional printed sources. The program has proven highly successful in that it preserves the reminiscences of those who witnessed many of the important events of our early history.

In 1982, the CAP began interviewing members who served on Active Duty during World War II. This was later expanded to cover other individuals who have significantly contributed to CAP's growth. Therefore, as a longstanding member of CAP who grew up during World War II, we believe an extensive in-depth interview covering your life and CAP career would enrich and broaden the scope of our history.

While the interview will be biographical in format, it will emphasize your experiences. Normally, the interview takes two or three hours; if more time is required, arrangements can be made for additional sessions. The recording and resulting transcript will be retained in the CAP Historical Archives and made available to researchers. A copy of the interview transcript will be provided for your personal use.

If you would like to participate in this program, we will arrange with you to conduct the interview at a time and place of your choosing.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jacob Gerstein". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above the typed name.

1st Lt Jacob Gerstein  
Historian  
Howard Composite Squadron

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Colleen McCormick". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above the typed name.

SM Colleen McCormick  
Assistant Historian  
Howard Composite Squadron

**ACCESS AGREEMENT**

**KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS:**

That I, Major Johannes Schmitz, have this day participated in a digitally recorded oral interview covering my best recollections of events and experiences which may be of historical significance to the Civil Air Patrol.

I understand that the recording and the transcribed manuscript resulting therefrom will be accessioned into the Civil Air Patrol's Historical Holdings. In the best interest of the Civil Air Patrol, I do hereby voluntarily give, transfer, convey, and assign all right, title, and interest in the memoirs and remembrances contained in the aforementioned digital recording and manuscript to the Civil Air Patrol, to have and to hold the same forever, hereby relinquishing for myself, my executors, administrators, heirs, and assigns all ownership, right, title, and interest therein to the donee expressly on the condition of strict observance of the following restrictions:

No restrictions

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The interviewer has explained CAPP 5 (E) Attachment 23, a copy of which appears on the reverse of this document.

Johannes J. Schmitz  
Major Johannes Schmitz, DONOR

9-3-2009  
DATE

ACCEPTED ON BEHALF OF THE CIVIL AIR PATROL BY:

Colleen McCormick  
SM Colleen McCormick, INTERVIEWER

9-3-2009  
DATE

SCHMITZ1@VERIZON.NET

**EXPLANATION TO INTERVIEWEE**

**STANDARD STATEMENT ORALLY PRESENTED TO INTERVIEWEES**

At the initial interview session, the interviewer informs the subject that:

- a. The interview will be transcribed within a minimum of six months of completion.
- b. A transcript copy will be sent to them for a cursory edit.
- c. Copies of the transcript, including their incorporated editorial changes, will be sent for personal retention.
- d. The original and one copy, plus tapes, will be accessioned into the Civil Air Patrol's Headquarters archives and other official CAP archives locations.

The interviewee is informed that the interview will be available to qualified interested researchers who are actively pursuing a study of Civil Air Patrol History. It is emphasized that the interview will not be disseminated indiscriminately and that any restrictions placed on it will be honored to the fullest extent possible.

At the end of the interview session, the interviewer presents the Tape and Transcript Access Agreement to the subject and discourages any attempts to over restrict access to the interview. In those instances where the subject makes caustic comments about currently living individuals, and the interviewee voices concern about the matter, it is recommended that he/she use the caveat "Permission to cite or quote must be received from donor."

The interviewee will also be asked to suggest names of prospects he recommends to be interviewed.



HEADQUARTERS  
HOWARD COMPOSITE SQUADRON  
CIVIL AIR PATROL  
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE AUXILIARY  
5936 Trotter Road • Clarksville, MD 21029



Transmittal Letter

25 January 2010

Maj Hanz Schmitz:

Enclosed for your review is a transcript of the oral history interview conducted with you on 03 September 2009. We are pleased with the results and feel it will be a valuable addition to our historical collection after it is finalized. I hope that you will also be pleased with it.

In reviewing the transcript of the interview, you will find that it may not read as well as the usual written effort. This is the result of putting the spoken word to paper. While this technique is not as disciplined as thoughts transferred to the printed word, the spontaneity of the transcribed word lends flavor and intimacy – one of the values of oral history. Consequently, we refrain from heavy editing that would bring the transcript into more accord with the normally written product.

Kindly use a color other than black when making any corrections or changes. You will undoubtedly find that we were unable to determine a date, the name of a location, or perhaps other words. Your help in this area will also be greatly appreciated.

Please return the transcript as soon as you have finished reviewing it. We will incorporate whatever changes or corrections you wish. Additionally, a summary will be added. Once that is done, a personal copy (or copies, if you would like more than one) will be given to you.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jacob Gerstein".

1st Lt Jacob Gerstein  
Historian  
Howard Composite Squadron



HEADQUARTERS  
HOWARD COMPOSITE SQUADRON  
CIVIL AIR PATROL  
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE AUXILIARY  
5936 Trotter Road • Clarksville, MD 21029



Thank You Letter

17 February 2010

Maj Hans Schmitz:

Enclosed is one printed copy of your oral history transcript for your personal retention. It includes a CD that has digital copies of all of the material. Should you have need for a reasonable number of additional printed copies, please do not hesitate to request them.

We sincerely appreciate your contribution to the CAP Oral History Program. Thank you for sharing your interesting story!

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jacob Gerstein".

1st Lt Jacob Gerstein  
Historian  
Howard Composite Squadron

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