



Retired Gen. Jim Hall of Centennial displays some of his original World War II bomber jackets. Hall was an Army flight engineer before beginning his decades of parachuting adventures.

Photo by Peter Jones

FAR LEFT: Jim Hall, probably second from left, joins other Air Force parachutists in a training exercise.

# LIFE & SKYDIVING

At 86, Centennial's Gen. Jim Hall is jumping for joy

By PETER JONES

Jim Hall fell in love with parachuting – but before that, he fell on his butt.

"It was my first jump. I damned near killed myself," he said. "I wasn't trained at all. We jumped into Old Mexico looking for gold. I got down and I landed very hard."

The 20-something college student was lucky enough to limp away from the hard landing with little more than a few bumps and bruises, but he learned a lesson about respecting the power of attitude and the skill of jumping at 18,000 feet.

Some 3,000 jumps later, Hall is still an avid – but more skillful – skydiver. The 86-year-old took his most recent plunge from a perfectly operational airplane about 10 months ago. He will do it again soon – his breathing machine notwithstanding – whether his doctor likes it or not.

"It's all downhill," he said. "What the hell's so difficult about it?"

Hall's parachute has taken him in more directions than down. In addition to dropping into Mexico for a 21st century gold rush, the lifelong adventurer has literally fallen into military hotspots, flown combat tours over Japan, volunteered as a catapulted guinea pig and briefly fell in with Cuban revolutionaries. He even dropped into Hollywood as a stuntman and adventure writer.

Any regrets? "No," he says without missing a beat.

Hall told his own true-life action story in *Parachuting for Gold in Old Mexico*, a 2010 memoir that could easily warrant its own big-screen action pic.

The Centennial resident and retired 86-year-old Air Force general will be

## MEET HALL, SUPPORT TRUST FOR 'EAGLE' HALL

A tribute to Gen. Jim Hall will be held March 24, 5-7:30 p.m. at Glenmoor Country Club, 110 Glenmoor Drive in Cherry Hills Village. Tickets are \$35 or \$50, which includes a signed copy of Hall's book *Parachuting for Gold in Old Mexico*. Proceeds will benefit a trust for "Eagle," Hall's son, a Special Olympics athlete. For reservations, call 720-675-7056.

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## ESCAPE FROM THE COALMINES

Hall was born in 1926 in a small mining town, Muckelrat – "Welsh for big rat," according to the salty Irishman – located somewhere in the dismal coalfields of western Pennsylvania. He was the seventh son of seven boys and three girls.

"My old man was a miner and a damn good one," Hall said. "We didn't talk about black lung back then. They just worked him to death. He walked three miles to work and never missed a day of work in his life."

Hall's father had entered the mines at age 12 and didn't get out until he died a haggard old man at 54. For a time, Hall was on the path to his father's footsteps, rarely going to school. Instead, he helped Dad work a "bootleg mine," stealing coal to heat the house and help neighbors too poor to buy fuel.

In 1943, Hall was saved from the mines by the Army Air Corps. The 17-year-old was now old enough to get the parental signature needed to follow his older brothers – and virtually every

young man in the dying coal town – into the military. The 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had changed everything.

Being mechanically inclined, Hall was quickly trained as a flight engineer and was soon assigned to assist in B-29 bombing raids over Japan.

At the end of World War II at the urging of his Catholic mother, Hall briefly considered a career in the priesthood. Although he soon dismissed the idea, he earned enough credits at seminary to attend the University of New Mexico.

Although Hall had never before pulled a ripcord, his college roommate, a former paratrooper, talked him into joining his moneymaking parachute exhibitions and into taking part in that hard-bottomed drop to Mexico.

"That was a wild goose trip," Hall said of the rough landing.

Not all of Hall's gold-digging efforts were as painful. After graduating with degrees in engineering and geology, the now-trained parachutist and adventurer was ready to combine his areas of expertise and return to the deep canyons of Mexico.

"There was gold all over the place that the conquistadors had discovered in the 1500s," he said. "But it's way back in the canyons. It takes you literally weeks by burro because there's no roads there. I'd fly over there by helicopter in 20 minutes and parachute out. I made a hell of a lot of money – and lost a lot of money."

## CASTRO & HOLLYWOOD

Hall met a cast of characters during his mid-1950s jaunts, at one point parachuting into a native village whose terrified inhabitants had never seen a white man – much less one falling from the sky with a canine companion named Ace.

The skydiver, who had Mexico's parachuting license No. 1, would also catch the attention of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara who were at the time assembling their armies in the revolutionary hotbed of southern Mexico.

"Fidel was a big guy. He was tough. I was impressed," Hall said. "I didn't know he was a communist. I thought he was a bum like me."

Hall was among the various drifters and soldiers of fortune who were recruited – albeit briefly in Hall's case – into Castro's 1959 revolution.

A well-trained parachutist would come in handy.

"I didn't give a damn," Hall said of Castro's political aspirations. "I was 28. He was going to make me a major in his army. I was going to be one of his five leaders."

Hall nearly went through with it until the U.S. Embassy threatened his citizenship.

"I decided it wasn't worth it," he said. "I sent word back to Castro, and of course he was quite angry. He tried to kidnap me."



Jim Hall, right, instructs actor Paul Burke, star of the TV series *12 O'Clock High*, on use of an F-106 ejection seat. In 1965, Hall singlehandedly tested the seat for airplanes, propelling himself 400 feet into the air and causing his chronic back and lung problems.

It's all downhill. What the hell's so difficult about it?

- Gen. Jim Hall on parachuting



Gen. Jim Hall, right, will be honored March 24 at Glenmoor Country Club at a fundraiser for his son "Eagle," left, a Special Olympian. His wife, Georgann and daughter Jennifer are also pictured.



Partners Dave Burt and Jim Hall coordinated jumps for Hollywood productions in the 1950s and '60s.

Photos courtesy of Jim Hall

