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Woman travels 12 hours to USS Wisconsin to reconnect with her late grandfather

- By Denise M. Watson
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- Courtesy of Chelsea Schell

Chelsea Schell visits the ship her grandfather served on to recreate photos.



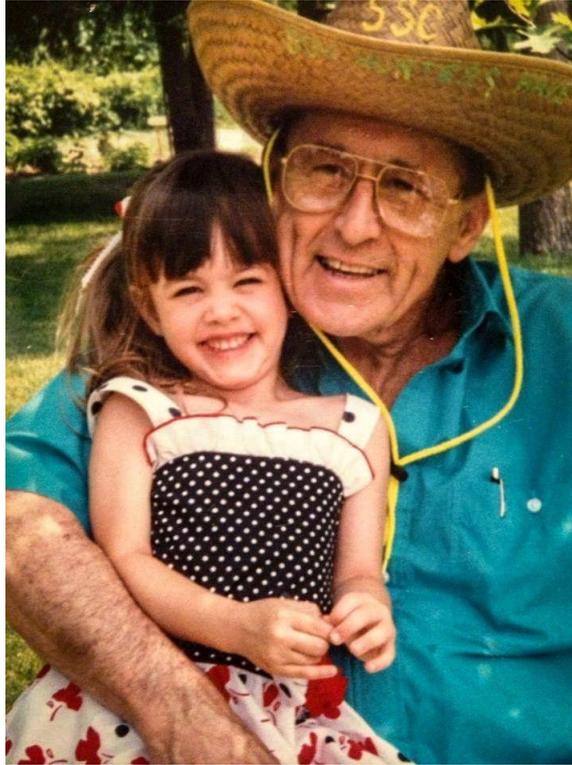
- Courtesy of Chelsea Schell

Chelsea Schell recreates photos of her grandfather on the USS Wisconsin



- Courtesy of Chelsea Schell

Chelsea Schell of Waterford, Mich., visited the USS Wisconsin recently to recreate photos of her grandfather, James Schell, who served on the Wisconsin after World War II.



- Courtesy of Chelsea Schell

Chelsea Schell and her grandfather, James, in an undated photo.



- Courtesy of Chelsea Schell

Chelsea Schell poses in one of the sailor's racks on the USS Wisconsin. She said she wondered how her grandfather, who was almost 6-feet 4-inches tall, fit into the sleeping area.

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Chelsea Schell and her friends had driven 12 long hours to stand before the gray, hulking mass anchored in Norfolk, the city her grandpa had talked about for years. She'd been planning this journey from Waterford, Mich., for months. She carried a couple of black-and-white photos of her grandpa, James Schell, that would've been taken 70 years ago somewhere aboard the battleship Wisconsin.

She wore a navy blue jacket that she cuffed like her grandfather in one of the snapshots. Her matching shorts had buttons that looked like they belonged on a sailor's uniform.

At 25, she was about to check off the top item on her bucket list. She just needed to find where her grandfather would've placed his feet as he stood watch on the Wisconsin, where he would've laughed with his buddies, where he might have slept.

And she couldn't let herself cry.

Chelsea Schell lost her best friend when her grandfather died a few days before Thanksgiving in 2006.

He was the kind of grandpa who was serious, caring, Superman strong, but he once proudly walked into a store and bought Chelsea her first pair of ruffled tights.

“When my parents were at work, I was with him,” Schell remembered. “We just had this special bond. He would keep his fridge in the basement filled with my favorite pop. I wouldn't be who I am today if it weren't for my grandfather.”

She hasn't been able to drink any of her faves — Country Time lemonade and Faygo Redpop — since he died.

He also talked with her about his days in the Navy. Even though she couldn't digest all the details when she was younger, she could feel that it was one of the most important times of his life.

He told her about how badly he wanted to join the war after Pearl Harbor, but when he turned 17 in 1943, the Army told him he was too young. He could enlist in the Navy, but one of his parents had to sign for him.

They refused until the summer of 1944 and the Allied invasion of Europe, when they believed that the war's end was imminent.

Still, when James Schell signed up with a recruiter, he was given a choice to return home and get called back in two to six weeks or leave the next day. He went home, and over dinner, told his parents he had to leave in the morning. His mom cried so much she couldn't finish eating.

He wouldn't tell them about the first option until years later.

Schell trained as a quartermaster and learned navigation. Though he was hankering for a fight, by the time his ship, LST 974, entered the Pacific theater, Japan was days from surrender.

His ship repatriated Japanese soldiers from China back to their island. Schell remained in the Navy and also served during the Korean War.

He'd talk about enjoying his training in Norfolk. However, his granddaughter couldn't remember specific stories or when he was here, or even the names of the ships he served on. James Schell settled back in Michigan and kept in touch with friends he'd made onboard and lived a quiet life until the end.

Two years ago, Chelsea Schell was vacationing with friends in South Carolina when they invited her to join them on the tour of the aircraft carrier Yorktown, which is moored in Mount Pleasant.

She said she just went along, not thinking about her grandfather until she stepped onboard the aircraft carrier and started walking through the rooms.

Then her mind flooded with questions.

"Am I standing on the ship my grandpa was on? Is this where he ate? Where he slept? Where he met so many friends, some of whom he never saw again?" she recalled.

"That's when everything changed. I had to find out the name of the ship my grandpa was on."

She returned to Michigan and sorted through photos. Written on the back of one was "USS Wisconsin" and "1946." She jumped on the Internet to research the ship.

Schell was stunned when she realized that the battleship was not only still around, but open for tours. She started planning.

In February, Schell contacted Nauticus, which manages the Wisconsin, and got in contact with Battleship Operations Manager Clayton Allen.

Allen averages two calls or emails a week from someone with a special request. A lot of times people don't know what they want from the ship or how they want him to help.

"They just want to reconnect with the past," Allen said. "Chelsea's goal was easy; she knew what she wanted."

She wanted to make sure she could get to the areas where her grandfather's shots had been taken. She emailed photos of Schell standing on a ladder well and sitting on a thick anchor chain.

By comparing her photo and analyzing the antennae, and number and types of guns in the background, Allen confirmed one picture was taken between 1946 and 1948.

The photo of the stairs was trickier. Allen and other historians studied background details, such as the D-rings and weld line behind James Schell, and the shadows on his face, but couldn't identify which ladder well. The Wisconsin has more than 30 of them now.

"We couldn't nail it down because the ship was completely reconfigured in the 1980s," he said.

He told Chelsea what he'd found, and told his crew about her and shared her photos.

She boarded the Wisconsin on March 11 with a tour group. She mentioned to the guide that her grandfather had served on the ship, and he called out, "Oh, you must be Chelsea!"

It would be one of the first of many times during the day she would be overwhelmed.

Chelsea used to work for a photography company and knew what she wanted. She wanted to place her feet, as much as possible, next to her grandpa's. She positioned herself sitting on the bulky chain on the bow, left arm resting on her knee, as he grandfather had. Even though Allen couldn't find the exact stairwell, the crew pointed out one that was likely near the area. She tried to match the pose, but that was another impossibility. James Schell, at nearly 6 feet, 4 inches tall, was almost a foot taller than she, so she stood on lower steps in her photo.

She jumped into a sailor's rack and tried to imagine her grandpa's lanky frame sleeping. She toured the main galley and mess deck, the navigation bridge and quartermaster's space, and looked at instruments similar to ones he would've used.

"Standing there on the Wisconsin was like the closest I'd been to him since he'd died," Schell said. "It was probably the most emotional moment of my life."

She returned to Michigan feeling a never-before connection to her country's and family's past, she said. Now her father and an aunt want to visit. And one day, when she has children, she knows she'll bring them to the city where their great-grandfather spent a part of his life in service to his country.

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