I'm Matt Anderson, a curator with the Minnesota Historical Society, and I'm standing in the fuselage of a C-47 airplane in the Minnesota’s Greatest Generation exhibit. Aircraft like this were used to transport troops and supplies during World War II, and paratroopers jumped out of these airplanes to participate in campaigns throughout North Africa, Europe, and the Pacific.

The legacy of these airborne soldiers is preserved through personal artifacts from Minnesotans like Arnold Gustafson and Robert Klostermann of the 82nd Airborne Division in Europe, and Carl Platou of the 11th Airborne Division in the Pacific.

The 82nd Airborne Division was created during World War I. The division included members from all 48 states which earned it the nickname “All American.” A double “A” became the division’s insignia. In 1942, the division was reactivated and went on to fight in North Africa, Italy, France, and Germany.

Paratroopers played a vital role in the D-Day invasion of Normandy. On June 5 and 6, 1944, more than 15,000 paratroopers participated in the largest airborne assault in history. The casualties were high and, after 33 days of fighting, more than 5,000 paratroopers were killed, wounded, or missing. After D-Day, paratroopers continued to serve with distinction at the Battle of the Bulge and during the occupation of Berlin.

Object: Paratrooper’s Jump Coat and Trousers (2005.111.2-3)

Paratroopers jumped into danger with only their jump uniforms, parachutes, and rifles. We recently acquired a jump uniform issued to Minneapolis native Arnold Gustafson, who joined the 504th Parachute Infantry of the 82nd Airborne Division in 1942. Gustafson served in North Africa and Europe until December 1945. His uniform consists of a coat and trousers made from olive drab cotton twill. Note the many expandable pockets for carrying essential equipment. Note also the roomy trousers which helped give the 504th its nickname: “Devils in Baggy Pants.”

Object: Paratrooper Insignia Patches and Ribbon Bars (64.98.14)
Robert Klostermann, born in Ramsey County, also served in the 82nd Airborne Division. He joined the service in 1941, and was part of the Coast Guard Artillery and stationed at several points across the United States before joining the 82nd Airborne. These patches and insignia tell us a lot about Klostermann’s military service. This ribbon bar is for a Purple Heart medal, which Klostermann received after being wounded in Belgium in 1945. These three white embroidered bars show his rank as a First Lieutenant. Each bar was taken from a different uniform. This triple ribbon bar shows that Klostermann received the World War II Victory Medal, the European-African-Middle Eastern Theatre Campaign Medal, and the American Campaign Medal.

Object: Garrison Caps (64.98.6.A,B)

Also in the Society’s collections are Klostermann’s garrison caps. Both are for summer use and are made from khaki cotton with black and gold piping. This cap features a glider-borne paratrooper patch sewn into its right front.

Paratroopers also fought in the Pacific Theatre during World War II. Carl Platou was a demolitions specialist who served in the 11th Airborne Division. He was stationed in New Guinea, and on other islands throughout the South Pacific.

The heroic acts of Minnesota paratroopers are inspirational. The objects we’ve collected here give you just a glimpse into their ordeals and triumphs. Minnesota paratrooper stories are just a part of the Minnesota’s Greatest Generation exhibit. To learn more about them, please visit us here at the History Center.