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When he was 14 years old in 1946, John F. Rutch Jr. was old enough to comprehend what it meant for a person to serve his or her country.

"I remember them coming home at the time, and I understood the bravery, the commitment, and what it meant to serve our country," said Rutch, now 83.

"Of course," he added, "I knew a lot of guys, and, as a boy, I had a lot of respect for our veterans, especially the guys in World War II."

Nearly 70 years later, Rutch still has the same reverence for all veterans. The only thing is, he is one of them, and an honored one at that.

"Skeeter," as he is known to thousands of friends, will represent the men he once watched returning to their hometown after serving in the military, and those who played similar roles throughout many world conflicts, when he leads the 2016 Summit Hill Memorial Day Parade on Monday, as grand marshal.

When Legionnaires and Parade Committee Chairman Tom Vermillion visited Rutch at 239 S. Pine St., where he lives with his daughter and son-in-law, Maria and Jeff Szczecina, Rutch said, "I was greatly surprised. Happy about it, but they really surprised the heck out of me, because I feel there are so many others who are just as worthy of this honor."

Humbled by his selection, Rutch can't stop talking about the town where he grew up to be an octogenarian with unceasing popularity.

"Growing up here, this was the greatest town," he insists. "It had a lot of great people, and, for me, coming from a large relation, I was fortunate to know a lot of them. I was always a guy who liked to talk to people."

A 1950 graduate of the former Summit Hill High School, Rutch was drafted in February 1953, and is an Army veteran of the Korean War. He initially served at Fort Meade, Maryland,

underwent basic training in Kentucky, and later spent 18 months with the Infantry, 2nd Armored Division, in Germany. He remembers being on an Army ship headed there in July 1953 when the cease-fire was ordered, ending the conflict. He was honorably discharged in February 1955.

John and his wife, the former Mary Ginda, were married in 1953 before he was sent overseas. While in Korea, he received a telegram that his first child (daughter Nancy Kunzweiler of Laurys Station), was born. Due to communications not being what they are today, the telegram came eight days after he became a father.

Rutch said he “was fortunate” to have been sent to Germany at a time when “a lot of my buddies went to Korea,” explaining assignments were made alphabetically by the military, with soldiers whose names began with A to M going to Korea and those from N-Z being assigned to the European Theater.

Upon his return home, he secured a position with the former Bundy Tubing Co., Hometown, and then worked at various manufacturing companies before taking a job at Mack Trucks Inc. in Allentown, where he worked from 1964 until retiring in 1987. During that period, the Summit Hill man was a United Auto Workers union steward and became the very first clerical committeeman.

His lengthy civic involvement includes having been a longtime member of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Summit Hill, where he participated in fundraising and fund drives. When he and his late wife resided in Coaldale while caring for her mother, Rutch was a Catholic Youth League basketball coach at the former St. Mary’s School in that community.

In Summit Hill, he served on the borough council, during which time the borough established the Bill Black Memorial Park on Holland Street.

Rutch recalls, “I was very proud to serve, and proud of the council’s accomplishments. In addition to enhancing recreation for the youths of the community, we were able to get many things done in the town, but we were especially effective in cutting wasteful spending.”

Later, he served as Summit Hill’s representative on the Coaldale-Lansford-Summit Hill Joint Sewer Authority for 11 years, including having served as its chairman for four years.

A son of the late John F. Sr. and Martha (Lisella) Rutch, John has three siblings, Frank of Hometown; Louise, wife of Charles Frassinelli of Summit Hill; and Marthajane, wife of John Rita of Hershey.

Besides Maria and Nancy, he and his late wife have two other children, John and his wife, Donna, of Coppell, Texas, and Greg and his fiancée, Lisa Hukill, of Highland Village, Texas. Rutch has five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

The holiday festivities will begin with American Legion Post 316, Summit Hill, holding its annual memorial services at 10 a.m. in Ludlow Park, where Rutch will participate and then ring the former Summit Hill High School bell in the park, signaling the start of the parade. He will then

board a convertible that will take him around the community as the 2016 guest of honor.

Rutch said, "Memorial Day is a day of remembrance. Above, all, it's about the veterans who fought our wars. I will be proud to represent them. It'll be a great feeling. I've been blessed."