

1-507th Parachute Infantry Regiment

Airborne History

Perhaps no military development has been so revolutionary as the employment of paratroopers. Certainly, none has been so spectacular!

Shortly after World War I, General Billy Mitchell proposed that parachuting troops from aircraft into combat could be effective. During the demonstration of his concept at Kelly Field at San Antonio, Texas, six soldiers parachuted from a Martin Bomber, safely landed, and in less than three minutes after exiting the aircraft had their weapons assembled and were ready for action.

Although the U.S. observers dismissed the concept, not all of the observers arrived at the same conclusion. The Soviets and Germans were impressed with the demonstration. In the USSR, static line parachuting was introduced as a national sport and the population was encouraged to join the Russian Airborne Corps. The German observers eagerly grasped the idea and planners worked quickly to develop an effective military parachute organization.

For the first time, in August 1930 at Veronezh, Russia, Soviet paratroopers participated in military maneuvers. Their actions were so effective that a repeat performance was given in Moscow one month later.

The Germans effectively developed their airborne forces and, at the start of World War II, used parachute troops in their spearhead assaults.

Spurred by the successful employment of airborne troops by the Germans in their invasion of the Low Countries, U.S. military branches began an all-out effort to develop this new form of warfare. Controversy surrounded the effort and the various branches made several colorful proposals. The Air Corps made the most unique proposal. Its staff proposed that the Air Infantry be called "Air Grenadiers" and be members of the "Marines of the Air Corps."

In April 1940, following the controversies, the War Department approved plans for the formation of a test platoon of Airborne Infantry to form, equip, and train under the direction and control of the Army's Infantry Board. In June, the Commandant of the Infantry School was directed to organize a test platoon of volunteers from Fort Benning's 29th Infantry Regiment. Later that year, the 2d Infantry Division was directed to conduct the necessary tests to develop reference data and operational procedures for air-transported troops.

In July 1940, the task of organizing the platoon began. First Lieutenant William T. Ryder from the 29th Infantry Regiment volunteered and was designated the test platoon's Platoon Leader and Lieutenant James A. Bassett was designated Assistant Platoon Leader. Based on high standards of health and rugged physical characteristics, forty-eight enlisted men were selected from a pool of 200 volunteers. Quickly thereafter, the platoon moved into tents near Lawson Field, and an abandoned hanger was obtained for use as a training hall and for parachute packing.

Lieutenant Colonel William C. Lee, a staff officer for the Chief of Infantry, was intently interested in the test platoon. He recommended that the men be moved to the Safe Parachute Company at Hightstown, NJ for training on the parachute drop towers used during the New York World's Fair. Eighteen days after organization, the platoon was moved to New Jersey and trained for one week on the 250-foot free towers.

The training was particularly effective. When a drop from the tower was compared to a drop from an airplane, it was found that the added realism was otherwise impossible to duplicate. The drop also proved to the troopers that their parachutes would function safely. The Army was so impressed with the tower drops that two were purchased and erected at Fort Benning on what is now Eubanks Field. Later, two more were added. Three of the original four towers are still in use training paratroopers at Fort Benning. PLF training was often conducted by the volunteers jumping from PT platforms and from the back of moving 2 1/2 ton trucks to allow the trainees to experience the shock of landing.

Less than forty-five days after organization, the first jump from an aircraft in flight by members of the test platoon was made from a Douglas B-18 over Lawson Field on 16 August, 1940. Before the drop, the test platoon held a lottery to determine who would follow Lieutenant Ryder out of the airplane and Private William N. (Red) King became the first enlisted man to make an official jump as a paratrooper in the United States Army. On 29 August, at Lawson Field, the platoon made the first platoon mass jump held in the United States.

The first parachute combat unit to be organized was the 501st Parachute Battalion. It was commanded by Major William M. Miley, later a Major General and Commander of the 17th Airborne Division, and the original test platoon members formed the battalion cadre. The Civilian Conservation Corps cleared new jump areas and three new training buildings were erected. Several B-18 and C-39 aircraft were provided for training. The traditional paratrooper cry "GERONIMO" was originated in the 501st by Private Aubrey Eberhart to prove to a friend that he had full control of his faculties when he jumped. That cry was adopted by the 501st and has been often used by paratroopers since then.

The 502d Parachute Infantry Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William C. Lee with men from the 501st as cadre, was activated on 1 July, 1941. The 502d was far below strength, and 172 prospective troopers from the 9th Infantry Division at Fort Bragg, NC were needed. The response to Lieutenant Colonel Lee's call for volunteers was startling: more than 400 men volunteered, including many noncommissioned officers who were willing to take a reduction in rank ("take a bust") to transfer to the new battalion.

Airborne experimentation of another type was initiated on 10 October, 1941 when the Army's first Glider Infantry battalion was activated. This unit was officially designated as the 88th Glider Infantry Battalion and was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Elbridge G. Chapman, Jr. Lieutenant Colonel Chapman later became a Major General and commanded the 13th Airborne Division.

As more airborne units were activated, it became apparent that a centralized training facility should be established. Consequently, the facility was organized at Fort Benning on 15 May,

1942. Since that date, the U.S. Army Parachute School has been known by a variety of names: The Airborne School (1 January, 1946); Airborne Army Aviation Section, The Infantry School (1 November, 1946); Airborne Department, The Infantry School (February, 1955); Airborne-Air Mobility Department (February, 1956); Airborne Department (August 1964); Airborne-Air Mobility Department (October, 1974); Airborne Department (October, 1976); 4th Airborne Training Battalion, The School Brigade (January, 1982); 1st Battalion (Abn), 507TH Parachute Infantry, The School Brigade (October, 1985); and the 1st Battalion (Abn), 507TH Infantry, 11th Infantry Regiment (July, 1991).

Although several types of headgear insignia have been worn by parachute and glider organizations since 1942, an insignia peculiar to the Airborne was not authorized until 1949 and did not appear in Army Regulations until 1956. The authorization was first mentioned in AR 670-5 (dated 20 September, 1956), which stated, "Airborne insignia may be worn when prescribed by commander...The insignia consists of a white parachute and glider on blue disk with a red border approximately 2 1/4 inches in diameter overall."

In December, 1943, the all black "555th Parachute Infantry Company (Colored)", later redesignated Company A, 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion (and remembered by many as the "Triple Nickel"), arrived at Fort Benning for airborne training. This training event marked a significant milestone for black Americans in the combat arms. The first troops in the unit were volunteers from the all-black 92d Infantry Division stationed at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. After proving their skills, the battalion was not sent overseas, but was deployed to the western United States for "Operation Firefly," dropping in to fight forest fires set by Japanese incendiary balloons in the Pacific Northwest. During this mission, the 555th earned the nickname the "Smoke Jumpers." In 1948, after full integration of the Armed Forces was finally effected, black Americans were finally given their full rights as American combat paratroopers and made their first combat jump while attached to the 187th Regimental Combat Team during the Korean War.

On 14 December, 1973 another milestone in Airborne history was established when Privates Joyce Kutsch and Rita Johnson became the first women to graduate from the Basic Airborne Course. Following graduation from a modified, but rigorous, airborne course the two women successfully completed the U.S. Army Quartermaster School Parachute Rigger Course and were assigned to Aerial Delivery Companies at Fort Bragg, NC. Since then, women do not attend a modified airborne course, but complete the full course and meet the same standards as their male counterparts.

Airborne unit combat records tell stories of extreme valor. From the first combat jump during World War II in North Africa, paratroopers have fought with a spirit, determination, and tenacity that captured the respect of the world. Future events will continue to find the American paratrooper in the forefront of hostilities.