

The 2d Infantry Division ("Air-borne")

JOHN M. MANGUSO

The exploits of the Army's airborne divisions in World War II are well known. But few students of history are aware of the role the 2d Infantry Division played in the development of the airborne concept.

Following World War I, the division was stationed at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, one of the largest and most active Army garrisons at the time. Histories of the post call it "the cradle of the airborne infantry," usually without further com-

ment or explanation. This claim is rooted in the parachute drops of infantry machinegun units from the 2d Division at Brooks Field in 1927. But that is just the start of the story.

On 20 August 1940, the Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army directed a study of "the proper organization, equipment and tactical employment of parachute and air transported" troops. On 15 September, Major William C. Lee visited San Antonio to discuss the concept of "air infantry" with the

staff of the 8th Corps Area, headquartered at Fort Sam Houston. San Antonio newspapers at the time credited the post with being "the point of origin for the new military arm. . . parachute troops." The 501st Parachute Battalion was organized the next day.

The 2d Division—occasionally referred to at the time as the "Army's guinea pigs" because of its frequent role as a test-bed for new equipment and tactics—conducted plane-loading tests at Duncan Field in San Antonio in November and December 1940. Loading practice on mock-ups of transports had been conducted earlier at Fort Sam Houston, but this time real aircraft were used—two C-39 transports (a variant of the Douglas DC-2) and one B-18 bomber. Troops of Company H, 9th Infantry, loaded machineguns and an M-3 37mm antitank gun and their crews and ammunition. The load was about 3,500 pounds per aircraft.

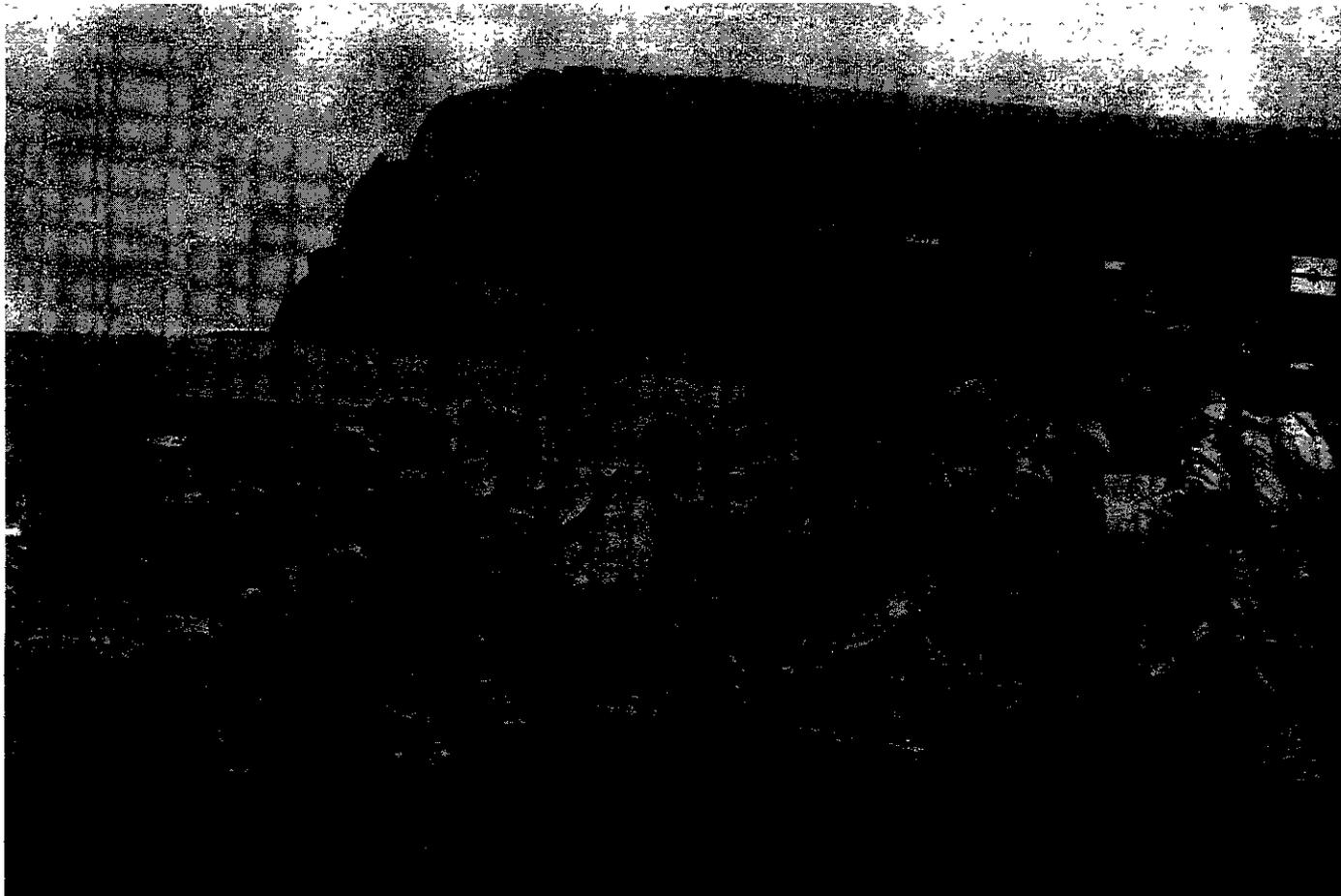
In June 1941 a newspaper article noted the development of "blitz tactics" by the 2d Division. Photos showed a 37mm gun being loaded onto a transport mock-up and an interior view of a transport in flight with a 37mm gun and crew. The article indicated that the experiments at Fort Sam Houston in moving troops rapidly by air complemented the parachute training of units at Fort Benning, Georgia. It refers to the 2d Division as "air-borne" troops used to follow up advances made by the parachute troops.

Field Manual 100-5, *Field Service Regulations: Operations*, dated May 1941, outlined the concept for the use of "Troops Transported by Air" in much the same manner: The parachute troops, attached to the air-landing troops, constitute the advance guard of the force. Missions for the air-transported force included seizing and holding objectives along with other forces, conducting envelopments by air, mounting surprise attacks as feints or diversions, and attacking enemy positions otherwise unassailable by ground forces. The air-landed force, it was noted, did not have to be a specially organized unit. It was to be a standard infantry division with air transport and parachute units attached to it in a task force arrangement.

The summer of 1941 saw significant advancements for the parachute forces at Fort Benning. The 502d Parachute Battalion was organized in July, and William C. Lee, by now a lieutenant colonel, was appointed to command the Provisional Parachute Group. Another battalion was organized in Panama as the 550th Infantry Airborne Battalion, and the Army also began to experiment with gliders.

In the Louisiana Maneuvers in 1941, a single parachute company from the 502d conducted two air drops while the 2d Infantry Division participated as a straight infantry division.

In the November Carolina Maneuvers involving the 1st Army and IV Corps, an airborne task force was organized



Heavy machinegun section with C-47 during October 1942 maneuvers. By this time, the 2d Infantry Division had been issued the M-1 steel helmets, but they still used M1903 Springfield rifles.

Keep 'em Flying

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Mobile Show By USO Group To Play Here

"Join the Service and See the Stars!"

Post San Houston men have in the past enjoyed the mobile entertainment shows sent out by the Officers' Committee for the Army and Navy and are now in for something new and different as the U.S.O. Headquarters has announced that their organization will take to the road this winter in the famous style show shows for the enlisted men. The shows will be the 10 days of Broadway and as to the road and shows.

The complete program for these touring shows will be the touring theater and the complete program of exhibits and will play all military reservations and posts throughout the United States.

Headed by Eddie Hoover, post doctor and producer, Camp Sherman, Ill., has already started out with its playing of Broadway hits and representing the shows in the hope to bring the show to Post San Houston. The show is being produced by the U.S.O. Headquarters.

Ninth Doughboys "Keep 'em Flying"



The provision of the 9th Infantry's operations in the North Carolina maneuvers.

9th Infantry Forms First Sky Troops Bn.

The first big-scale movement of air-borne troops by the United States Army got underway last week and with members of the 2d Battalion, Ninth Infantry, pioneering the newly organized method of troop training.

The provisional battalion consisted of 19 officers and 498 enlisted men. The first group boarded huge army transports at Duncan Field Thursday, Nov. 23, with the Carolina maneuvers their destination. Two hundred troops took off in 16 transports Friday and were followed by the remaining 306 on Saturday.

9th Guinea Pigs
The training mission is for a type of troops now being used extensively in Europe but heretofore a new experiment on the part of the United States Army. The movement will be used to check on an air-borne battalion now being formed at Ft. Benning, Ga., for use in support of parachute troops.

Among the problems under study are the loading of the air-borne troops on to the transports.

Post newspaper coverage of the 9th Infantry's operations in the North Carolina maneuvers.

under Lee's Provisional Parachute Group. These maneuvers were to be the first large-scale movement of U.S. airborne troops. The airborne task force was to include the 88th Infantry Airborne Battalion, the Army's first designated air-landing unit, but the 88th Battalion, organized in September, was not yet ready. (Note the terminology then in use. The units' designations depended principally upon the way they arrived on the battlefield. They were called "parachute battalions" and not "parachute infantry battalions," while the air-landing units were designated "infantry airborne battalions.") The 3d Battalion, 9th Infantry, of the 2d Infantry Division, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel C.J. Hirschberger, was substituted for the 88th Battalion, and the battalion was streamlined down to 467 men, or about the same size as the 88th Battalion.

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Kerran, Jr., executive officer of the 88th, was sent to San Antonio to take charge of the air movement, assisted by Captain Leroy Yarborough, Jr., also

of the 88th. Although there is no record of any parachute training for the 2d Division, photos of its 3d Battalion, 9th Infantry, show the troops wearing seat-type parachutes while loading the transports. The battalion was then moved by air in two echelons from Duncan Field and Kelly Field to the Carolina Maneuver Area.

The airborne task force, based at Shaw Field, prepared for an assault on Pope Field near Fayetteville, North Carolina. Lee's airborne task force assaulted Pope Field on 19 November with a parachute drop by the 502d Parachute Battalion. This attack failed when the defenders executed a pre-planned counterattack and theoretically eliminated the parachute unit. The scenario was then altered to permit the air-landed attack by the 3d Battalion, 9th Infantry. Then, the air-landed assault demonstration was conducted for reporters, and another airborne mission captured and destroyed an important bridge. During their deployment from San Antonio to the Carolinas and back, the 9th Infantry soldiers logged 27

hours in the air.

The Army—after these maneuvers, and considering its experiences with airborne operations in Europe—came to believe that future parachute operations would have to be conducted by larger units, including glider units, and supported by ground forces. Entire airborne regiments and divisions would be needed. The Army therefore converted the 82d and 101st Infantry Divisions into airborne divisions in August 1942.

The Airborne Command continued to train the 2d Infantry Division in air-landed operations. In October 1942, the division intensified its training in preparation for airborne maneuvers. All three of its regimental combat teams—the 9th, 23d, and 38th Infantry Regiments—along with the division staff, received training in air movement. For this exercise, all non-air-transportable equipment and all non-essential personnel were deleted from the tables of organization and equipment. At least 11 mock-ups of C-46 and C-47 transports were built at Fort Sam Houston.

Several C-47s towing CG-4A WACO gliders landed on the parade ground at Fort Sam Houston. Familiarization rides and practice loading were conducted with the loaded aircraft towing the gliders taking off again from the parade ground. (One veteran of this phase of the training explained that the aircraft took off northward, or toward the post hospital, then banked to the right. This was done, he explained, so that if a plane should crash on takeoff it would come down on post instead of in the city of San Antonio.)

Instructional teams were sent from the Airborne Command, and a “flying command post exercise” was conducted. Due to a shortage of aircraft, the final phase of the maneuver included the movement of the division by combat teams, rather than in a single echelon, to secure airfields near Brackettville and Del Rio, Texas, a distance of about 150 miles, on 24 October.

As usual, parachute troops made the first assault. Cavalry units from Fort Clark defended the airfields. By way of comparison, in the German air assault against Crete in May

1941, the initial assault force of two reinforced parachute regiments was projected about 200 miles from its bases, followed later the same day by two more parachute regiments. The air-landed 5th Mountain Division arrived the following day.

This exercise by the 2d Infantry Division and the 1st Troop Carrier Command was observed by a host of visiting officers whose names are familiar to students of airborne history. The group included Brigadier General Elbridge G. Chapman, Airborne Command; Brigadier General Joseph M. Swing, Division Artillery Commander, 82d Airborne Division; and Brigadier Generals Don F. Pratt and Anthony C. McAuliffe of the 101st Airborne Division.

Although the exercise was successful, the 2d Infantry Division’s days as an airborne division were at an end. The division was transferred to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, in November of 1942 for a four-month program of winter training and, of course, to test equipment for use in extreme cold weather. In October 1943, the 2d Infantry Division began its movement overseas to Europe.

Considering the record of achievement of the 2d Infantry Division and the airborne divisions in overseas combat during the war, it is not surprising that the airborne training of the 2d Division is not so well known. Today, we tend to think of “airborne” in terms of the parachutes used within those units. But in the formative days of the Army’s airborne forces, there were *parachute* battalions and *air-landed* battalions. Both types traveled to the battlefield by aircraft and were literally “airborne” forces. By this definition, the 2d Infantry Division, during 1941 and 1942, was indeed an airborne division.

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