

Introduction

The idea of airborne forces probably started with, of all people, Dr. Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia. What prince of a kingdom, he wondered, could defend himself (and that kingdom) against a few thousand soldiers who might descend upon his country from balloons? Okay, it probably was a long way from being a practical concept in the late 18th century. But the guy who, according to legend, discovered electricity with a key and a kite, among many other achievements that we know are facts of history—whatever you may believe—he sure enough came up with the germ of a good idea.

In more conventional terms though, the idea was more than sound. Nobody, certainly no enemy of ours, can put troops everywhere. They only have so many assets to use, and have to distribute them in some way or other that will *never* be perfect. Our job, as *their* enemy, is to hurt them most efficiently by striking where they are weak—by putting our assets where they don't have many, and doing that quickly and decisively. Better yet, grab something important *really* fast. Something that the enemy cannot do *without*, because they probably can't even cover all of their most important assets and still hold the places they know you *will* attack with your heavy troops. This knowledge is key to why airborne troops are credible in today's world.

It's called *seizing the initiative*. What uniformed officers call "the initiative" is nothing more than knowing that you have a choice of things to do, and your enemy knowing that as well. Better yet, it usually means that you can conduct your operations while your enemy must wait and react to whatever you choose to do. This is the inherent advantage of the offensive. The more time your enemy worries about what *you* can do rather than what he can do is money in the bank for the good guys. And that's before you really do anything bad to him. The spirit of attack is the key to military operations today, and always will be. If you're sitting still and waiting, your forces are probably sitting ducks, waiting to be served up by your enemy.

The 82nd Airborne Division is the Army's counterpart to the United States Marine Corps, still a subsidiary organization of the United States Navy. The Marines are mainly light infantry troops who attack from the sea

with the Navy in direct support. The Airborne strikes from the sky, carried there and supported by the United States Air Force. Both organizations are elite because they have to be. They do dangerous things. When the Marines hit a beach, whether by amphibious tractor, landing craft, or helicopter, they are coming in light in weapons. But while the Marines have a friendly sea at their back, and the “Big Blue Team” of the U.S. Navy in direct support, the Airborne goes in just about naked. How naked? Well, imagine yourself dangling from a parachute under fire. Rather like a duck in hunting season, except that you’re slowly coming straight down, and at least a duck can maneuver. Your unit lands scattered; not as a cohesive fighting formation. Your first job is to get organized—under fire from an organized foe—so that you can begin to do your job. Your weapons are only what you can carry, and tough, fit trooper that you are, you can’t carry all *that* much. It is a formidable physical challenge.

In September 1944, Allied paratroopers jumped into Eindhoven, Nimegen, and Arnhem (in Nazi-occupied Holland) in a bold attempt to bring an end to the Second World War by carving open a path through the German lines. This was designed to allow the rapid passage of the British XXX Corps into the German rear areas, cracking the enemy front wide open. It was a bold and ambitious plan, and it went so wrong. Remembered as a failure, Operation MARKET-GARDEN was, in my estimation, a gamble worth taking. Laid on much too quickly (just a week from first notice to the actual jumps) and executed without full and proper planning and training, it very nearly succeeded. Had that happened, millions of lives in German concentration camps might have been saved. As it was, one battalion of paratroopers from the British 1st Airborne Division held off what was effectively an SS armored brigade at Arnhem Bridge (the famous *Bridge Too Far*) for the best part of a week in their effort to save the mission. Out-numbered, heavily outgunned, and far from help, they came close to making it all work.

What this tells us is that it’s not just the weapons you carry that matter, but also the skill, training, and determination of the troopers who jump into battle. Elite is as elite does. Elite means that you train harder and do somewhat more dangerous things—which earns you the right to blouse your jump boots and strut a little more than the “track toads” of the armor community. It means that you know the additional dangers of coming into battle like a skeet tossed out of an electric trap at the gun club, and you’re willing to take them, because if you ever have to do it, there will be a good reason for it. The Airborne doesn’t have the weapons to do their job with a sabot round from four clicks (kilometers) away. They have to get in close. Their primary weapons are their M16 combat rifles and grenade launchers. For enemy armor they carry light anti-tank weapons. There are lots of people around the world with old Soviet-designed tanks to worry about, and Airborne forces have to train for that threat every day. As you might imagine, life in the 82nd can be hard!

However, that just makes them more enthusiastic for the life they have chosen for themselves. Visit them at Fort Bragg, and you see the pride, from the general who commands to the lieutenants who lead the troopers, to the sergeants who lead the squads and the new privates who are learning the business. You see a team tighter than most “old world” families. The senior officers, some of whom come in from other assignments in “heavy” units, almost always shed ten or fifteen years off their birth certificates and start acting like youngsters again. *Everybody* jumps in the division. In fact, everybody wants to jump and wants to be seen to jump. It’s the Airborne thing. You’re not one of the family if you don’t at least pretend to like it—and you can’t lead troopers like these if you’re not one of the family. These officers command from the front because that’s where the troopers are, and there is no rear for the Airborne. They walk with a confident strut, their red berets adjusted on their heads just so, because it’s an Airborne “thing.” They are a proud family.

The most recent nickname for the 82nd is “America’s Fire Brigade.” If there’s a big problem that the Marines can’t reach from the sea, or one that is developing just too rapidly for the ships to move in quickly enough, the Airborne will be there first. Their first job is likely to be seizure of an airfield so that heavy equipment can be flown in behind them. Or they might be dropped right onto an objective, to do what has to be done—hostage rescue, a direct attack on a vital enemy asset—with instant speed and lethal force, all of them hoping that they hit the ground alive so that they can organize, move out, and get it done fast, because speed is their best friend. The enemy will unquestionably be surprised by their arrival, and if you can organize and strike before he can organize to resist, you win. The idea is to end it as quickly as possible. It’s been said that no country has ever profited from a long war. That’s probably true. It is certainly true that no soldier ever profited from a long battle.

That’s why Paratroops train so hard. Hit hard. Hit fast. End it quickly. Clear the way for other troops and forces. Move out and prepare for the next one. Do these things and perhaps the next enemy will think twice. Maybe they will watch the sky and wonder how many of the red-beret troopers might be just a few hours away, and decide it isn’t worth the trouble. Just like nuclear weapons and precision-guided munitions, Airborne forces are a deterrence force with power, mass, and ability to make an opponent think about whether his ambitions are really worth the risk and trouble. Think about that as you read on. I think that you will find, as I did, that the Airborne is as credible as they head into the 21st century, as they were in the Normandy Beachhead in 1944.

—Tom Clancy
Perigine Cliff, Maryland
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