Budget Straphangers:

Reevaluating Airborne in an Age of Austerity

By Bart Steele

On a blazing June day in 2006, a unit of the 3rd Infantry Division at Fort Benning, Audie Murphy's regiment and one instrumental in the rapid seizure of Baghdad in 2003, had a problem. Helicopters scheduled to assist in air assault landing training were suddenly unavailable.

Standing on the hot field, the commander made a decision. "There's your helicopter," he shouted to his troopers, and pointed at the ground. Sergeants quickly sprayed chalk lines on the dirt, and a helicopter was born.

No one likely thought about it, but visible from the field where soldiers lay in defensive posture around chalk lines were the three 250-foot towers at the heart of the Army's basic airborne course, where far more expensive training was taking place. While the 3rd Division soldiers would conduct many air assault missions in future deployments, the vast majority of those airborne students would never jump from an aircraft in flight during a mission. Many would never even add a sixth jump to their log.

What is the role of the airborne in the twenty first century Army? The era of large scale parachute operations is over, and may have never actually begun. The Army must recognize this and reform its parachute training structure to reflect this reality.

Advancements in technology, particularly in troop-carrying and remotely operated equipment, have effectively rendered traditional large-scale airborne assaults obsolete. The prevalence of surface to air weaponry makes the mass parachute drop risky at best and suicidal at worst. Dispersion over the drop zone can rapidly sap a unit's combat effectiveness as commanders scramble to assemble and stage their troops; not even the autonomy of a modern brigade combat team can mitigate these unpredictable and historically disastrous variables. Ground troops, particularly light infantry, will always be required to hold and consolidate gains, but their method of entry into the fight is beyond the parachute deployment tactics of earlier eras.

Considering this, and respecting the mantra that tradition is never a reasonable substitute for usefulness and efficacy, especially during a period of tightening purse strings, reason dictates that parachute training on the scale currently offered by the U.S. Army is an unnecessary drain on resources and budget. Because of this, the Army would be wise to shutter the basic airborne course at Fort Benning. The training can be retained far more efficiently at a more localized level, and on a much smaller scale.

Airborne techniques and training were developed worldwide following the Great War, but the United States Army seized on the concept aggressively. In the years leading up to the United States' entry into the Second World War, the U.S. Army created and tested the new doctrine of the vertical envelopment. During this period, basic paratrooper training was conducted in multiple locations across the United States. The training model was quite different from the current practice; units largely trained together for a specific purpose, in contrast to the individual training prior to assignment as is the case today. The Army increasingly centralized the jump school at Fort Benning, and further reform in the ensuing decades culminated in the current three-week course.

The core doctrine developed by this school remains largely unchanged today, but the available weapons platforms have advanced well beyond the parachute. The two primary purposes of vertical envelopment operations are to seize and hold small parts of enemy territory until reinforced or relieved by a main body of troops, and to harass and engage the enemy in the context of a larger assault. Airheads, the furthest friendly lines held by

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airborne elements, are always dependent on swift resupply and relief. Once on the ground, paratroopers function indistinguishably from regular light infantry. When the Army boasts of the "rapid deployment capability" of airborne units, it is referring to the mobilization of light infantry and its support. The parachute is an insertion tool, but there are other, more effective tools.

Helicopters have alleviated many of the problems inherent in vertical envelopment maneuvers. During Operation Junction City in Vietnam, a massive fleet of helicopters landed infantrymen in a coordinated air assault along with the parachuting 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, 173rd Airborne Brigade. This enormous combat operation expertly illustrated the two purposes of the vertical envelopment maneuver, but it did so with helicopters instead of fixed-wing paratrooper drops. The Junction City parachute assault was a completely unnecessary vanity jump. Airborne officer General William C. Westmoreland, pining for a combat jump, had asked his planners to include a parachute insertion in the operation, but his staff repeatedly omitted it from the proceedings in favor of the helicopters. Eventually Westmoreland lost his patience and outright demanded the jump; the planners acquiesced.[1] A senior officer later recalled that Life Magazine photographers, their cameras ready, were already on the drop zone when the paratroopers landed.[2] While many other airmobile operations of that conflict and others have successfully used the helicopter for large-scale vertical envelopment, the parachute has been relegated to photo-op jumps and a litany of "what-if" training scenarios.

There was a time when a regular paratrooper trained for a specific and quite dangerous purpose. That training continues today in parachute units, but these forces are increasingly unlikely to ever use this expensive specialized skill in a combat jump. In most cases, modern jump wings denote what the Army calls a skill identifier, but such human resources codes do not, of course, determine any quantifiable proficiency. Such identifiers are largely aids to evaluation reports, indicators of assignment preference, or a few extra promotion points for an enlisted soldier. The airborne qualifier no longer denotes light infantry proficiency, or even light infantry support proficiency, just as the airborne school itself no longer caters to parachute units alone. Jump wings are now worn by individuals in virtually every branch and military occupational specialty across the Armed Forces. A large number of these wings signify anything but training in the deployment of light infantry and its support.

One does not need flowcharts, tables of organization and equipment, budget reports, or special experience to recognize that the type of large-scale, widely-available basic airborne training currently offered by the Army has exceeded its cost-to-benefit ratio. In the twenty-first century, a course of basic, rapid instruction need not be tied down to one fixed location. All branches of the Armed Forces spend unnecessary dollars funding travel expenses for service members attending the basic airborne course in Georgia. That money is wasted on a body of instruction that, for the majority of individuals, holds no current operational value. Today, the three week long, basic airborne course at Fort Benning is essentially a relic of another era. Like Westmoreland's Junction City jump, it is a superfluous holdover of tradition that functions primarily as an advancement opportunity for a large number of service members.

If the Army were to close its costly jump school at Fort Benning, what options exist for continued parachute training? Examples of modern alternatives to the Fort Benning course exist in the private sector. These civilian courses have successfully imitated the Army's basic airborne training regimen on a smaller scale. Mass-exit static line courses in Dunnellon, Florida and Frederick, Oklahoma have pared down the Army's basic instruction on steerable round canopies to a matter of days, and even that length of time is simply a product of adopted safety standards. These two courses require no former training in round canopy technique. Both outfits train extensively in precision jumps for demonstrations and proficiency using the same standards as the U.S. Army's basic airborne course, excluding the physical conditioning.

In contrast, the three week course at Fort Benning is padded with extraneous frills. A great deal of time at this school is expended enforcing physical fitness standards in an effort to retain a sense of elite training. The

fitness regimen is a holdover from the forties, when paratroopers trained for a very specialized function. With the basic airborne course today open to virtually every military area of concentration, those standards hold little bearing on the ability to use a parachute, and are best enforced at the individual unit level outside of Training and Doctrine Command according to each commander's needs. Additionally, at least one week is wasted on the "tower training" method, which today provides a great photo op for public relations but little modern training value. The mock towers used in this training are designed to simulate the act of exiting an aircraft in flight, and give instructors the opportunity to critique a student's exit technique. The larger 250-foot towers allow the student to experience low-level parachute handling and a parachute landing fall under canopy. However, the private sector equivalents of the Army's school do not use these towers, despite operating aircraft and parachute systems that demand far more mastery than the Army's basic platforms. Both of these private schools train for jumps from the C-47 Skytrain (or the Douglas DC-3) aircraft, in which a safe exit technique is especially critical owing to the position of the engine and propeller relative to the exit door. These schools also employ steerable round canopies that are especially hazardous at lower altitudes; the parachutist can easily spill air from the canopy at the pull of a toggle, thus reducing the canopy's lift and inviting a hard, fast, and dangerous landing. Despite these apparent risks, these private schools have proven able to conduct training rapidly and safely without the use of towers.

The elimination of the Army's basic airborne course would open several options for retaining the doctrine. All of these would necessarily coincide with a reduction in the number of specialized parachute units. A training unit, or series of training units, could be organized within the pared-down airborne community to provide basic instruction and support at the receiving unit level, similar to air assault training or Fort Bragg's Advanced Airborne School (the latter already provides resources and mobile teams for a variety of training needs, and might serve as the command base from which to reform a comprehensive mobile basic course).[3] This concept is not new; such unit-based basic airborne courses existed globally before the total centralization of initial parachute instruction at Fort Benning, including a complete airborne school at Fort Bragg that functioned for eight years until it was absorbed by Fort Benning in 1962.[4] Parachute familiarization might also be partially privatized, simultaneously fulfilling a Department of Defense mandate to provide jobs for veteran service members. All of these choices share the same basic model – any initial parachute training should be conducted at the lowest echelon possible on a more cost-efficient scale.

The train-up time for an infantryman inexperienced in the deployment of a parachute is, in extreme cases, less than one day. Civilian skydiving classes have historically used the static line technique within hours of the start of training. The concept of static-line parachute deployment is a simple one: the parachutist attaches a cord from his parachute's deployment bag to a fixed point on his jump platform, exits the platform, and lets gravity do the rest of the work.[5] The core specialized instruction involves proper exit, landing, and safety procedures, but the basic technique is so intuitive that in 1954 the French Army managed to parachute 680 non-airborne reinforcements, all untrained in parachute operations, into the besieged fort of Dien Bien Phu in Indochina with no more jump-related injuries than the qualified paratroopers.[6]

Injury during static-line training usually results from either an improper exit from the aircraft, or poor execution of a parachute landing fall, or PLF, upon touchdown. But a trainee may acquire these basic skills with minimal equipment and training time. Any unit can easily integrate the exit procedures, the PLF, and drag training into its regimen. For equipment, a few parachutes, a wooden platform, sand pit, and a rudimentary mock-up of an aircraft's exit door are all that is required. An airborne unit will have these training tools readily available; non-airborne units can obtain and construct them as quickly and cheaply as needed.

Given the relative simplicity of static line parachuting, it is unnecessary and impractical to extensively train individuals not assigned to airborne duty in the use of specific parachute equipment. In the Air Force, familiarization with the PLF and parachute handling on the ground has been widely taught without requiring actual jump qualification.[7] This method can be applied to units outside of the airborne community using minimal equip-

ment. The training is fun, unique, and provides excellent physical toughening outside of airborne doctrine. PLF proficiency alone holds immense safety value beyond parachute training; a soldier can use the fall technique in any situation that requires him to distribute the force of a tumble across his body to avoid injury. This training, when widely disseminated, can be used as a base from which to draw reserve paratroopers if needed.

The current regimen at Fort Benning emphasizes mass safety over specialization. This is by necessity and design; airborne assaults are occasionally conducted from very low altitudes to minimize exposing the troopers in the air, and participating paratroopers are usually heavily loaded with equipment. At Fort Benning, the first five training jumps onto Fryar Drop Zone are meant only to familiarize and instill confidence, not develop combat technique and tactics. Little time in the course is devoted to advanced safety procedures, and even less time is given to any instruction in precision canopy handling. Those areas of expertise are left to the receiving units and advanced schools. However, while the Fort Benning school finds few spare hours in its three week block for this type of instruction, the private courses in Dunnellon and Frederick manage to teach advanced safety procedures (including wire, water, and tree landings and mid-air collision recovery) and some advanced canopy handling techniques within their week long basic instruction. The breadth of this rapid private instruction illustrates the superiority of intimate native-unit training over collective mass training.

By closing the Fort Benning course and reducing the size of the general parachute force, the Army would shift the training burden to the primary receiving units. The instruction of the basics and the specialized skills would be conducted with pared-down and closely-integrated units under one unified command. In this way, the Army could achieve total control of the entire training environment. The reduced number of service members selected for full parachute training would substantially improve the instructor-to-student ratio, maximizing safety and allowing the teaching of specific advanced procedures. A unified command could closely supervise the performance of both the initial training unit and the advanced instruction of the line units. The training unit may also serve as the contact point for the sister branches and foreign troops, much as the school at Benning does currently, albeit on a smaller and more cost-effective scale. A similar training structure might be developed by the other branches as necessary.

The modern reduction of airborne forces and their training is not without precedent. Following the Second World War, and in the clutch of tightening budgets, the British Army drastically reduced its parachute force. This fiscally and operationally conscious reform effort continued in the ensuing decades. As late as 1998, a British Strategic Defence Review found that it could "no longer identify circumstances under which Britain would need to undertake parachute operations at greater than battalion group level."[8] The review further recommended that the British Army limit parachute operations to smaller units for greater operational flexibility.[9] The U.S. Army is entering a period of similar austerity. It should follow suit and take the first steps towards reducing unnecessary and costly training. The basic airborne course is a prime candidate for total restructuring.

Many of those 3rd Division soldiers leaping onto a hot Fort Benning field from an imaginary helicopter wore jump wings on their uniforms. None would ever pin a combat star to the tiny silver parachute. None probably ever swapped their basic badge for the starred master wings. But for the cost of three words, "There's your helicopter," they trained in tactics that have proven decisive in battle, a qualification conventional airborne operations have yet to achieve. The Army at large should take note, and think more about chalk lines in the dirt than chalks in the air.

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NOTES:

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2. Ibid.

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4. "Advanced Airborne School History." United States Army Advanced Airborne School, Fort Bragg website, last updated July 16, 2013, http://www.bragg.army.mil/82nd/AAS/Documents/History.pdf.

5. For a complete explanation of U.S. Army static line equipment and procedures, see: Training Circular (TC) 3-21.220, *Static Line Parachuting Techniques And Tactics* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], September 2003), http://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/rtb/1-507th/content/pdf/FEF%20TC_3-21-220%20%28OCT%20 2013%29.pdf.

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9. Ibid.