



August 15, 1942: The 82nd Airborne Division is born, the division that would make history for American paratroopers

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The **15th of August 1942** is one of the symbolic dates in the history of the United States airborne troops.

On that day, the **82nd Infantry Division** ceased to be a regular infantry division and was officially **redesignated as the 82nd Airborne Division**. The historical documents of the U.S. Army expressly state that part of the division's personnel was simultaneously used to form the new **101st Airborne Division**.

It was the beginning of a transformation destined to radically change the way the American Army envisioned the deployment of large units behind enemy lines.

The U.S. Army indeed recalls that on August 15, 1942, the 82nd was transformed and the 101st was constituted within the framework of the creation of the **first two airborne divisions of the United States Army**.

For the 82nd, however, the story had begun much earlier.

1917: the birth of the 82nd Division

The origins of the division date back to the First World War.

The unit was activated at **Camp Gordon, Georgia, on August 25, 1917**, under the command of Major General Eben Swift.

It was still a traditional infantry division.

The composition of its men from numerous American states contributed to the birth of the nickname that would forever be associated with the unit:

“All American”.

That expression would later also be represented by the famous divisional insignia with the letters **“AA”**.

In 1918 the division reached Europe.

On **April 25, 1918**, the overseas transfer began and from **June 25** it entered combat on the Western Front, participating almost continuously in operations until the early days of November.

Among the most important campaigns were **Saint-Mihiel** and especially the great offensive of the **Meuse-Argonne**.

It was in the 82nd Division that one of the most famous American soldiers of the First World War fought.

Alvin York and the 82nd Division

On October 8, 1918, during the **Meuse-Argonne** offensive, near **Châtel-Chéhéry**, Corporal **Alvin C. York** of Company G, 328th Infantry Regiment, 82nd Division, found himself at the center of one of the most famous episodes of the First World War. An American patrol advanced against some German machine gun positions that were blocking the advance. The group

suffered heavy losses and, with the other non-commissioned officers out of action, York took command of the survivors and continued the action under enemy fire.

Remaining in charge of just seven men, York continued to advance, neutralized a machine gun position, and helped break the German resistance. At the end of the clash, the Americans had captured **132 prisoners**, including **4 officers and 128 soldiers**, as well as several weapons. The feat earned him the **Medal of Honor** and transformed York into one of the most famous American soldiers of the First World War.

The legend of the “All Americans”, therefore, precedes the birth of the airborne component by almost a quarter of a century.

1919: demobilization

After the First World War, the 82nd returned to the United States.

In **April 1919** the division was demobilized. However, it did not mean the definitive cancellation of its legacy.

In **1921** elements of the division were reconstituted in the **Organized Reserves**, the reserve organization of the United States Army at the time. The official lineages of the U.S. Army indicate for numerous components of the 82nd the date of **June 24, 1921** for this reconstitution.

For over twenty years, therefore, the designation of the 82nd Division continued to exist in the American reserve organization, then came the Second World War.

March 25, 1942: the 82nd returns to service

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into the war, the U.S. Army began a gigantic expansion.

On **March 25, 1942** the 82nd Division was once again called into active service and reorganized at **Camp Claiborne, Louisiana**.

Its commander was Major General **Omar N. Bradley**, a future protagonist of the Allied campaigns in Europe.

A few months later, on **June 26, 1942**, command passed to Major General **Matthew B. Ridgway**.

It was Ridgway who led the division in its most important transformation.

Why the United States wanted airborne divisions

The early phases of the Second World War had demonstrated the potential of air operations.

The spectacular German operations in **Norway, Belgium, and especially Crete** had shown that units transported by air could surpass the front line, occupy airports, bridges, and strategic nodes, and disrupt enemy rear areas.

The U.S. Army thus began to develop its own airborne doctrine.

Already in **June 1940** an experimental platoon of paratroopers had been formed to develop procedures, equipment, and tactics.

From small experimental units, they quickly moved to the formation of battalions and regiments.

The next step was much more ambitious: **to create entire divisions capable of being projected from the sky.**

August 15, 1942: the 82nd Airborne Division is born

This brings us to today's anniversary.

August 15, 1942.

On that day, the 82nd Infantry Division was officially **redesignated as the 82nd Airborne Division**.

The documentation produced by the division itself in 1945 summarizes the event unequivocally: the 82nd Infantry Division was transformed into an airborne division, and the personnel was also divided to contribute to the formation of the **101st Airborne Division**.

The transformation involved the entire structure of the large unit.

The division was assigned, among others, the **504th Parachute Infantry Regiment**, effective from August 15, 1942.

The organization of the airborne divisions of the time combined two different insertion systems:

- **parachute infantry**, dropped from airplanes;
- **infantry and units transported by gliders**, capable of bringing men, light artillery, vehicles, and materials to the ground.

It was not simply a matter of giving a parachute to a normal infantry division.

An organization was being born, designed to fight **isolated behind enemy lines**, often for hours or days before rejoining ground forces.

October 1942: Fort Bragg and airborne training

On **October 1, 1942**, the 82nd Airborne Division moved to **Fort Bragg, North Carolina**, to continue airborne training.

Fort Bragg would become indelibly linked to the history of the 82nd.

Here, the division perfected the procedures necessary for airborne operations: paratrooper drops, concentration after landing, communications, use of air-transported artillery, glider operations, and coordination with transport aviation.

But the preparation phase was short. In 1943, the time for war arrived.

1943: the baptism of fire in Sicily

On **April 29, 1943**, the division left the United States headed for the North African theater.

A few months later, it would be the protagonist of a historic operation.

On the night of **July 9-10, 1943**, as part of **Operation Husky**, American paratroopers were dropped over Sicily.

Husky was the first major airborne operation of the American Army.

The conditions were far from ideal.

Wind, navigation errors, dispersion of formations, and the complexity of coordination between air, naval, and ground forces caused a wide dispersion of the paratroopers.

But that very dispersion paradoxically produced an important effect: small groups of paratroopers appeared in numerous points of the Italian and German rear, creating confusion and often fighting independently.

Sicily thus became the laboratory where Americans learned, often paying a high price, what it really meant to conduct a large-scale airborne operation.

Salerno: paratroopers arrive directly on the battlefield

A few months later, the 82nd returned to action in Italy.

During the crisis of the Allied beachhead at **Salerno** in September 1943, units of the 82nd Airborne were quickly transported to Italy to reinforce the forces already engaged.

Between **September 14 and October 1, 1943**, the 82nd intervened in the Salerno area and participated in the subsequent advance towards Naples.

This was followed by a period of garrisoning the city of **Naples**, lasting until November 1943.

The 82nd had demonstrated another characteristic that would become central to its history:

being a force rapidly projectable where the situation was most critical.

From Italy to Great Britain

On **November 18, 1943**, the transfer of the division to the northwestern European theater began.

On **December 9, 1943**, the 82nd arrived in Northern Ireland.

In the following months, it moved to England and began preparations for what would become the most famous amphibious invasion in history.

Operation Overlord.

June 6, 1944: Normandy

On the night of June 5-6, **1944**, thousands of American paratroopers took off from England aboard C-47s.

Even before the first amphibious waves reached the French beaches, the 82nd and the 101st Airborne were already fighting in the Normandy hinterland.

The objective of the 82nd was particularly delicate.

His paratroopers were to operate in the western area of the American bridgehead, occupying and defending key points around **Sainte-Mère-Église** and along the Merderet River.

Sainte-Mère-Église became one of the symbols of D-Day.

Among the toughest battles was the one for **La Fièvre**, where men of the 82nd fought to maintain control of the crucial crossings over the Merderet.

The battle of **La Fièvre** became one of the toughest and most representative episodes of the 82nd paratroopers' experience in Normandy.

For weeks the “All Americans” fought as infantry on French soil.

The Normandy campaign of the division concluded in July 1944, when the 82nd returned to England to be reconstituted and prepared for a new operation.

September 1944: Market Garden

The next major drop came on **September 17, 1944**.

It was the beginning of **Operation Market Garden**, the gigantic Allied attempt to quickly cross the Netherlands by capturing a series of bridges before the arrival of the armored ground columns.

The 82nd Airborne was assigned the area of **Nijmegen**.

One of the main objectives was the large bridge over the Waal River.

The fighting was extremely fierce.

One of the most famous episodes was the crossing of the Waal carried out by American paratroopers in fragile assault boats under German fire.

The overall operation did not achieve the strategic goal of immediately opening the road to Germany, but the battle of Nijmegen became a definitive part of the history of the 82nd Airborne.

December 1944: the Ardennes

Three months later the division was urgently called again.

On **December 16, 1944**, German forces launched the great offensive in the Ardennes.

American airborne units were quickly transferred to the front.

The 82nd Airborne fought in the northern part of the German salient, while the 101st would become famous mainly for the defense of Bastogne.

For the men of the 82nd, it was weeks of fierce fighting amid snow, ice, and extreme cold.

The veteran of the 82nd Airborne **Tom Blakey**, who had fought in Normandy, Market Garden, and the Ardennes, summed up that campaign in four words: “cold, snow, ice, and death.”

1945: to Germany and Berlin

After overcoming the Ardennes offensive, the 82nd continued the advance into Germany until the end of the war in Europe. After the fighting ended, the division was assigned to occupation duties and reached **Berlin**, one of the last chapters of its long European campaign.

It was in Berlin, in **1945**, that the division's commander, Major General **James M. Gavin**, conceived the idea of collecting and preserving relics, documents, and testimonies of the “All Americans.” That project did not remain on paper: from that initiative was born the nucleus of what would become the **82nd Airborne Division War Memorial Museum**, today at **Fort Bragg, North Carolina**, dedicated to the history of the division from 1917 to the present day.

It was a way to fix in memory an extraordinary military story: in less than three years, the 82nd had gone from training in the United States to drops in Sicily and Normandy, to fighting in Italy, the Netherlands, and the Ardennes, up to the occupation of the German capital. The division that in 1942 had just been transformed into an airborne unit had by then built much of its legend.

The great transformation: from infantry division to strategic force

The history of the 82nd can therefore be read through a precise sequence of transformations:

1917 - 82nd Division

Born as a large infantry unit of the National Army for World War I.

1918 - fighting in Europe

Fought on the Western Front and in the Meuse-Argonne.

1919 - demobilization

Returned to the United States and was demobilized.

1921 - Organized Reserves

Elements of the division were reconstituted in the reserve organization.

March 25, 1942 - reactivation

The 82nd Infantry Division returned to active service at Camp Claiborne.

August 15, 1942 - 82nd Airborne Division

The division was redesignated as a large airborne unit.

1943-1945 - combat airborne division

Sicily, Italy, Normandy, the Netherlands, the Ardennes, and Germany built its legend.

But the story does not end in 1945.

The post-war: the 82nd remains airborne

Many large units created during World War II were disbanded or profoundly transformed at the end of the conflict.

The 82nd Airborne remained one of the main intervention forces of the American Army.

During the Cold War, the ability to rapidly deploy airborne troops became particularly valuable.

The division was maintained as a high-readiness force, capable of departing from the United States and quickly reaching a crisis theater.

This function would characterize practically its entire subsequent history.

1965: Dominican Republic

During the American intervention in the **Dominican Republic** in 1965, the 82nd Airborne carried out what the U.S. Army Airborne and Special Operations Museum describes as its largest

overseas deployment since World War II up to that point.

It was a demonstration that the concept born in 1942 was no longer limited to the great world conflict.

The 82nd had become a strategic response force.

Vietnam

Elements of the 82nd Airborne were later employed during the Vietnam War.

The Southeast Asian experience once again showed how a division born for parachute drops could also be used as highly mobile light infantry.

The “airborne” dimension did not mean that every operation had to necessarily start with a parachute drop.

The strategic value was mainly in the **speed of deployment, the lightness of the structure, and the ability to fight with relatively limited support.**

1983: Grenada

On **October 25, 1983**, during **Operation Urgent Fury**, units of the 82nd Airborne were deployed to Grenada.

Two brigades of the 82nd were employed in the operation, one of the first major American military actions after Vietnam.

Once again, the “All Americans” were used as a rapidly available force for a sudden crisis.

1989: Panama and the return of combat parachute drops

One of the most important operations in the modern history of the 82nd Airborne took place in December 1989.

During **Operation Just Cause** in Panama, elements of the 75th Ranger Regiment and the 82nd Airborne Division conducted parachute drops on strategic targets.

On **December 20, 1989**, American units were parachuted onto the areas of Rio Hato and Torrijos-Tocumen.

Decades after Sicily and Normandy, the 1942 concept proved to still be operational.

Gulf War

In 1990, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait triggered a new international crisis.

Once again, the 82nd Airborne was among the American forces rapidly sent to the region as part of **Operation Desert Shield**, which would later transform into the Gulf War of 1991.

The mission perfectly embodied the role assumed by the division in the post-war period:

to arrive quickly and establish a credible initial ground force while the rest of the American military apparatus was mobilized.

Afghanistan and Iraq

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, units of the 82nd Airborne were repeatedly employed in American operations in **Afghanistan and Iraq**.

In these conflicts as well, the division alternated traditional airborne capabilities with infantry, security, counterinsurgency, and rapid response missions.

Thus, the division's history entered the 21st century without losing the characteristic officially born on August 15, 1942.

Why August 15, 1942, is an important date in military history

The birth of the 82nd Airborne did not simply represent a name change for a division.

It was part of a true conceptual revolution.

For centuries, armies had sought to outflank the enemy by moving men and horses on the flanks.

With the advent of airborne forces, it became possible to **physically overcome the front**.

Bridges, airports, crossroads, and communication centers could be attacked simultaneously in front of and behind enemy lines.

The paratrooper thus became one of the most radical expressions of maneuver warfare:

a light soldier, with limited ammunition and supplies, called to fight often surrounded until the arrival of the main forces.

Sicily showed how difficult it was.

Normandy showed how decisive it could be.

Market Garden simultaneously showed its possibilities and limitations.

The Ardennes, on the other hand, demonstrated that airborne divisions had also become **elite infantry**, capable of being rapidly used at the most critical points of the front.

From the “All Americans” of 1917 to the paratroopers of 1942

And perhaps this is the most fascinating aspect of the history of the 82nd.

The division **was not born as a parachutist**. When its men departed to fight in France in 1918, it was still a large infantry unit, at a time when the modern concept of an airborne division was still far from taking shape. At the end of World War I, it was demobilized, then reconstituted in the reserve, and with the entry of the United States into World War II, called back into active service. It was only then, in the summer of 1942, that the 82nd underwent the transformation destined to change its identity and role forever: from an infantry division to a large airborne unit of the United States Army.

On **August 15, 1942**, the 82nd Infantry Division became the **82nd Airborne Division**.

From that moment, its name would be linked to some of the most famous places in the history of paratroopers:

- **Sicily.**
- **Salerno.**
- **Sainte-Mère-Église.**
- **La Fièvre.**
- **Nijmegen.**
- **Ardennes.**
- **Germany.**

And, in the following decades: **Dominican Republic, Grenada, Panama, Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq.**

A history that began in 1917 as a regular infantry division and was transformed, that **August 15, 84 years ago**, into one of the most famous airborne units in the world.

All American. All the Way.

Sources

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<https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2022/02/04/29ae4116/82nd-airborne-division-press-kit-cao-3feb22.pdf>

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Insight into the birth of U.S. airborne forces, the transformation of the 82nd Infantry Division, and the activation of the 101st Airborne in August 1942.

https://www.army.mil/article/3852/the_first_u_s_army_airborne_operation

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Official documentation on the reconstitution in the Organized Reserves and the reorganization on **August 15, 1942** within the 82nd Airborne Division.

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Official insight into the role of gliders in American airborne divisions during operations in **Normandy and Holland**.

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Official museum testimony of the deployment of the 82nd Airborne during the **invasion of Grenada in 1983**.

<https://history.army.mil/Army-Museum-Enterprise/Find-an-Army-Museum/US-Army-Womens-Museum/Gallery/Be-All-You-Can-Be/>

- **U.S. Army - 82nd Airborne Division**

Institutional page of the division and its current operational and training activities.

<https://www.army.mil/82ndairborne>

- **U.S. Army - 82nd Airborne Division participates in Swift Response 25**

Recent source confirming that the 82nd still maintains a real parachute capability today: in 2025, about **600 paratroopers** from the division participated in a *Joint Forcible Entry* airborne operation.

https://www.army.mil/article/285259/82nd_airborne_division_participates_in_swift_response_25

Photo: [82nd Airborne Division Museum](#)