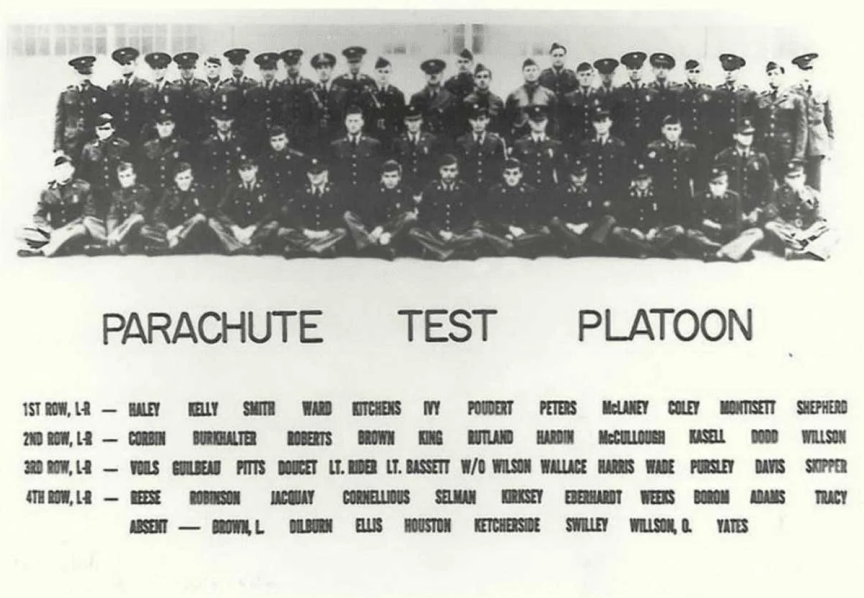

Fort Benning, August 16, 1940: The History of U.S. Army Paratroopers Begins

Published on 16/08/2026

On **August 16, 1940**, at **Fort Benning, in Georgia**, a small group of volunteers from the United States Army took a step destined to profoundly change American military history. That day the **Parachute Test Platoon** carried out what U.S. official sources remember as the **first official parachute jump of the U.S. Army**.

It was the beginning of a story that, within a few years, would lead to the birth of the great American airborne units and the deployment of paratroopers on the battlefields of World War II, from the Mediterranean to Normandy.

The Parachute Test Platoon

In 1940 the American Army did not yet have true parachute units. The use of soldiers dropped from the air was, however, followed with growing interest, especially in light of the military

experiences gained in Europe.

The **War Department authorized on June 25, 1940 the establishment of an experimental unit** tasked with concretely evaluating the possibilities offered by airborne troops. The unit was formed at Fort Benning using volunteers from the **29th Infantry Regiment**.

According to a reconstruction published by the U.S. Army, more than **180 volunteers** presented themselves. The selection led to the choice of **two officers and 48 enlisted men**, subjected to a completely new program, in which much of the techniques still had to be tested and codified.

The platoon formally began training at the end of June 1940.

Leading it was **Lieutenant William T. Ryder**, a figure destined to become one of the pioneers of the American Airborne. Alongside him was Lieutenant **James A. Bassett**.

Training in Something That Didn't Yet Exist

These men were not simply attending a parachuting course.

They were helping to **invent it**.

Procedures for exiting the aircraft, landing techniques, ground training, equipment deployment and jump organization had to be tested and progressively perfected.

The Test Platoon also conducted some of its preparation using parachute towers in New Jersey before returning to Fort Benning for aircraft trials. The experience gained during this phase contributed to the development of the training system that would later be adopted by the Army.

Ryder also played an important role in defining certain procedures. U.S. Army sources recall, for example, how he insisted that the men initially learn to personally prepare their own parachute, believing that this would help increase confidence in the equipment.

August 16, 1940: The First Jump

The decisive moment came on **August 16**.

At **Lawson Field**, within Fort Benning, the Parachute Test Platoon carried out the first official jump in the history of the United States Army.

The first man to leave the aircraft was **Lieutenant William T. Ryder**.

The U.S. Army's Airborne and Special Operations Museum identifies him as the first Test Platoon American military to present himself at the aircraft door and jump that day. Immediately after him jumped soldier **William "Red" King**, remembered as the first enlisted paratrooper of the United States Army.

A more recent reconstruction published by the U.S. Army indicates that the men made the jump from approximately **1,500 feet**, just over 450 meters.

That jump was not yet a combat operation and did not even represent the conclusion of the trials.

However, it was the practical demonstration that the United States Army could create, train, and deploy its own paratroopers.

The Trials Continued

The experimental program continued in the weeks following.

On **August 29, 1940** the Test Platoon carried out what a U.S. Army reconstruction defines as its final qualifying jump, including a mass exit. The experiment conclusively confirmed the validity of the project.

From that small experimental unit would be born something enormously larger.

Within just two years the United States would establish airborne formations on a divisional scale. On **August 15, 1942** the **82nd Infantry Division** would be reorganized as the **82nd Airborne Division**, while shortly after the **101st Airborne Division** would also be created.

These were the units that would help make American military parachuting famous during World War II.

From Test Platoon to War

The distance between the Fort Benning experiments and actual combat was surprisingly short.

In **November 1942**, during **Operation Torch** in North Africa, men from the **2nd Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment** carried out what the presidential proclamation of National Airborne Day identifies as the **first American combat jump**.

In the following years American airborne forces would be deployed on a scale unimaginable to the men who had begun the experiments at Fort Benning in 1940.

Sicily, Normandy, southern France, Holland, the Ardennes, and the Philippines would become some of the names linked to the history of the American Airborne.

During World War II the U.S. Army deployed five airborne divisions: **11th, 13th, 17th, 82nd, and 101st Airborne Division**.

August 16 is Today National Airborne Day

The symbolic importance of that day was officially recognized many decades later.

In **2002**, United States President **George W. Bush** proclaimed **August 16 National Airborne Day**, explicitly recalling the first official Army jump that occurred on **August 16, 1940**.

It is therefore not a date chosen generically to celebrate paratroopers.

It is precisely the anniversary of that first successful experiment at Fort Benning.

From a Platoon to the Great Airborne Divisions

On August 16, 1940, no one could yet know how far that experience would go.

There were only a few dozen volunteers, an experimental program, and a doctrine still completely to be built.

Four years later thousands of American paratroopers would descend from the sky over occupied Europe.

The history of the great Airborne units of the United States, from the **82nd Airborne Division** to the **101st Airborne Division**, passing through the other airborne divisions created during the war, finds its roots precisely in the experiments of that small **Parachute Test Platoon**.

And it all had one of its decisive moments at Fort Benning, **on August 16, 1940**, when William Ryder appeared at the aircraft door and threw himself into the void.

Sources

- **U.S. Army**, *The jump that changed US warfare history*, August 15, 2025.
- **U.S. Army Center of Military History – Airborne and Special Operations Museum**, *Early Airborne*.
- **U.S. Army**, *One platoon's bravery becomes an Army legacy*.
- **U.S. Army**, *Army commemorates 79 years of Airborne history*.
- **U.S. Government**, *Proclamation 7582 – National Airborne Day, 2002*.