



Military Paratroopers: Doctrine, History, and Strategic Role of a Unique Specialty

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Military Paratroopers represent one of the most complex expressions of modern land power. They are not simply elite infantry nor a variant of special forces. Their identity is defined by the **operational doctrine**, even before training or equipment.

It is the function assigned to them within the military apparatus that makes them unique, not the means by which they are deployed.

The paratrooper is born to solve a specific and recurring problem in military history: **projecting combat force in depth, in rapid times, overcoming geographical obstacles, enemy lines, and political constraints.**

It is a tool designed to act when land maneuver is slow, when naval maneuver is not possible, or when the exclusive use of special forces is not sufficient.

This capability entails an inevitable consequence: the paratrooper operates accepting **isolation, uncertainty, and high risk** as normal conditions, not as exceptions.

The hinge between conventional forces and special forces

In NATO doctrine, particularly in the **AJP-3.2 - Allied Joint Doctrine for Land Operations**, airborne units are framed as **high readiness land forces**, intended to intervene in the initial phases of a crisis or armed conflict.

Their task is not to “win the war,” but to **create the operational conditions** so that the **overall maneuver can develop favorably**. Occupying key nodes, airports, critical infrastructure, denying spaces to the enemy, slowing or diverting adversary reactions: this is their primary function.

The paratrooper, by doctrine, fights with limited support and with initially fragile logistics. For this reason, **decision-making autonomy, discipline, and cohesion take on central value**. The initial dispersion, typical of an airdrop, is not considered a failure but a **foreseen condition**, which requires Commanders capable of operating according to the principle of *mission command* and soldiers trained to reorganize and fight even in conditions of fragmentation and chaos.

This setup finds direct confirmation in one of the latest **AJP-3.5 - Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations** available in declassified form (NATO generally does not make the most recent versions of special operations doctrine public). The document defines the perimeter of special operations and the relationship with conventional forces.

In this framework, the **Paratroopers** occupy an operational bridging role: they are not Special Forces, but they can function as a **hinge** between conventional maneuver and SOF action. They can support special operations, protect their effects, and above all **consolidate and expand their results on the ground**, without replacing them and without distorting their function.

This placement is essential to ensure continuity between selective action and maneuver on a larger scale.

The employment of the **Parachute Regiment** (United Kingdom) in **Sierra Leone** in **2000** (Operation Barras) constitutes a paradigmatic example of the use of **airborne forces** as a bridging element between **special operations** and **conventional maneuver**, even in

scenarios outside high-intensity conflict. In this context, the paratroopers did not operate as special forces, but as **multipliers** and **stabilizers** of the effects generated by the **British special forces** (SAS), ensuring **operational continuity, isolation of the action area**, and **control of the terrain**.



September 10, 2000: in Sierra Leone, landed at 05:00 in the morning from Chinook helicopters, the United Kingdom paratroopers capture the village of Magbeni, neutralize all enemy positions, and secure the operations area, stabilizing the terrain after the intervention of the SAS - Photo copyright "The Parachute Regiment" Facebook page

The beginnings: an all-Italian story

This doctrinal placement is neither accidental nor recent. The roots of military parachuting go back to Italy already during the First World War, with **Alessandro Tandura**, an officer of the Arditi of the Royal Army. In 1918 Tandura was launched behind Austro-Hungarian lines for a sabotage and information liaison mission.

It is the **first operational military jump in history**. There is not yet a formalized doctrine, but the concept is already complete: using the third dimension to overcome the front, strike in depth, and create an operational advantage.

During the Second World War, military parachuting becomes a structured operational tool.

Italy too, with the Folgore, often remembered exclusively for El Alamein, develops and employs airborne units in a manner consistent with the emerging doctrines of the time. The 1941 operations of the 2nd Paratrooper Battalion for the capture of Cefalonia and Zante demonstrate a mature use of the tool: rapid occupation, territorial control, integration with air-

naval operations.

In these contexts, the Paratrooper is not just a shock force, but an **element of initial stabilization**, capable of creating a fait accompli on the ground.

Simultaneously, the large Allied operations bring airborne doctrine to its maximum expansion. From Normandy to **Operation Market Garden**, the potential of the tool clearly emerges, but also its **structural limits**. The paratrooper can conquer, disorganize, block, and delay the enemy.

However, they cannot sustain prolonged combat without reuniting with conventional forces.

This lesson, paid at a high price, is now fully internalized in NATO doctrines and constitutes **one of the pillars of modern airborne force employment**.



April 30, 1941, Italian Paratroopers of the 2nd Battalion "pave the way": a daring operation that would lead within hours to the occupation of Cefalonia, Zante, and Ithaca, opening a new era for the newborn specialty.

Contemporary employment: from projection to deterrence

In the post-war period, and even more so in the contemporary context, the role of Paratroopers evolves further. No longer mass drops, but **rapid reaction forces**, ready to be deployed in unstable, urban, complex, and high-intensity scenarios.

In modern doctrine, Paratroopers are conceived as a flexible tool, capable of operating across the entire conflict spectrum, from deterrence to open crisis, from stabilization operations to conventional combat.

The key concept remains that of a hinge force. Paratroopers **bridge the gap between the heavy maneuver of conventional units and the selective action of special forces**. They can open an operational theater, consolidate it in the most critical phases, and allow the progressive entry of more structured units.

Another recent example of this logic is the French intervention in **Mali** in **2013**, during **Operation Serval**. In the initial phases, the **French special forces** conducted rapid and selective actions to halt the advance of jihadist groups, identify key targets, and prepare the ground for a larger-scale intervention. Subsequently, units of the **11e Brigade Parachutiste**, including those of the **2e REP** (Foreign Legion Paratroopers), were employed to occupy and secure airports, urban centers, and logistical hubs, expanding and making the effects produced by the initial SOF action lasting. In this framework, the paratroopers operated as an **intermediate transition force**, ensuring operational continuity, ground control, and area stabilization, until the full deployment of conventional and multinational components.

This function makes them irreplaceable and explains why, even when the drop is not executed, the airborne capability is still maintained as an element of operational credibility and strategic deterrence.



Timbuktu, Mali, January 2013: Paratroopers of the 2e REP of the 11e Brigade Parachutiste (France) during the consolidation phase in Operation Serval following the intervention of the French special forces - Photo Pinterest

Conclusion: a specialty born from doctrine, not myth

The Paratrooper is not defined by myth nor by exception. It is defined by **doctrine**, responsibility, and the ability to operate where time is critical and the operational space is still

uncertain.

From the solitary jump of Alessandro Tandura to modern joint and combined operations, the common thread is always the same: **to win the distance even before the enemy**, providing the Armed Force with an option that no other unit can truly replace.

Sources:

NATO AJP-3.2 ALLIED JOINT DOCTRINE FOR LAND OPERATIONS

[AJP-3.2 EDB V1 E 2288Download](#)

NATO AJP-3.5 ALLIED JOINT DOCTRINE FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS

[556591548-AJP-3-5-AJD-for-Special-Operations-Ed-A-V-1-Dec13Download](#)