The Paratroopers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade: Tactical Drones and 3D Printing - VIDEO

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In March 2024, the United States officially retired the RQ-7B Shadow platform, creating a gap for soldiers trained in unmanned aerial vehicle (drone) operations. However, this gap also represented an opportunity for the 173rd Airborne Brigade, which embarked on a new path in integrating drone technology into combat operations.

Supported by brigade-level funding, the paratroopers of the Hawkeye Platoon invested in four PDW C100 drones, as well as a fleet of customized FPV (First-Person View) drones, many of which were designed and assembled by the soldiers themselves using commercial parts and 3D-printed components. This innovative approach allows the Platoon to be autonomous and swift in providing tactical solutions to support military operations.

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Affordable and Lethal Drones for Battle

The ability of the Hawkeye Platoon to build, repair, and customize their own drones is one of the distinctive features of their innovative approach. Sergeant Major Andy Ortiz, instructor and drone pilot, explains that an entire set of FPV drones costs about 400-500 dollars and can be assembled in a few hours. This low cost and assembly speed make FPV drones a powerful option for paratrooper units, allowing even beginners to build them quickly.

Not only FPV drones, but also C100 drones represent a leap forward. With a range of up to 10 kilometers and a flight autonomy of 74 minutes, C100 drones allow small units to transport supplies or conduct reconnaissance missions without the need to maintain a line of sight, which is particularly useful in mountainous or contested terrains.

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Drones for the Future: Training and Interoperability

The Hawkeye Platoon doesn't just fly drones: they build, repair, and constantly improve them. Their ability to innovate is supported by a solid training model that allows skills to be rapidly disseminated within the brigade. Drone manufacturers train the non-commissioned officers through a "train-the-trainer" model, enabling NCOs to train other soldiers throughout the brigade.

In June 2025, the Hawkeye Platoon participated in the Agile Spirit 25 exercise, a multinational exercise that saw collaboration between allied and partner forces. During the exercise, the Platoon tested new technologies and refined its drone usage techniques, helping to shape the future of Army lethality.

This transition from old systems to new technologies has transformed the Hawkeye Platoon into an incubator of innovation on the battlefield. Today, the paratroopers of the Platoon represent the evolution of Army aviation, where lethality is "printed," built, and piloted by the soldiers themselves.

News link: https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4264091/hawkeye-platoon-leads-army-innovation-with-tactical-drones-3d-printed-lethality/