



USA: 173rd Airborne “drone” battalion returns to parachute infantry

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The experiment was launched to determine how lessons from the war in Ukraine could reshape the organization of an American combat unit. Now, after just a few months, the US Army has decided to change course: the **3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (3-504th PIR)** will end its specific role as a “**drone assault battalion**” and return to focusing on the core functions of a parachute infantry battalion.

The decision, first reported by the *Wall Street Journal*, will take effect at the end of the unit’s participation in **Saber Junction**, the major exercise scheduled between August and September at the Hohenfels training area in Germany. The battalion will then present the Army with the conclusions of the experiment, which will help guide the future organization of units and the employment of unmanned systems.

A battalion of about 600 paratroopers to study drone warfare

The 3-504th PIR was established in January 2026 using approximately **600 personnel from the 173rd Airborne Brigade**, the U.S. airborne brigade permanently stationed in Europe.

The unit was assigned a distinctive mission: to test, at battalion scale, the integration of **drones, ground robotic systems, and new combat tactics**, drawing in particular on observations from the Ukrainian battlefield.

A small portion of the personnel was also to be sent to **Kyiv to engage directly with Ukrainian drone commanders and operators**, while other troops had the opportunity to train with Ukrainian personnel during NATO activities in Europe.

For the 173rd Airborne, however, unmanned systems are not unfamiliar territory. As early as 2025, the brigade had developed an in-house **FPV Drone Lab at Caserma Del Din in Vicenza**, dedicated to the testing and development of FPV drones. Brigade personnel had also tested UAS during training activities at Grafenwöhr, Germany.

This is not an abandonment of drones

However, the US Army's decision should not be interpreted as a negative assessment of the usefulness of drones.

The issue is instead **how to integrate them into ground units**.

Once Saber Junction is complete, the 3-504th PIR will cease to be a battalion specifically built around experimentation with autonomous systems and will return, according to an Army spokesperson, to focusing on its **“core warfighting tasks as an airborne infantry battalion”**, namely the fundamental tasks of airborne infantry.

The experience accumulated by the unit will not be lost: it will be used to help inform force design and future experimentation.

And that is precisely the most interesting aspect of the story.

The question the U.S. Army is trying to resolve no longer appears to be **whether to use drones**, but at what organizational level to integrate them and how much they should reshape the traditional structure of combat units.

The U.S. Army's new direction

The decision comes as senior U.S. Army leaders place greater emphasis on the core capabilities of soldiers and small units.

In **“The Army Azimuth”**, published on August 19 by General Christopher C. LaNeve, the need to refocus on individual training, small-unit tactical capabilities, and operational readiness is reaffirmed.

That does not, however, mean taking a step backward technologically.

In the same document, LaNeve states that the Army must be able to outmatch its adversaries by combining human capabilities with advanced technologies, explicitly citing **autonomy and artificial intelligence**.

The message therefore appears quite clear: **innovation, yes—but without losing the fundamental capabilities of the warfighter and maneuver units**.

The lesson for airborne infantry

For a formation such as the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the issue is particularly significant.

Airborne units must be light, rapidly deployable, and capable of fighting with limited logistics. FPV drones, small reconnaissance UAS, and robotic systems can greatly expand the observation and engagement capabilities of a company or battalion.

But transforming an entire infantry battalion into a drone-specialized unit is a far more radical organizational choice.

The 3-504th PIR experiment therefore appears to have reached a new phase: **the experimental battalion is disappearing as a dedicated structure, but what the paratroopers have learned will continue to influence how the U.S. Army employs drones and autonomous systems on the battlefield**.

Technology, in short, does not necessarily replace the paratrooper. Increasingly, it may simply become another weapon at his disposal.

News link: <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/new-drone-unit-to-be-phased-out-as-hegseths-army-pick-makes-his-mark-ff5f5fc8>