



USA, West Point honors Paratroopers of the 11th Airborne Division: the “Arctic Angels” patch on Black Knights helmets

The Military Academy’s football team will commemorate the Alaska-based airborne division in Philadelphia.

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The **West Point** American football team wore the insignia of the **11th Airborne Division** on its helmets during the game against Temple, played on September 25 at Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia.

For the Black Knights, it was their first road game of the season. The initiative is part of the **Honored Division theme**, through which U.S. Military Academy players wear U.S. Army division patches during the season, commemorating their history, operations, and service.

The formation selected for this game was the **11th Airborne Division**, now known as the **“Arctic Angels”**, a major U.S. Army airborne unit based in Alaska. Its units operate primarily at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson and Fort Wainwright.

From the Pacific War to Alaska

The division was activated on **February 25, 1943**, at Camp Mackall, North Carolina. Its first commander was Major General **Joseph M. Swing**, a 1915 West Point graduate.

After the difficulties encountered by U.S. airborne forces in the first major operations of World War II, particularly during the invasion of Sicily, Swing was tasked with leading a commission to assess the organization, doctrine, and future of major airborne units.

A decisive milestone was the **Knollwood Maneuver**, a major exercise conducted in December 1943 in North Carolina. The 11th Airborne Division employed paratroopers and gliders in a complex operation involving the seizure and defense of an airfield, aerial resupply, casualty evacuation, and subsequent combat actions.

The success of the maneuver played a decisive role in convincing senior U.S. Army leaders of the value of airborne divisions and the need to retain them in the force structure.

Deployed to the Pacific in **May 1944**, the division took part in operations in New Guinea and subsequently in the Philippine campaign.

It fought on Leyte and Luzon and took part in some of the best-known airborne operations of the Pacific War, including the drop on **Tagaytay Ridge** and the raid on the **Los Baños** internment camp, which led to the liberation of thousands of civilian prisoners.

After Japan's surrender, the division took part in the occupation of Japan, where it remained until May 1949.

It was during that period that the **187th Airborne Infantry Regiment** received the nickname **“Rakkasans”**, derived from the Japanese expression used to refer to paratroopers and roughly translatable as “men with falling umbrellas.”

From Korea to airmobile warfare

During the Korean War, the **187th Airborne Infantry Regiment** operated separately as an airborne Regimental Combat Team.

The unit carried out two major combat jumps, in the **Sukchon-Sunchon** area in 1950 and at **Munsan-ni** in 1951.

In 1956, the 11th Airborne Division was transferred to Germany as part of Operation **Gyroscope**, replacing the 5th Infantry Division.

On **1° luglio 1958**, the division was inactivated, and part of its structure contributed to the reorganization of the 24th Infantry Division.

The designation returned on **1° febbraio 1963**, when the **11th Air Assault Division (Test)** was established to test new doctrines based on the large-scale use of helicopters.

The unit played a key role in developing the concept of **air mobility**, which would profoundly reshape U.S. Army operations.

On July 3, 1965, the division was inactivated again. Some of its personnel, equipment, and accumulated experience contributed to the formation of the **1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile)**, which was deployed to Vietnam shortly afterward.

The rebirth of the “Arctic Angels”

The **11th Airborne Division** was reactivated in June 2022 as part of the reorganization of U.S. Army forces in Alaska.

The formation is now tasked with preparing personnel and units for operations in Arctic and subarctic environments, which are considered increasingly important in U.S. strategic planning.

Its commander is Major General **John Cogbill**, a 1994 West Point graduate. During his career, he also commanded the 187th Infantry Regiment, now assigned to the 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 101st Airborne Division.

The connection with West Point

The tribute to the 11th Airborne Division also involved several members of the West Point community who served in units now associated with the formation.

They include Cadet **Michael Pidgeon**, Class of 2029, who before being admitted to the Academy had served in the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, attaining the rank of sergeant. His grandfather had also served in the division during the 1950s.

Pidgeon recalled the stark differences between training in hot, humid environments such as Thailand and activities conducted in Alaska's harsh climatic conditions.

Major **Gregory Bremser**, now an instructor at West Point, had instead served in the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, before its subsequent reorganization. During his assignment, he also took part in a jump inside the Arctic Circle alongside Canadian forces.

Captain **Timothy Bickle** served at Fort Wainwright from 2019 and was later deployed to Mosul, Iraq, as part of Operation Inherent Resolve.

Lieutenant Colonel **Eric Gutierrez**, an instructor in the Department of Chemical and Biological Engineering, served from 2013 to 2017 in the 6th Brigade Engineer Battalion.

A patch linking past and present

For West Point cadets, the 11th Airborne Division insignia on their helmets is more than just a reminder of U.S. military history.

It is also a direct connection to the units where many of them will be assigned to serve after graduating from the Academy.

From airborne operations in the Pacific to the experimentation with airmobile warfare and today's activities in the Arctic, the history of the 11th Airborne Division spans more than 80 years of U.S. Army evolution.

The Black Knights' tribute thus links the tradition of American airborne forces with the new generations of officers called upon to lead them.

News link:

https://www.army.mil/article/295691/honored_division_week_3_black_knights_head_to_philadelphia_for_first_road_game_honor_11th_airborne_division_with_gameday_patch_against_temple?utm_source=chatgpt.com