REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE *(DD-MM-YYYY)*	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED *(From - To)*
28-04-2020	Master of Military Studies (MMS) thesis	AY 2019-2020

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE
Maintaining The Army's Conventional Airborne Assault Capability

5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
N/A

5b. GRANT NUMBER
N/A

5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
N/A

6. AUTHOR(S)
Thompson, Peter D. (Major)

5d. PROJECT NUMBER
N/A

5e. TASK NUMBER
N/A

5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
N/A

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)
USMC Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Quantico, VA 22134-5068

8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
N/A

9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)
N/A

10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)

11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)
N/A

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

The Joint Operational Access Concept of 2012 asserts that a military incapable of gaining access loses its "utility as an instrument of national power." Since July 1940, the United States military has maintained a conventional airborne force to reinforce that capability of our nation. Although airborne units have served the United States in every major conflict since World War II, only seven parachute assaults have been conducted in combat since 1945. So, if the United States rarely utilizes its airborne capability, is there still relevance for maintaining airborne units inside the conventional force structure? This is a question that several Army officers, politicians, and military scholars have been debating for decades, but the discussion was reignited in a 2015 Army Study by Marc DeVore which concluded that the modern-day existence of paratroopers is not a product of their operational success or necessity, but rather a strong institutionalization within the services. This study does not attempt to argue for large-scale, high-intensity airborne operations on today's modern battlefield. Rather, it seeks to examine how the airborne community has adapted to criticism since 1945 and asserts the need for maintaining the force as a rapidly deployable, expeditionary, forcible entry capability.

15. SUBJECT TERMS
airborne; paratrooper; parachute assault, joint forcible entry; expeditionary; global response force

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			USMC Command and Staff College
Unclass	Unclass	Unclass	UU	37	19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER *(Include area code)* (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

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Marine Corps Combat Development Command
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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

MAINTAINING THE ARMY'S CONVENTIONAL AIRBORNE ASSAULT CAPABILITY

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

MAJOR PETER D. THOMPSON

AY 2019-20

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Approved: //signed//
Date: 28 April 2020

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Date: 28 April 2020

Executive Summary

Title: Maintaining The Army's Conventional Airborne Assault Capability

Author: Major Peter D. Thompson, United States Army

Thesis: To remain credible, both as a deterrent and as a viable military option, the United States must maintain a conventional airborne capability that is ready and capable of forcing an entry from a strategic distance into geographical areas controlled by hostile forces or inaccessible by ground movement.

Discussion: The Joint Operational Access Concept of 2012 asserts that a military incapable of gaining access loses its "utility as an instrument of national power."[1] Since July 1940, the United States military has maintained a conventional airborne force to reinforce that capability of our nation. Although airborne units have served the United States in every major conflict since World War II, only seven parachute assaults have been conducted in combat since 1945. So, if the United States rarely utilizes its airborne capability, is there still relevance for maintaining airborne units inside the conventional force structure? This is a question that several Army officers, politicians, and military scholars have been debating for decades, but the discussion was reignited in a 2015 Army Study by Marc DeVore which concluded that the modern-day existence of paratroopers is not a product of their operational success or necessity, but rather a strong institutionalization within the services. This study does not attempt to argue for large-scale, high-intensity airborne operations on today's modern battlefield. Rather, it seeks to examine how the airborne community has adapted to criticism since 1945 and asserts the need for maintaining the force as a rapidly deployable, expeditionary, forcible entry capability.

Conclusion: The unfortunate prevalence of global instability requires the United States military to maintain an airborne capability to conduct rapid, forcible entry operations. Weak governance, the proliferation of arms, weapons of mass destruction, uneven economic recovery, humanitarian and natural disasters, resource scarcity, and energy dependency are just a few examples that have the potential to cause regional conflict and prompt a military response. All of these mission sets require a highly trained, disciplined, and expeditionary fighting force that is always prepared to deploy and gain access; airborne units provide that capability and therefore should remain as a tool in America's arsenal.

[1] United States, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operational Access Concept*, 2012, 2.

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THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

Illustrations

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the faculty and staff at the United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College for a tremendous ten-month experience. I have been challenged, both personally and professionally, and grown because of your leadership, instruction, and mentorship. I am especially grateful for Dr. J. H. Joyner, the Security Studies Department Head, for serving as my advisor on this study.

This study would not have been possible without the paratroopers and leaders that I have had the privilege of serving with throughout my career. Being a part of your team will always be the highest honor of my life. I am a better officer and engineer because of it, and I look forward to our next link-up on the drop zone.

Introduction

Since June 1940, the United States Army has trained and maintained a conventional[2] airborne infantry force that is capable of conducting low altitude, static-line parachute operations. Originally adopted as a means to quickly insert combat-equipped troops deep behind enemy lines, the mission of the airborne remains to conduct forcible entry parachute assaults and secure key objectives for follow-on military operations in support of national interests. Although airborne operations during World War II had relatively mixed success, five airborne-qualified divisions remained on active duty after 1945.[3] Since then, however, those numbers have significantly diminished. As of January 2020, the U.S. Army only maintains five airborne infantry brigade combat teams (BCTs): three with the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina; the 173rd Airborne BCT in Vicenza, Italy; and 4th Airborne BCT, 25th Infantry Division at Fort Richardson, Alaska. Additionally, the Army's XVIII Airborne Corps maintains several combat support elements that are also airborne capable.[4]

One explanation for the significant reduction in airborne-capable forces is that the United States has not conducted a division-level parachute assault into combat since World War II. Although static-line combat jumps were executed in Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, and Panama, they were done at much lower echelons (battalion and below). The last brigade-level parachute assault into combat was conducted in 2003, and it is widely acknowledged that the 173rd Airborne BCT jumped into an already secured airfield in northern Iraq with no enemy resistance. So, if the

[2] The term "conventional" is utilized to describe the airborne capability maintained in conventional Army units, such as the 82nd Airborne Division, and not that maintained in U.S. Special Operations Command.
[3] Marc DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: The Army Press, 2015), 30.
[4] John Gordon IV, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, David A. Shlapak, Caroline Baxter, Scott Boston, Michael McGee, Todd Nichols, and Elizabeth Tencza, *Enhanced Army Airborne Forces: A New Joint Operational Capability* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014), xiv.

United States rarely utilizes its airborne capability, is there still relevance for maintaining airborne units outside of U.S. Special Operations Command?

According to military scholar Marc DeVore, the answer to that question is emphatically "no." In a decade-long study of the United States, United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union from 1945 to 2015 to assess whether parachute-enabled forcible entries "have ever accomplished their objectives at an acceptable cost,"[5] DeVore concluded that their modern-day existence is not a product of their operational success or necessity, but rather a strong institutionalization within the services. DeVore argues that large-scale, high-intensity airborne operations are a thing of the past; regarding the United States, airborne units have justified their existence by undertaking new mission sets that are supported by the Army's highest-ranking commanders.

DeVore's argument carries some validity. The United States Army has not conducted a contested airborne operation at the brigade-level (or higher) in over three decades. Although units such as the 82nd Airborne Division still maintain their ability and proficiency to conduct such an operation, they do so under a relatively new mission set entitled 'Global Response Force' (GRF). The premise of the mission is for the division to always have a BCT on standby, capable of outloading all personnel and equipment within 18-hours of notification to any location in the world. And at the time of DeVore's study publication, nine of the Army's 13 four-star general officers had either commanded or served in airborne units during their career – many of them with the 82nd Airborne Division.[6] Although DeVore would most likely argue that this strengthens his institutionalization claim, there is certainly something to be said about how the Army values leaders who have served successfully in airborne units. Additionally, there is an appreciation amongst those leaders for the strategic capability that an airborne force provides.

[5] DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, iii.
[6] Kyle Jahner, "Does The Army Need Airborne," *The Army Times*, February 29, 2016, https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2016/02/29/does-the-army-need-airborne/.

When asked about its necessity, General Stephen Townsend, former commander of XVIII Airborne Corps, responded: "It's not an Army requirement . . . It's a national security requirement. This is the Army's highest levels saying this capability is something the country needs."[7]

DeVore's study was more than likely read or reviewed by the most senior leaders within the Pentagon. Still, it probably wasn't widely known until the *Army Times* published a front-page article entitled "Does The Army Need Airborne?" in February 2016. Beneath a photo of several hundred paratroopers exiting from C-17s as part of NATO exercise "Trident Juncture," author Kyle Jahner referenced DeVore's study and re-asked the controversial question. With an estimated viewership of four million users, Jahner's article went viral throughout the airborne community.[8] 'The Alpha Gators,' an online satirical military cartoon, published an illustrated response three weeks later with the caption: "Heresy shall be purged!"

[7] Jahner, "Does The Army Need Airborne."
[8] Sightline Media Group, "Military Times," accessed March 7, 2020, https://sightlinemediagroup.com/military-times/.

Figure 1: Cartoon From 'The Alpha Gators,' Published 18 March 2016

Although DeVore's criticism was met with strong disdain within the airborne community, his argument was not a new concept. Even prior to the conclusion of World War II, there had been an ongoing discussion about the role and necessity of maintaining an airborne capability within the conventional armed forces. After many of the setbacks experienced from the 1942-1943 airborne campaigns, then-Secretary of War Henry Stimson and then-Allied Forces Commander Dwight Eisenhower argued for the complete disbandment of the American airborne

command.[9] Due to their limited use and renewed scrutiny during the Kennedy Administration, the airborne community felt compelled to lobby for additional mission sets to maintain relevance.[10] During the height of the Cold War, Army leaders re-designated airborne units as the nation's crisis response force to justify their continued existence. But since the start of the War on Terror in 2001, critics of the Army's airborne force mostly fell silent.

It is essential to acknowledge that DeVore and Jahner are not questioning the need to retain airborne-qualified units within the United States' special operations community. There are numerous unclassified examples of small teams and units being inserted via static-line and freefall parachute operations, and probably many more that go undiscussed. Therefore, this paper will attempt to justify the strategic relevance for maintaining a low-altitude, static-line airborne capability within the Army's conventional forces.

To remain credible, both as a deterrent and as a viable military option, the United States must maintain a conventional airborne capability that is ready and capable of forcing an entry from a strategic distance into geographical areas controlled by hostile forces or inaccessible by ground movement. Envisioned during the height of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the Department of Defense wanted the ability to deploy a combat-ready unit with limited notice in response to emerging threats or challenges around the globe. This unit needed to be light enough to be able to deploy all of its personnel and equipment by air rapidly, yet still retain a high level of mobility and lethality once it reached its objective on the ground. Although an armored or mechanized brigade would be the preferred option against a near-peer competitor and meets the latter requirement, it does not meet the first. Armored and mechanized brigades require weeks, not hours, to outload and even longer to transport. Even pre-positioned assets across Europe and

[9] Thomas Sheehan, "World War II Vertical Envelopment: The German Influence on US Army Airborne Operations." (Master's Thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College, 2010), 68-69.
[10] DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, 59.

Asia take weeks to draw, and infiltration is restricted by ground access. Of the ten Army divisions on active duty, only four do not rely on mechanized, tracked vehicles to complete their mission; the Army designates them as 'light' divisions. All four of these divisions are capable of conducting the GRF mission if the method of infiltration is by ground, air assault, or airland. But what happens if none of those options are feasible or timely? Only one division is capable of reaching an objective that is inaccessible by ground, out of refueling range of an air assault, and without an operational or capable airfield: the 82nd Airborne Division. The division's ability to deploy a combined arms team that is tailorable and scalable to the mission, whether it is combat or humanitarian, is not exclusive. But its ability to force entry by parachute assault is what makes it unique from any other conventional force in the Army's inventory and guarantees the rapid response required by the Department of Defense.

The remainder of the study will be organized into four sections. The first section will provide a brief history of the formation and employment of airborne units during World War II. The second section will discuss the criticisms faced by the airborne community after World War II, mainly due to their marginal employment success in combat. Acknowledging that there have been limited airborne operations in recent history, three case studies will then be presented where static-line parachute jumps were successfully utilized to achieve military objectives despite those criticisms. Although all of the case studies employ special operations forces, specifically units from the 75th Ranger Regiment, they highlight the advantages of quickly massing combat power on a drop zone by parachute assault. Lastly, this paper will address many of DeVore's most recent criticisms of the Army's airborne community and argue for why these units are not only necessary but must be retained in support of our national interests.

The Formation and Employment of Airborne Units During World War II

Airpower in World War II provided a proving ground for a new type of infantry soldier: the paratrooper. Before this conflict, ground commanders were limited in the manner that they could deploy their forces in theater. Regardless of their specialty (infantry, armor, field artillery, etc.), all of these forces moved in linear ground formations towards their objectives. If there were natural or manmade obstacles impeding their line of advance, their only means of negotiating those obstacles were to breach or bypass them. Sometimes these options were not viable, and ground forces spent many months fighting through trenches and mountains only to gain a meager advance. Furthermore, once a commander had located and fixed the enemy, attack from the rear was almost nonexistent because commanders knew that additional friendly divisions generally secured their rear.

With the expanded role of military aircraft and the invention of dependable parachutes, the concept of 'vertical envelopment' was theorized by military commanders and supported by political leaders such as Winston Churchill.[11] The ability to drop soldiers behind an enemy's seemingly impenetrable front lines would undoubtedly provide a marked advantage to the attacking force.[12] The introduction of the paratrooper would change a centuries-old mindset of warfare and provide commanders with a new means of insertion into remote or heavily defended areas of operation.[13]

Paratroopers were quickly seen as a strike-force unit, capable of being airdropped deep behind enemy lines and assaulting their way back out towards supporting friendly forces.[14] Unlike a ground assault where the disposition of the attacking force was relatively known,

[11] DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, 19.
[12] DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, 19.
[13] Gordon Rottman, "Airborne Warfare Tactics," in *Airborne: World War II Paratroopers in Combat*, ed. Julie Guard (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2007), 6.
[14] Rottman, "Airborne Warfare Tactics," 12.

paratroopers could rapidly deploy on any flank of an enemy's defense; these tactics would force enemy commanders to redistribute troops and assets to meet the new threat, which in theory would cause disorder and chaos within the enemy ranks. Because these advantages were appealing to commanders on the battlefield, airborne units were developed and utilized by both the Axis and Allied powers during World War II.

Although first conceived and tested by the Soviet Union, the German Luftwaffe was the first to introduce paratroopers in combat. Fallschirmjägers, literally translated as 'parachute hunters,' were light infantry troops that were specially trained to use static-line parachutes[15] from low-flying aircraft. Some of the earliest airborne operations conducted by the Luftwaffe were arguably seen as the most decisive and successful. A significant contributing factor to their initial success was the composition of their targets: lightly defended objectives in the neutral country of Norway.[16] On April 9, 1940, Fallschirmjägers conducted the first vertical envelopment to seize Sola Airfield, a strategic Norwegian airbase southwest of the city of Stavanger. When the Germans leaped from their planes in the early morning hours, they did so with a small company of Fallschirmjägers in relatively favorable light and wind conditions.[17] Once the airfield had been seized, the Germans were able to rapidly build combat power and establish a lodgment from which to conduct ground offensive operations; reinforcements and equipment were safely airlanded throughout the remainder of the day and into the night.[18] Although considered a significant loss for the Norwegians, it is essential to note that no country in the world had ever

[15] The term "static-line parachutes" almost exclusively refers to low-altitude, mass-exit parachute operations. This is in contrast to military freefall operations (HAHO or HALO), where static lines are rarely utilized.
[16] Roy M. Stanley, *Evolution of Airborne Operations, 1939–1945* (Pen & Sword Military, 2015), 35.
[17] Williamson Murray, "Airborne Comes of Age," World War II, vol. 18, no. 7, Mar. 2004, 29.
[18] Roger E. Bilstein, *Airlift and Airborne Operations in World War II (*Air Force History and Museums Program, 1998), 12.

trained to defend against an airborne attack; the Germans would continue to capitalize on this advantage throughout the remainder of that spring.

Emboldened by their success, the Fallschirmjägers were utilized one month later in support of the 10th Panzer Division's march south into Belgium. The Brandenburg Regiment conducted two simultaneous airborne operations; the first seized a series of bridges along the main avenue of advance, and the second jumped directly into the Belgian fortress of Eben Emael and seized it.[19] Both of these operations provided the 10th Panzer Division with the freedom of maneuver it desired to conduct its blitzkrieg tactics throughout the country. Shortly after that, on May 10, 1940, the Fallschirmjägers were used once again to support the panzers' advance into Holland. German paratroopers landed on an airfield near The Hague in an attempt to seize the Dutch capital, but their follow-on reinforcements were unable to airland before Dutch forces repelled the initial assault.[20] Despite the initial setback, the Fallschirmjägers' surprise attack from the air led Dutch military commanders to commit their strategic reserve to reinforce the capital. Unknown to them at the time, near-simultaneous airborne drops were being conducted by the Germans to seize key bridges throughout the Dutch countryside. Once again, the 10th Panzer Division was granted the freedom of maneuver it needed to rapidly advance towards The Hague and overwhelm the Dutch defenses. Within 24 hours of the initial assault, Holland surrendered.[21]

Successive German victories made the airborne concept a great interest to allied commanders. In June 1940, the United States Army developed the first airborne test platoon at Fort Benning, Georgia. Selected from over 200 volunteers from the 29th Infantry Regiment, two officers and 48 enlisted soldiers were chosen to begin parachute training. On August 16, 1940, the test platoon made their first static-line parachute jump over Lawson Airfield on Fort

[19] Murray, "Airborne Comes of Age," 30.
[20] DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, 20.
[21] Murray, "Airborne Comes of Age," 31.

Benning, Georgia; First Lieutenant William T. Ryder, the Platoon Leader, and Private William N. King became the first official officer and enlisted paratroopers in the United States Army. Shortly after their training was complete, the members of the test platoon served as the airborne training cadre for the newly formed 501st Parachute Infantry Battalion; this battalion was tasked with training additional paratroopers on Fort Benning to fill the newly designated or established airborne units. At the conclusion of World War II, over 100,000 paratroopers had been trained during the five-year period.

Not only did the Allied powers benefit significantly from observing the Fallschirmjägers successes of 1940, but they also became recipients of the German doctrinal manual for paratrooper operations in May 1941. Captured by the British during the German assault on the island of Crete, it was passed along to the Americans and used extensively to train the fledgling force of Allied sky soldiers.[22] After two years of intense training, the first division-sized airborne operation was conducted by the Allies on July 10, 1943 during the invasion of Sicily. Dropped at night in gale force winds, paratroopers and gliders were scattered all across the island—some many miles from their intended objectives.[23] Although the airdrop was considered a massive failure, Allied paratroopers were still able to incite mass chaos and confusion throughout the German and Italian defensive forces. Despite being separated from their assigned units, Allied paratroopers quickly formed into small teams on the drop zone and began conducting independent offensive operations; coastal defenses were attacked, lines of communication were disabled, and Axis patrols and positions were ambushed.[24] As daylight broke on the morning of July 11, the Allies had secured positions along the southern and eastern shores of the island and set the conditions for an amphibious landing at Gela. Recognizing that the Germans were

[22] Murray, "Airborne Comes of Age," 34.
[23] Bilstein, *Airlift and Airborne Operations in World War II*, 29.
[24] Murray, "Airborne Comes of Age," 34.

consolidating their forces and preparing to counterattack at Gela, Patton ordered the 504th Regimental Combat Team to conduct a follow-on parachute assault and reinforce the Allied lines.[25] Tragically, hundreds of American paratroopers and air crews were killed later that night, when 23 troop carriers were shot down in a friendly-fire incident during the mission.[26] Although the Allies suffered significant casualties in both drops on Sicily, the failure was written off by military commanders due to "a lack of experience rather than to a flawed concept."[27] Two months later, two regimental drops into Salerno secured key bridges and enabled the Allied advance from the Italian beachhead; both were considered successful progress.

The Allies continued to utilize airborne forces in high numbers throughout the remainder of the war. Operation Overlord in June 1944 served as their next major challenge: three divisions would be airdropped just inland of the amphibious landing sites at Normandy, France. Once again, severe weather conditions, poor aerial navigation, and withering enemy anti-aircraft fire wreaked havoc on the drop. Paratroopers and gliders were scattered throughout the French countryside, but the sky soldiers were victorious in seizing their intended bridgeheads, disrupting enemy lines of communication, and delaying German reinforcements from reaching the amphibious landing sites. The Allied airdrop during Operation Market-Garden served as the largest and one of the last notable airborne operations of World War II. Once again employing three airborne divisions, the results were mixed and highly disputed. A senior British commander, Lieutenant General Frederick Browning, was placed in charge of the more experienced American commander, Major General Matthew Ridgway. Subsequently, the British 1st Airborne Division (with minimal to no combat experience) was tasked as the main effort; the

[25] Bilstein, *Airlift and Airborne Operations in World War II,* 29.
[26] Stanley, *Evolution of Airborne Operations, 1939–194,* 88.
[27] Murray, "Airborne Comes of Age," 35.

American 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were given supporting roles.[28] Operating in broad daylight, the Allies were once again met with blistering German anti-aircraft fire on their way to the target; units were widely scattered, and the British became wholly cut off from ground reinforcement. Courage was not in short supply on the drop zone, but poor planning fated the mission from the outset.

Less widely known airborne missions during World War II were conducted by the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the British Special Operations Executive (SOE). Both of these intelligence agencies were responsible for conducting covert operations during the war, including reconnaissance, espionage, and subversion.[29] One of the most pivotal clandestine operations conducted in Europe, codenamed Operation Jedburgh, was initiated with small airborne operations into German-occupied France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Three-man teams consisting of a commander, executive officer, and radio operator were airdropped at night and then conducted link-up operations with local, partisan forces. Almost all of these airborne operations were successful; OSS and SOE teams were able to wait for suitable weather conditions to jump, single aircraft were able to penetrate enemy air defenses covertly, and their dispersion on the drop zone was minimal. These three factors for success are in stark contrast to the operations conducted by their military counterparts, which led to renewed criticism after the war.

[28] Ben Herndon, "An All-American's Adventure," World War II 21, no. 2, May 2006, 39.
[29] Tommaso Piffer, "Office of Strategic Services versus Special Operations Executive," Journal of Cold War Studies, vol. 17, no. 4, Fall 2015, 41.

Criticism of Airborne Operations After World War II

Following the conclusion of World War II, the airborne concept was met with a wide array of criticism. Initially utilized by the Germans as a method of inserting a company-sized element in broad daylight on an unsuspecting opponent, airborne operations ballooned into multi-division nighttime assaults on well-entrenched, experienced enemy units by the end of the war. Arguably, many of the operations that employed paratroopers could be characterized as battles of attrition, and military commanders seemed more concerned with saturating the objective with as many personnel as possible despite the risks associated with their assault. Much of DeVore's criticism of airborne units during the war centers on their inability to insert onto a target reliably, and therefore their untimeliness in achieving their tactical objectives. This criticism is also shared by my other military historians, including Daniel Haulman, who focuses most of his research on military airpower during the war.[30] In essence, most paratroopers were already at a significant disadvantage before they even exited the aircraft.

One of the first problems that plagued airborne operations was evident in the planning process: the lack of accurate intelligence for enemy and terrain conditions on the drop zone. Unknown to many airborne units were the composition and disposition of enemy forces on the objective. Not only did this impact the selection of the drop zones, but it also did not guarantee the proper dispersion of anti-tank weapons on the drop. Many paratroopers found themselves jumping directly into enemy assembly areas and main defensive lines; withering machine gun fire, minefields, and German artillery had a devastating effect on Allied forces before they were able to even get out of their parachute harnesses.[31] A second setback from poor intelligence was a misunderstanding of terrain. When most drop zones were selected for use, they appeared to be

[30] Daniel L. Haulman, "Before the D-Day Dawn: The Performance of the Troop Carriers at Normandy," Air Power History 61, no. 2, Summer 2014, 10.
[31] Herndon, "An All-American's Adventure," 38-39.

large open fields with multiple avenues of egress. However, what most paratroopers encountered were water-logged meadows, surrounded by thick hedgerows, and studded with natural and manmade obstacles.[32] Not only did this significantly impede the speed of paratroopers to reach their objectives, but it also hindered the successful link-up with their assigned units.

The air movement from Allied airfields to their intended drop zones was fraught with setbacks. First, airborne units were reliant on large formations of troop-carrying aircraft that posed a significant threat to their force. These transport aircraft were often enormous, slow, and minimally armed. When flying together in a large formation, they were an easy target for enemy fighter planes and anti-aircraft guns that were often guarding potential objectives. Haulman argues that the concentrated enemy fire and blinding effect of exploding flak caused most pilots to change course, adjust altitude, increase airspeed.[33] All three of these factors negatively affected the success of the airdrop for those planes that survived the barrage; many did not. Second, a lack of navigation technology and accurate meteorological intelligence from the drop zone often caused a wide dispersion of paratroopers on and off the objective. DeVore and Haulman both concur with this criticism: attempting to conduct a nighttime parachute assault with minimal ambient light, a lack of visible ground landmarks, and thick clouds that further restricted pilot visibility was a nearly impossible task.[34] There were many instances during World War II where Allied paratroopers landed miles from their intended objectives; during the invasion of Sicily, over eighty percent of the American force was dispersed between one and 65 miles away from their intended drop zone.[35] At Normandy, intelligence officers estimates that only one-third of the 216 troop transports used dropped accurately; over half the force dropped

[32] Alex Kershaw, "First In," World War II 34, no. 2, August 2019, 46.
[33] Haulman, "Before the D-Day Dawn: The Performance of the Troop Carriers at Normandy," 8.
[34] Haulman, "Before the D-Day Dawn: The Performance of the Troop Carriers at Normandy," 8.
[35] Herndon, "An All-American's Adventure," 36.

more than two miles from their intended targets.[36] This inability to reliably concentrate the force greatly hindered the paratroopers' ability to rapidly build combat power, which was no fault of their own.

DeVore offers two primary criticisms of the paratroopers in World War II once they finally landed: their lack of rapid mobility and their relatively light weaponry. Both are certainly valid for the time; paratroopers did not have many means to maneuver quickly over land, and they lacked sufficient organic firepower to defeat enemy armor and artillery.[37] Gliders were later introduced to airland small jeeps and howitzers on the drop zone, but those efforts were marginally successful for many of the same reasons listed previously. Therefore, most airborne units could only move as fast as they could march on foot. Navigating on unfamiliar terrain, in total darkness, also slowed the paratroopers' rate of advance. This often provided the enemy with some reaction time after the initial assault to reposition and forward reinforcements. Lastly, the small arms that paratroopers carried were woefully inadequate to defeat many of the German defenses that they encountered. Armed with only the weapons that they could exit the aircraft with, airborne units were typically outgunned by "standard infantry divisions and exceedingly vulnerable to attacks by enemy armored units."[38]

All of these factors led many nations to reevaluate the value added by airborne units in their formations. Countries such as the Soviet Union and Germany, two of the original pioneers of airborne operations, completely suspended airborne operations at the end of the war; Japan followed suit.[39] The United States, however, was in great conflict over what it should do with its newly developed capability. Although airborne insertions were primarily considered a failure

[36] Haulman, "Before the D-Day Dawn: The Performance of the Troop Carriers at Normandy," 10.
[37] DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, 21.
[38] DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, 21.
[39] DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, 24.

during the war, the ferocity and valor of paratroopers once they hit the ground was something that could not be ignored. Haulman references General Kurt Student, "the foremost German authority on airborne operations in World War II," and his evaluation of Allied paratroopers at the invasion of Normandy.[40] According to Student, the "U.S. airborne operation substantially speeded the Allies' taking of initial objectives and significantly reduced the American casualties on the Utah beach landings."[41] Additionally, most of the smaller-scale airborne operations during the war, specifically those of the Germans to seize key terrain such as airfields and bridges, were widely successful. DeVore notes that because these "certain smaller operations succeeded" and advancements in military technology were in production, there was a renewed appetite amongst American military commanders to retain the airborne concept.[42]

Recent Case Studies

Despite the decision to retain America's airborne capability, the decade that followed World War II saw massive reductions in the force. When the Army elected to downsize from 89 divisions to 11, its airborne divisions were also reduced from five down to one.[43] Additionally, only three major airborne operations were conducted over the next forty years: two in Korea and one during Vietnam. Surprisingly, none of these operations seized on the lessons learned from World War II. All three were utilized to drop large numbers of paratroopers deep behind enemy lines to either cut off a retreating enemy or conduct deep offensive operations; none were used to capture key terrain such as an airfield and rapidly build combat power through airlands. Decades later, DeVore still attributes the lack of utilization to the "poor performance of airborne forces

[40] Haulman, "Before the D-Day Dawn: The Performance of the Troop Carriers at Normandy," 12.
[41] Haulman, "Before the D-Day Dawn: The Performance of the Troop Carriers at Normandy," 12.
[42] DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, 26.
[43] DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, 59.

during the Second World War." But alternate hypotheses not discussed by DeVore certainly exist, to include an entirely different terrain landscape and enemy compared to that encountered in the European campaign.[44] In his study, DeVore characterizes the evolution of airborne forces post-1945 as follows:

> Airborne forces gradually retreated from being a participant in great power conflicts to a resource for counterinsurgency campaigns in the 1950s, until finally being relegated, in the 1960s, to the status of an intervention force for use against unsophisticated opponents in underdeveloped countries. This process reached completion in the late-1970s, and, since 1978, no state has used paratroopers to achieve vital objectives. The two US airborne operations conducted since 1978 - Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989) - saw these elite forces employed in permissive environments, against poorly equipped opponents whose defeat would have been secured without airborne troops' involvement.[45]

This section will introduce three case studies where American airborne operations have been utilized since 1983, beginning with the United States' invasion of Grenada. The purpose of these case studies is to highlight the differences from the airborne operations previously discussed in this paper, specifically: the technological advancements, the size of the assault force, the composition of the enemy, and the stated mission and outcome. While all three of the case studies involve operations conducted by 75th Ranger Regiment, the assets utilized are not unique to U.S. Special Operations Command and could have arguably been conducted by a conventional airborne force. In fact, several battalions from the 82nd Airborne Division were dropped in one of the case studies (Panama) and were prepared to drop in another (Grenada).

Operation Urgent Fury, Grenada, 1983

The Caribbean nation of Grenada experienced a Marxist coup in the summer of 1979. Maurice Bishop, the leader of the People's Revolutionary Government, assumed power. Four

[44] DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, 25.
[45] DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, 25.

years later, in the fall of 1983, internal fighting within the government became violent; Prime Minister Bishop was executed, and a Revolutionary Military Council was established. Hudson Austin, the self-appointed chairman of the council, was widely opposed by the citizens of Grenada and violent protests broke out across the island. Concerned with the safety of nearly 600 American medical students on the island, President Ronald Regan ordered the deployment of the nation's global response force to secure and evacuate them.

On 25 October 1983, the United States conducted the fourth airborne operation since World War II into Grenada.[46] Originally intending to conduct an air-land operation at Point Salines Airport, 1st Ranger Battalion was forced to execute a low-light parachute drop when they received intelligence that obstacles were strewn across the flight landing strip. Before their arrival to the drop zone, Air Force AC-130 gunships conducted preparatory fires on the airfield to neutralize several ZSU-23 antiaircraft guns and armored personnel carriers (APC) that were there in defensive positions. At approximately 0500 hours, two companies of rangers executed a low-altitude static-line parachute jump onto the airfield. The rangers met enemy resistance upon landing, in the form of small arms and APC fire from trained Cuban soldiers and local militias but eliminated the threats with their own small arms and anti-armor weaponry – all of which was jumped in on the assault. Second Ranger Battalion quickly followed with their airborne assault; by 1000 hours, the airfield was secure, and the flight landing strip was cleared of all obstacles and debris. Taking defense positions around the airfield, the rangers set the conditions for a rapid buildup of combat power on the airfield. By 1400 hours, one regiment from the 82nd Airborne Division airlanded at Point Salines and prepared to conducted offensive operations in support of the other missions on the island.

[46] Edgar F. Raines, "Four Perspectives on the Importance of Operation Urgent Fury." *Army History*, no. 72 (2009), 7.

The airborne assault at Point Salines Airport served as a stark contrast to every other airborne operation conducted by the U.S. military in its history. First and foremost, it responds to DeVore's primary criticism of World War II paratroopers, which was their inability to insert onto a target and achieve their tactical objectives reliably. In Grenada, the invasion force was able to collect a significant amount of intelligence about their target before they left their departure airfields, and they were even able to conduct in-route revisions to the plan (jump versus airland) as new intelligence was gathered mid-flight about the status of the flight landing strip. All of the aircraft that were utilized to drop the rangers were equipped with global positioning satellite systems, a technological advancement of the 1970s, and night vision goggles to better aid the pilots on their approach to the target. This greatly improved the accuracy of the airdrops; all of the rangers landed on the airfield and were able to consolidate and maneuver to their objectives quickly.

Another reason for the success at Point Salines was the Army's ability to tailor and scale the assault force to meet the requirements of the mission. Battalions from the 75th Ranger Regiment and 82nd Airborne Division were chosen to conduct the operation, a vast difference with the division-sized airborne assaults seen in World War II. These paratroopers were also much better equipped than their predecessors; they each carried personal night vision devices to aid in their rapid movement at night, and better anti-tank weapons to neutralize the APC and armor threat on the drop zone. Although DeVore argues that the rangers fought "poorly equipped opponents," well-trained Cuban soldiers aided in defense of the airfield. They were also concerned enough about the possibility of airland operations that they rendered the flight landing strip inoperable in preparation for the American assault. Without an airborne capability, the U.S. military would not have been able to exercise its branch plan in-flight and conduct a parachute

assault; the aircraft carrying hundreds of rangers would have had to return to the departure airfield, and other means of insertion would have had to been considered. Instead, within five hours, the rangers were able to neutralize the enemy threat at Point Salines, secure the airfield, and clear the flight landing strip of all obstacles and debris. The airlands that followed brought in large amounts of personnel and equipment to reinforce the assault force, which aided in the quick end to the conflict.

Operation Just Cause, Panama, 1989

Manuel Noriega, a career military officer and the Chief Executive Officer of Panama, posed a severe problem to the United States in 1989. Threatening the lives of 35,000 American civilians and military personnel living in Panama and challenged the neutrality of the Panama Canal, Noriega became a prime concern of the Bush Administration.[47] Therefore, in December of 1989, the United States invaded Panama with over 50,000 troops in *Operation Just Cause.*

At approximately 0200 hours on December 20, 1989, rangers from the 75th Ranger Regiment and paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division's "ready brigade" conducted a low-altitude static-line parachute jump onto Torrijos International Airfield. The rangers once again landed first, with the mission of clearing the airfield's hangars and terminals. In addition to being an international airport, Torrijos served as a garrison for the Panamanian Army's 2nd Infantry Company and the headquarters for the Panamanian Air Force.[48] A brigade of paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division followed shortly after that, with the tasks of reinforcing the rangers, blocking Panamanian reinforcements, and preparing to assault follow-on objectives.

[47] Ved Nanda, "The Validity of United States Intervention in Panama Under International Law." *The American Journal of International Law* 84, no. 2 (1990), 494.
[48] Kyle Rempfer, "Soldiers Recall Combat Jumps Into Panama On 30th Anniversary," *The Army Times,* December 20, 2019. https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/12/20/soldiers-recall-combat-jumps-into-panama-on-30th-anniversary/.

Following the airborne assault onto Torrijos International Airfield, the Panamanian Defense Forces initiated a counterattack with mechanized infantry forces. Although the rangers and paratroopers had light anti-armor weaponry, close air support provided by AC-130 gunships was essential for neutralizing the armored threat.[49] Once the 82nd Airborne Division had established a command post on the airfield, paratroopers began to assault secondary objectives off of the airfield to destroy additional Panamanian military garrisons. Within 48-hours of the initial airborne assault, all of the major garrisons had been seized by the paratroopers.

The airborne assault into Panama was the largest combat jump conducted by the United States since Operation Market Garden in World War II.[50] The military continued to capitalize on all of the technological advancements and tactics employed during the invasion of Grenada; paratroopers were accurately dropped on the intended drop zone, rapidly assembled to build combat power, and then decisively assaulted their assigned targets. But prior to the assault, intelligence of enemy assets on the objective played an integral role during the planning process. For the first time in an airborne operation, pre-assault fires were synchronized with the assault to soften the Panamanian Defenses. AC-130 aircraft, armed with a pair of 25mm gatling guns and a 105mm cannon, were essential in neutralizing enemy armor assets and hardened defensive positions before the rangers and paratroopers exited their aircraft. Once on the ground, AC-130s continued to provide close air support as the assault force maneuvered towards their objectives. Not only did this aid in the seizure of Torrijos International Airfield, but the coordinated airpower also helped to repel reinforcements and counterattacks from the Panamanians. The introduction of air power in conjunction with an airborne assault now proved that paratroopers were capable of reliably attacking targets reinforced with tanks and armored personnel carriers.

[49] Rempfer, "Soldiers Recall Combat Jumps Into Panama On 30th Anniversary."
[50] Rempfer, "Soldiers Recall Combat Jumps Into Panama On 30th Anniversary."

Operation Rhino, Afghanistan, 2001

Shortly after the attacks on 11 September 2001, rangers from 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment were tasked to secure a foothold in Afghanistan near Kandahar. An unimproved flight landing strip, codenamed Objective Rhino, was selected for seizure by the rangers; it would later be utilized as a forward aerial refuel/rearm point (FARP) for a nearby operation codenamed Operation Gecko.

On the night of 19 October 2001, approximately 200 rangers conducted a low-altitude static-line parachute jump from four MC-130 Combat Talon aircraft. Aided by preparatory fires from B-2 stealth bombers and AC-130 gunships, the rangers met minimal resistance on the drop zone. In addition to securing and assessing the flight landing strip, the rangers were tasked with three additional missions: destroy any remaining Taliban forces on the objective, gather intelligence, and establish a FARP.[51] The rangers completed their assigned missions in short order, boarded several MC-130 aircraft that landed on the FLS, and exfiltrated off of the objective.

What distinguishes the airborne operation on Operation Rhino from those conducted in Grenada and Panama was the type of enemy force encountered on the objective. Rather than facing a more conventional military force supported by anti-aircraft and armored assets, the rangers encountered minimal Taliban resistance with no real anti-access / area-denial capability. However, what the airborne insertion allowed the rangers to do was mass a sizeable force onto an objective that was necessary for the successful prosecution of a secondary target. The FARP on Objective Rhino allowed multiple aircraft to refuel and rearm during the assault on Objective Gecko, which was an effort to capture high-ranking Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar.[52]

[51] Donald Wright, *A Different Kind of War* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010), 95.
[52] Wright, *A Different Kind of War*, 96.

Although Omar was not captured because he was not on the objective, the rangers were able to gather significant intelligence from his compound before their exfil.[53]

Although some may argue that airborne forces were used unnecessarily during Operation Rhino, the mission was intended to deliver a psychological impact on the enemy.[54] The day following Operation Rhino, General Tommy Franks, the Central Command Commander, described it as a mission to prove to the Taliban "that we will go anywhere we choose to go."[55] Maintaining an airborne capability certainly provides commanders with that level of flexibility when determining how to infiltrate a target and achieve their military objectives. Consequently, Objective Rhino was later recaptured by U.S. Marines and established into a forward operating base. Camp Rhino and its flight landing strip would prove essential in the preparation to seize Kandahar Airfield, which was located less than 50 miles away and has been used extensively during the United States' prolonged war in Afghanistan.

Looking Ahead: How an Airborne Force Can Answer America's Future Challenges

Despite the advancements since World War II and the case studies presented, criticism still exists for maintaining a conventional airborne force in the 21st century. The following factors must be acknowledged: significant advancements in our adversaries' early detection and warning systems, advanced A2AD capabilities, and extended weapons engagement ranges. While not wholly unmitigable, all of these factors certainly impact the employment of an airborne force. As DeVore argues in his study: airborne BCTs are utterly ineffective if their aircraft never reach the drop zone. And although that is true, this criticism equally applies across America's joint force.

[53] Wright, *A Different Kind of War*, 96.
[54] Wright, *A Different Kind of War*, 96.
[55] Wright, *A Different Kind of War*, 96.

Many of the United States' adversaries have invested heavily in long-range precision fires to deny access to airborne and maritime forces. Not only are these fires accurate, but they are numerous; current adversaries have the potential to overwhelm our current air defense capabilities and inflict significant damage to the joint force. Any joint forcible entry against a near-peer competitor would require the United States to commit our forces inside of our adversary's weapons engagement zone, exposing them to effective and withering firepower. If our airborne, maritime, or ground forces become combat-ineffective and incapable of conducting entry, then their combat power and capability after entry becomes irrelevant.

Acknowledging this reality, it is highly unlikely that an airborne assault will be used as initially intended during World War II: in high-intensity conflict against a near-peer competitor. More likely, airborne units will find themselves engaged with hybrid threats, insurgencies, militias, and forces with degraded or limited A2AD capability. This, however, does not diminish their relevance on today's modern battlefield; airborne forces are still a valuable capability to a combatant commander for a variety of reasons.

First and foremost, airborne forces have the versatility to be deployed anywhere in the world that is accessible by air. While amphibious forces are limited to the littorals and air assault units are limited by the range of their helicopters, paratroopers can be dropped in almost any type of terrain across the globe. This greatly extends the power projection of any combatant commander and allows them to place troops on the ground in regions that were previously inaccessible by ground movement. Because almost all airborne operations take place on a pre-existing airfield or in an area where a flight landing strip can expediently be established, airborne assaults also open up the ability to rapidly build combat power through follow-on airland operations. Not only does this allow the airborne force to deliver additional forces onto the

objective, but it also enables non-air droppable assets such as helicopters, tanks, armored vehicles, and non-airborne qualified personnel to be delivered to the objective. These assets can provide the air cover, armored capability, and personnel necessary to strike secondary and tertiary targets off the initial airborne objective and achieve greater force superiority against an adversary.

Second, a conventional airborne BCT is a combined arms force that delivers much greater organic combat power than their unconventional counterparts. Although the 75th Ranger Regiment and other special operations units are elite strike forces, they lack many of the combat enablers that are present in an airborne BCT. Each airborne BCT is comprised of three infantry battalions, a cavalry squadron, a field artillery battalion, an engineer battalion, a sustainment battalion, and a robust brigade headquarters. Some critics such as DeVore would argue that maintaining brigade-sized airborne units is unnecessary, as they will most likely never conduct an airborne operation in mass. However, their assortment of combat power and enablers makes the brigade a scalable and tailorable asset, capable of meeting the requirements for any mission. Unlike special operations units, airborne BCTs are also better postured to sustain themselves for more prolonged conflicts, mainly when follow-on missions include defensive or stability operations.

Third, airborne BCTs from the 82nd Airborne Division comprise the nation's global response force. Because of their ability to outload a battalion within 18-hours of notification and the remainder of the brigade within 96-hours, airborne units are rapidly deployable to address the needs of a combatant commander. No other brigade combat team is capable of outloading and deploying as quickly, and none are capable of guaranteeing their infiltration to locations that are inaccessible by ground or amphibious assault. DeVore questions the need for maintaining an

entire airborne division in his study, but it is necessary if one wants to maintain a capability such as the global response force. While one BCT assumes the responsibility of the 'ready brigade,' the other two BCTs are required to support that mission: one is conducting training to assume the responsibility, and the other is actively preparing to outload the 'ready brigade' in the event of a deployment. This rotation of responsibility occurs every nine to twelve months and ensures that the President always has the capability at their disposal; no country other than the United States maintains such a force.

Fourth, airborne BCTs are a great asset to utilize during non-combatant evacuations and humanitarian assistance operations. There is great utility in being able to force entry to places that have no functioning roads or airfields, such as in the wake of a natural disaster. An expeditionary force that can conduct forcible entry operations can provide material support, render aid, and evacuate victims (as necessary) promptly after a crisis. The 82nd Airborne Division was mobilized to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2006, to Haiti after the earthquake in 2010, and to Puerto Rico after the hurricane in 2017. Although no airborne operations were conducted in the previous examples, they easily could have been if access by other means was unavailable.

Fifth, airborne BCTs provide significant value for the cost of maintaining them, especially compared to the other BCT variants on active duty. Lieutenant General Joseph Anderson, former commander of the Army's XVIII Airborne Corps, noted that an airborne brigade costs about ten percent more to maintain than a comparable light infantry brigade, but roughly two-thirds less than a mechanized or armored BCT.[56] Considering that mechanized and armor BCTs outnumber airborne BCTs by at least three to one, the additional cost spent on maintaining our airborne force is minimal. Evaluated in dollars, it takes an additional $2.2

[56] Jahner, "Does The Army Need Airborne."

million annually to maintain an airborne brigade over a light infantry brigade.[57] At that rate, it's cheaper for the Army to maintain the airborne capability in all five of its airborne BCTs for a three year period than purchase one AH-64E Apache helicopter - valued over $35 million. Arguably, the cost is well worth the added capability of 25,000 paratroopers.

Sixth, airborne units historically serve as a proving ground for the military's future elite warriors and leaders. The airborne community prides itself on being a highly trained, disciplined, and physically fit organization that routinely operates (and succeeds) in dynamic and challenging situations. Leaders are empowered at the lowest level to take initiative and make decisions and are comfortable with operating in small teams that may be under-resourced. Therefore, there is a significant emphasis placed on furthering military education across the airborne community; paratroopers are encouraged (and expected) to attend leadership schools such as Ranger School and Sapper School, qualification courses such as Jumpmaster School and Pathfinder School, and additional training that increases their occupational specialty capabilities. Unlike many other conventional units across the Army, airborne units call upon these skillsets from their paratroopers on a daily basis when conducting both training and real-world operations; they are not just badges and tabs that serve as resume builders. Therefore, when the special operations community recruits future green berets and rangers, it should not be any surprise that many come from units like the 82nd Airborne Division. Not only have junior leaders within the airborne community typically received more specialized training than their peers, but they have already developed a comfort for thinking and operating in ways that those elite units have deemed desirable.

The totality of these factors strengthens the argument that airborne BCTs have more than just an institutional role in America's military force (as DeVore suggests). The unfortunate

[57] Jahner, "Does The Army Need Airborne."

prevalence of global instability requires the United States military to maintain such a capability to conduct rapid, forcible entry operations. Weak governance, the proliferation of arms, weapons of mass destruction, uneven economic recovery, humanitarian and natural disasters, resource scarcity, and energy dependency are just a few examples that have the potential to cause regional conflict and prompt a military response. All of these mission sets require a highly trained, disciplined, and expeditionary fighting force that is always prepared to deploy and gain access; airborne units provide that capability and therefore should remain as a tool in America's arsenal.

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