
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the first October session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speaker is Jerry Devlin author of *Back to Corregidor*. He is joined by veterans of the 11th Airborne Division to discuss the vertical assaults in the Philippines and early security in Japan.

The old cliché 'Necessity is the mother of invention' was never more true than after four years of senseless slaughter on the Great War's Western Front. All the great powers desperately searched for ways to break through the stalemate. The Germans had some successes with stormtroop infiltration tactics but did not have the logistical capacity to capitalize on the openings they created. In the fall of 1918 Colonel William P. "Billy" Mitchell, who at the time was General John Pershing's air service advisor in France, proposed the idea of gathering all the Allied bombers, loading them with men armed with submachine guns who would be dropped by parachutes behind enemy lines to attack rear echelons. The men would be supported by fighter planes until supporting forces arrived. Pershing approved the plan and it was set for the spring of 1919, but the war ended before it could be executed.

During the inter-war years the two international pariahs, the Soviet Union and Germany, seized on and developed the concept of "vertical envelopment," that is, parachuting infantry troops behind enemy lines to surprise and envelope an opposing force. By 1935, the Soviet Union had battalion sized parachute troops engaging in mass jumps and had even perfected parachuting a tank unto a battlefield. During the 1930s the French, Italians, and Germans all opened military jump schools. The German paratroopers (*fallschirmjäger*) quickly increased first to regimental and then expanded to divisional strength. In May of 1940 the Germans made the first combat use of paratroopers and glider-borne troops in combat in their attack on the Netherlands, seizing and holding bridges until the infantry forces could catch up. In addition German forces were also able to seize and take the Belgian fortress of Eben Emael. A year later the Germans followed these victories up with the

first major airborne operation in history with the invasion of Crete. Maneuver and movement would be the hallmark of the Second World War, and infantry would no longer be continuously sent "over the top" to be slaughtered.

While Billy Mitchell had a good idea at the end of the Great War, the United States lagged far behind the other Great Powers in establishing anything that could conceivably be an airborne unit. What changed was the appointment of General George C. Marshall as the Army Chief of Staff in April 1939. After reading reports from his military attaché in Germany about their development of paratrooper and glider projects, Marshall requested a study on the feasibility of similar American troops. The different sections of the Army fought over who would be in charge of these new units, the engineers wanted them because the soldiers would have to be trained in explosives, the air unit because they would have to jump out of airplanes, and the infantry wanted them to be part of the ground forces. The infantry ultimately won out, but it was not until July 1940 that the First Parachute Test Platoon was formed.

While they started late, the United States proved capable of catching up fast. Once it entered World War II, the United States raised five airborne divisions, the 11th, 13th, 17th, 82nd, and 101st. The 17th, 82nd, and 101st all saw action in the European Theater of Operations. The 11th and 13th were held in reserve in the United States. The 13th was deployed to Europe it did not see combat.

The 11th Airborne, nicknamed "The Angels," was sent to the Pacific Theater of Operations in early 1944, to New Guinea for intensive jungle training. In November 1944, the Angels landed (in a conventional infantry role) at Leyte Beach in the Philippines. In January, the two glider regiments, operating as infantry, landed on Luzon and fought their way inland, while the paratroop regiment finally conducted a combat drop on Tagaytay Ridge, fortunately unopposed since Filipino forces had secured the target landing zone, but several hundred men were dispersed by jump master errors. After the Liberation of Manila, two companies of paratroopers raided the Los Baños internment camp, liberating some 2,000 civilians. Their final combat in the Islands was near Aparri in support of Filipino and American forces fight-

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

