

The First Airborne Infantry “Test Platoon”



In June of 1940, the US War Department created an Airborne Infantry “Test Platoon” at Fort Benning, GA. This test platoon was composed of 2 officers and 48 enlisted soldiers from Fort Benning’s 29th Infantry Regiment. First Lieutenant William T. Ryder was the test platoon’s leader and also considered the first American paratrooper.

Lieutenant Colonel William C. Lee, was intently interested in the test platoon, and he recommended that the men be moved to the Safe Parachute Company at Hightstown, NJ for training on the parachute drop towers used during the New York World’s Fair. Eighteen days after organization, the platoon was moved to New Jersey and trained for one week on the 250-foot towers.

Less than 50 days after being organized, the first official jump from an airplane was made by the Test Platoon from a Douglas B-18 over Lawson Field on August 16, 1940. Prior to this drop, the platoon held a lottery to determine what lucky soldier would follow Lieutenant Ryder out of the airplane. Private William N. “Red” King won this lottery and became the first enlisted man of the test platoon to jump out of an airplane.

Today, the 1st Battalion (Airborne), 507th Infantry Regiment has the responsibility to conduct the U.S. Army Airborne School. Army Airborne School, also called “Jump School”, is where students learn how to jump out of aircraft, navigate by using a parachute, and then land on the ground and move on to combat objectives.