



From left to right: CPT Ian Barron, CPT Brenda Lin, CPT Jessica Hayashida, CPT Lauren Carlile, and PVT2 Brian Nyborg at their Airborne School graduation at Fort Benning, GA. (Photo courtesy of author)

Pivotal Perspective

Prosecutor or Paratrooper?

By Captain Brenda Lin

“What do you want to be?”
“Airborne!”
“What do you truly want to be?”
“Super, duper Paratrooper!”
“What are you right now?”
“Dirty, nasty leg.”¹

You learn this call and response on day one of the Army’s Airborne School. As I drove seven and a half hours from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to Fort Benning, Georgia, I resolved to document my experiences and reflect upon the differences between those of Airborne School to those as a first-term trial counsel.

I have always wanted to try skydiving. I will try anything once. I told myself, “Well,

if the Army will let me go for free, I might as well go through the Army.” It was not always something I felt compelled to pursue, but I was grateful when presented with the opportunity. I could say the same for becoming a trial counsel and going to trial. I never thought of myself as a litigator, but I knew that if given the opportunity, I would make the most of it. The nerves surrounding jumping out of an airplane must be on par with those that come with going to trial; getting yelled at by the cadre must feel a lot like being admonished by a judge; and training in the 95-degree Georgia heat can’t be that different than enduring the the marathon of sleepless nights and long days in court, right?

I was excited. I had patiently waited almost two and a half years at XVIII Airborne Corps to go to Airborne School. Once I finally got my slot, I had little time to react. I was due to report to the school in three days. This quick turnaround is similar to when our Trial Defense Service teammates file a late-notice motion, sometimes just days before trial, and you spend what little time you have left to prepare for trial focused on the motions. I spent those three days haphazardly packing, finding and preparing coverage for all my work, and settling my affairs.²

You might think that after nine years in the Army I would know what to expect at Airborne School, but I did not. Some colleagues sent encouraging texts, comparing it to a three-week-long vacation. Others advised me to keep my feet and knees together. Like a trial, you do everything possible to get ready, but nothing will prepare you for how your body will respond as you fling yourself out of a door in the sky.

We spent the first day outdoors learning about harnesses, then wearing them, learning how to walk on an aircraft, and then jumping out of mock aircraft doors on the ground. We wore our advanced combat helmets (ACHs) and ran from the company footprint

to the training area, which at times required all-out sprints. We sprinted to the training areas right after breakfast and lunch. The cadre ridiculed those who fell out during the 400-meter sprint. At the end of day one, my appreciation for full-time paratroopers deepened, and I felt grateful for my day job. I slapped some BioFreeze on my calves and went to bed early.

On day two, we jumped out of thirty-four-foot towers and applied what we learned the previous day. We learned to trust the cadre because our lives were in their hands. I spent the morning on a detail assisting other students with their harnesses. I spoke with all types of Soldiers: a noncommissioned officer (NCO) who played a mini tuba in the 282d Army Band at Fort Jackson, a motivated private who had to jump a dozen times because he made a mistake every try, and a trauma surgeon who needed to get stitches after one of his jumps. The surgeon was okay! After a few hours' absence, he was back to training to finish jumping out of the towers.

At the end of day two, spirits were high. As trial counsel, we often encounter Soldiers during some of the most difficult moments of their careers. I did not realize how much that perspective weighed on me until I had the opportunity to meet some of my classmates at Airborne School. Everyone volunteered to be there, and some had waited years to be there. One NCO told me that Airborne School was his school of choice for winning NCO of the Year. I also developed a tremendous respect for the cadre running the school. There is something to be said about a handful of staff sergeants training 400 students through the towers, grading, and ensuring each student jumps at least five times satisfactorily.

The rest of week one consisted of learning how to perform a proper parachute landing fall (PLF) from a stationary position, a standing position, from two- to four-foot walls, and finally from a moving apparatus. This type of training took a deliberate, structured approach, employing a crawl-walk-run method.

Week two consisted of mass jumps out of the towers again and using the improved swing-landing trainer (ISLT). The ISLT was intimidating, and I sustained my first injury when the risers slipped out of my hands so quickly they tore the skin off. The cadre

were generous and put a Band-Aid on my finger. There are certainly fewer injuries in a courtroom, and they are mostly metaphorical and only to my ego and pride.

During jump week, week three, we spent hours in the harness shed with our main parachute (thirty-eight pounds) and reserve parachute (fifteen pounds) while waiting for our turn to jump out of a C-130. When the moment came, I shuffled to the ramp of the plane. I was parched because once we were rigged up and checked by a jumpmaster, we couldn't use the latrines. Luckily, adrenaline kicked in once we began boarding the plane. The C-130 took off, and within a few minutes, we were already over the drop zone. We jumped out consecutively in groups of fifteen before the plane turned around for another pass.

By now, we had practiced jumping out of mock doors for two weeks. I heard the prefatory commands: "Ten minutes," "Get ready," "Hook up," "Check equipment," "Sound off for equipment check," "One minute," "Thirty seconds," "Standby," and "Go." This time, I could barely make out the commands over the sound of the wind rushing from the open aircraft door and the noise from the aircraft. Even so, I knew it was coming.

I saw one after another of my classmates hand their static line to the jumpmaster and jump out of the door, and I knew my turn was quickly approaching. I repeated the correct body position for a proper exit in my head: chin tucked, elbows tight to the body, eyes on the horizon, feet and knees together, and a good up six inches, out thirty-six inches exit from the aircraft. All of the reps, gear, and training felt worthwhile as my body knew what to do and I landed safely on the ground.

Looking back, the entire two weeks leading up to jump week focused on training two key skills: proper exit from an aircraft and proper landing fall. If you drill these two things enough, you significantly reduce the risk of severe injury. Many paratroopers may go their entire careers without needing to exercise the more advanced techniques, which require reacting when collisions, entanglements, or malfunctions occur while in the air. However, the actions to take are all textbook and do not change.



Soldiers train on the tower during their second week of Airborne School. (Credit: SGT Danielle Hendrix)

Ultimately, trial and jumping out of planes are different experiences, connected perhaps by the surge of adrenaline. While the physical and mental demands of trial and Airborne School differ, judge advocates in Airborne units just might get the unique opportunity to experience both. Whether airborne or in the courtroom, I've learned that success relies on trusting the process, making the most of the opportunity presented, and ensuring you are prepared when it's your turn to "go." **TAL**

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Notes

1. For extra effect, the cadre instructed the students to look down at their boots when they said "dirty, nasty leg" and to sound unmotivated.
2. This primarily meant finding someone to care for my dog for three weeks.