

The 101st Airborne Division: “A Rendezvous with Destiny!”

The 101st Airborne Division was activated on 16 August 1942 at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana in response to Nazi Germany’s global ambitions and existential threat to the Westernized world. Its first commander, Major General William C. Lee, noted at the time that the 101st had no history, but it had “A Rendezvous with Destiny.” General Order No. 5 gave birth to the division and reads, in part,

...Due to the nature of our armament, and the tactics we shall perfect ourselves, we shall be called upon to carry out operations of far-reaching military importance and we shall habitually go into action when the is immediate and extreme. Let me call your attention to the fact that our badge is the great American eagle. This is a fitting emblem for a division that will crush its enemies by falling upon them like a thunderbolt from the skies. The history we shall make, the record of high achievement we hope to write in the annals of the American Army and the American people, depends wholly and completely on the men of this division. Each individual, each officer and each enlisted man, must therefore regard himself as a necessary part of a complex and powerful instrument for the overcoming of the enemies of the nation...

The 101st moved to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for training and successfully demonstrated its readiness during the Tennessee maneuvers of 1943. Embarking from Camp Shanks (NY) in September, the 101st continued training in England until D-Day, 6 June 1944, when its pathfinders became the first Americans to set foot in occupied France. Following them, the Screaming Eagles parachuted into Normandy and cleared the way for 1st and 4th Infantry Divisions at Omaha and Utah beaches. After 33 days of continuous fighting, including a bitter battle for the town of Carentan, the 101st returned to England to prepare for future airborne operations.

- On 17 September 1944, the 101st jumped into Holland during Operation Market Garden. Holding a narrow corridor 16 miles long through enemy territory, from Eindhoven to Grave, it came to be known as “Hell’s Highway.” The division fought against heavy odds for ten days. The division then continued its role in the liberation of Holland, spending a total of 72 days in combat.
- In November 1944, the 101st returned to France for a well-deserved rest, only to be sent into action again in the Battle of the Bulge. While defending the critical transportation hub of Bastogne, Belgium, the 101st was surrounded by advancing enemy forces who demanded immediate surrender. The acting Division Commander, Brigadier General Anthony C. McAuliffe made history with his classic reply, “Nuts!” The siege was broken on 26 December 1944, but the fighting continued until 18 January 1945.
- After moving through Alsace and the Ruhr Valley, the 101st captured Hitler’s “Eagles’ Nest,” his mountain retreat at Berchtesgaden. And on 30 November 1945, eight months after the German surrender, the Screaming Eagles were inactivated.

The end of World War11 marked the beginning of an intermittent existence for the 101st – several times they were inactivated during the next two decades. Official reactivation ceremonies were held on 21 September 1956, making the 101st the Army’s first Pentomic Division and part of the United States Strategic Response Force in preparation for the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons on future battlefields.

The Screaming Eagles never failed to live up to General Lee’s prophetic statement of August 1942. During its baptism of fire during WW11, it achieved legendary status as an elite Airborne division, creating its storied history as it went. Today, it remains the only air assault division of the United States Army. It is one of its most deployed and recognized divisions; its distinguished combat record spans from the paratroopers of WW11 to the Security Force Assistance Teams of Afghanistan during the War on Terror.