

# Airborne!

Forty years ago, I became a chaplain in the United States Army. That fact came home to me as I prepared a talk to be given last Saturday at Fort Myer, Va., to past and present members of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the unit I served with in Vietnam in 1971.

In preparing my remarks, I rummaged through old notebooks to see if I could recapture the flavor of those early days in uniform. Sure enough, notes in a little brown book sketch my days from May 22 through June 11, 1971, the intensive period when I attended airborne training, or “jump school,” at Fort Benning, Ga. Saturday’s listeners seemed to enjoy some of my entries and I thought you might as well.

**May 22:** Got to Benning at 2:00 (rather, 1400hrs!) but had to take a physical aptitude test from a chaplain before signing in. He sent a PFC to give me the test. I did well - left him in the dust in the run. He was so tired he had a sneezing fit.

**May 24:** Offered the 10:30 Mass at the Main Post Catholic Chapel. Anxious to begin training tomorrow morning and reporting time is 0545. Our class is a large one, about 400 enlisted and over 160 officers. At 31, I am likely the oldest and surely the only chaplain. Got head shaved yesterday.

**May 28:** My “box number” (identification on helmet) is A144. This is the 40th class of the 44th company of the 4th battalion. I am in the 4th “stick” of the 4th platoon. And I haven’t seen a bookie all week!

**May 29:** The nation celebrates a holiday, Memorial Day. My 5th anniversary of ordination to priesthood. Next anniversary will probably find me in VN.

**June 2:** Rained most of the afternoon and drenched us. We continued through the torrents and were soaked thru many times over. Got another airborne haircut 3 days ago but had to do 10 push-ups for need of a haircut! Another 10 for “crooked gig line.” Never heard of it but discovered in the break what it meant. (I thought my dog tags were crooked.) *Gig line refers to the alignment of various points along one’s uniform.*

**June 8:** At 2017 hrs this day I left a C141 USAF jet 1200 feet in the air and landed hard and happily with a left side plf. A glorious feeling. I offered Mass this morning for a safe flight and fall. Prayers were answered. *PLF: Parachute Landing Fall.*

June 11: Graduated at 1100 hrs in Infantry Hall. Fr. Frank Dolan pinned on my wings. I was called to give the benediction.

Those four weeks would teach me the skills I needed to move around safely from place to place in unfamiliar and often hostile environments. Nothing I learned at “jump school,” however, could prepare me for the emotionally charged and spiritually rewarding experiences that awaited me.

Three years later, I returned to civilian life, grateful to have served, with a deepened and life-long respect for our military members and their families, and, I suspect, much the richer for the experience.

*Archbishop O’Brien has asked four individuals to serve as guest columnists in August. These columns will begin appearing in next week’s Review. His weekly column will resume in September.*