

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.