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Army airborne celebrates birthday

Low clouds keep paratroopers from their freefall parachute demonstration

By Sarah A. Reid

Staff writer

Hundreds of military men and women celebrated the 69th anniversary of the beginning of Army airborne forces Saturday at the Airborne & Special Operations Museum with cake, a remembrance ceremony and speeches from top commanders.

Notably absent from the National Airborne Day ceremony was the traditional freefall parachute demonstration. Heavy cloud cover did not provide enough of a ceiling, organizers said.

The activities marked the first jump by soldiers who would become the first Army paratroopers. Soldiers from a test platoon jumped on Aug. 16, 1940, at Lawson Army Airfield in Georgia.

Before the ceremony kicked off at 9 a.m., Maj. Gen. Daniel Allyn, of the 18th Airborne Corps, sent off more than 500 paratroopers to Iraq and Afghanistan, he said. He estimated another 6,000 paratroopers would join the roughly 11,000 paratroopers who are already overseas.

“As I think about what we really celebrate here today, we celebrate the spirit of volunteers who answer the call that included dangers that they could not fully comprehend,” Allyn said. “This morning, as I watched these young American heroes headed onto the aircraft, I decided, quite frankly, that spirit is alive and well in our nation.”

Two soldiers laid black roses on top of two stone memorials near the entrance to the museum to pay homage to the military dead.

Retired Gen. Dan K. McNeill, the keynote speaker, said he would spend the day remembering the selfless service of paratroopers.

“They will not give out,” he said. “They will not give in. And they will not leave their buddies behind.”

After the speeches, Cub Scout Leader Dilles Walker and about 10 boys from Pack 1 in Southern Pines made their way to a large cake. On a sculpture commemorating the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the scouts ate chocolate and vanilla cake from napkins.

Celebrating the anniversary was a no-brainer for Walker, a retired soldier.

“It is sentimental both ways, and it is a good event,” he said.

The air-conditioned museum provided a cool respite for many participants. Families quietly cruised alongside displays detailing paratroopers’ contributions in World War II, Vietnam and other conflicts.

Children were drawn to re-enactors and military displays set up outside the museum.

Inside a medical tent set up along Bragg Boulevard, members of the 541st Forward Surgical Team had carefully dressed a flank steak in a sterile sheet on a gurney. Groups of children and adults flocked to zap the meat with a cauterizing tool.

“Smells like surgery,” joked Spc. Jim Hahl, a medic.

Just outside the tent, 3-year-old Olivia Brouse stared down the scope of a machine gun on display.

“Are you going to shoot the bad guys?” asked her mother, Lisa.

Three boys in an adjacent tent pulled on a Howitzer’s cranks and yelled at each other while trying to align the barrel.

Spc. Darius Bennett was assigned to watch over the weapon. He smiled as the boys fussed over who was cranking too hard and who wasn’t cranking enough.

“It makes me feel good about what I do,” Bennett said while the boys played. “At least they get to enjoy themselves on a day like this. Maybe one day they will understand what this day is about.”

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