

Golden Brigade marks 50th anniversary of Vietnam deployment

By [Drew Brooks](#) Military editor
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Claud Dunn was dressed in his best sharkskin suit as he and a friend left their Fort Bragg barracks on Feb. 12, 1968.

Dunn, then a sergeant in the 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, was looking to head into Fayetteville, buy drinks and find a good time at establishments with names like Dew Drop Inn, the Parachute Bar or the Brass Whale.

“We were going down to party,” recalled Dunn, now a retired command sergeant major.

But Dunn’s fun would have to wait. Because on that day, 50 years ago, the Army had other plans for him and more than 3,500 other Fort Bragg paratroopers.

For the entirety of the Vietnam War to that point, the 82nd Airborne Division had been left on the sidelines, held in a strategic reserve on the strength of its unique ability to deploy anywhere in the world on short notice.

Days earlier, on Jan. 30, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces had launched the Tet Offensive, with tens of thousands of troops streaming south in a surprise attack that was the largest military campaign of the war at that point.

U.S. troops and their allies in the Republic of Vietnam were surprised. They needed help in pushing back the offensive and reclaiming territory the enemy had claimed.

Gen. William C. Westmoreland, commanding general of U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam, requested that additional combat forces be immediately deployed. At the same time, he asked that those forces be paratroopers.

With few options and after much debate, the 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division was selected for the mission.

The unit, led by then-Col. Alexander R. Bolling Jr., was alerted at 5:30 p.m. on Monday, Feb. 12, 1968.

It was not known at the time, but the brigade would spend the next 22 months in Vietnam. It would lose more than 220 paratroopers to enemy action. Many more would be wounded. But the losses would pale in comparison to the damage the brigade wrought on enemy forces, more than 1,000 of whom were killed in the first 10 months of the deployment.

Dunn and his friend heard the news of the pending deployment from an unexpected source, as they stepped out for their night on the town.

“We started to go out the front door and we ran into the biggest (military policemen) I had ever seen, sitting there with their M16s,” Dunn said. “They said, ‘You guys aren’t going anywhere. You’ve been alerted.’”

Dunn, who had been at Fort Bragg for about eight or nine months, returned to the barracks and began to pack.

In early 1968, being alerted for a mission was nothing new for 3rd Brigade.

Over the last several years, the brigade had participated in numerous missions on short notice, including the invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965 and domestic missions.

Its success in those operations had earned it the moniker “Golden Brigade” – so-named because “everything the brigade touched was ‘golden.’”

In the previous year alone, the soldiers had been called on often by Army leaders.

In April 1967, troops parachuted onto Vieques Island, Puerto Rico, for a joint military exercise.

In July, it deployed on six hours’ notice to Detroit to assist local authorities in quelling civil disturbances in that city.

That fall, the brigade was tasked with conducting Brass Strike I, a major firepower and mobility demonstration for thousands of military and civilian dignitaries and students.

Even in the new year, the 3rd Brigade had plenty on its plate.

On Jan. 22, the brigade conducted an airborne assault in Florida as part of another joint exercise.

And after North Korean forces seized the U.S.S. Pueblo on Jan. 23, soldiers were told to prepare for an airborne assault to rescue the U.S. Navy ship and her 82 crew members.

That mission never took place. But the alert on Feb. 12 wasn’t like the others.

This time, it was not a training exercise. And as time quickly ticked by, soldiers began to realize the mission wouldn’t be called off.

They were going to deploy, although officials were mum on where.

Rich O’Hare, then a private, said paratroopers watched the news of the Tet Offensive closely.

“When they opened the warehouses and started issuing us jungle fatigues, jungle boots and brand new M16s, we pretty much figured that was it,” he said.

O'Hare, then a young soldier with no combat experience, was a rare find in the brigade. While the 82nd Airborne Division itself had not served in Vietnam, its paratroopers, for the most part, were seasoned veterans.

According to an official history of the 3rd Brigade's deployment, approximately 80 percent of its soldiers had served at least one tour in Vietnam.

"The entire 82nd was filled with Vietnam veterans," O'Hare said. "It was the only combat ready division left in the states. And it was the place where a lot of guys were going when they came back from Vietnam."

Bob Murill, then a second lieutenant, was the brigade's supply officer in early 1968.

When the unit was preparing to jump into North Korea, he ordered the cold weather gear they believed they would need for the mission.

And a few weeks later, he was returning that gear for something more suitable for the jungles of Vietnam.

"I sent all that stuff back and got some tropical gear," he said.

Murill said Vietnam was an open secret for the brigade.

"There was no question in anybody's mind that was exactly where we were going," he said. "But we didn't get the actual orders until we were on the plane and outside the continental U.S."

Murill was on that plane, just days after the brigade was alerted for the mission, he said. After leaving the U.S., the orders were pulled from a crisp envelope and read aloud.

Murill said deploying the brigade on short notice was no easy task. Planning that would have taken months for any other unit had to be completed in a matter of hours.

Maj. Gen. Richard J. Seitz, then commanding general of the 82nd Airborne Division, facilitated the quick turn around by directing that every asset within the division be used to assist the brigade.

One of the first steps, according to officials, was to fill the brigade itself.

Before being alerted, 3rd Brigade was only at 60 percent of its manning. The 82nd Airborne Division pulled soldiers from the 1st and 2nd Brigades to fill out the unit.

Within days, military vehicles were clogging roads between Fort Bragg and what was then Pope Air Force Base.

The first troops left Fort Bragg on Valentine's Day, but most flew out several days later, on Feb. 17.

Before they left, President Lyndon B. Johnson paid a special visit to Pope Air Force Base.

In short remarks to the deploying soldiers, Johnson spoke of his high regard for the competence and preparedness of the 82nd Airborne Division. And he extended his best wishes for the months ahead.

At the end of his speech, more than 3,600 paratroopers shouted “All the way, sir!” Johnson responded with his own shout, “Airborne!”

Moving the entire 3rd Brigade and its equipment to Vietnam required more than 155 C-141 flights and six C-133 cargo carriers, officials said.

The move was so swift that it caught American officials in Vietnam off guard. When the 82nd Airborne Division landed at Chu Lai Air Base at 11 a.m. on Feb. 15, officials said installation leaders had to scramble to find a place to put all the soldiers and equipment.

“They didn’t know we were coming,” Murill said. “They said, ‘The best we can do is put you in this field over here and get you some tents.’”

At Chu Lai, the 3rd Brigade began to organize itself. But it wasn’t long for the outpost. Soon, the brigade headed north to the area around Hue, Phu Bai and Da Nang.

There, the paratroopers worked closely with the 101st Airborne Division. It was the first time the two units had worked together in combat operations since they spearheaded the D-Day invasion in Normandy during World War II.

The deployment of the brigade was rapid. And the paratroopers were soon thrust into combat as some of the most northern forces in South Vietnam.

On Feb. 18, less than a week after it was alerted to deploy, the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment deployed to a fire base to begin operations.



The rest of the brigade headed further north, where it protected supply lines and existing bases and rooted out North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces who were preparing for another “Tet-like” attack. Later, some of those same soldiers were tasked to move south and defend the city of Saigon.

Deploying from Fort Bragg to the jungles of Vietnam more than 10,000 miles away was a dizzying

experience, said O'Hare, who now leads the Golden Brigade Chapter of the 82nd Airborne Division Association.

"Everything was a blur," he said. "They were moving us so fast."

In Vietnam, O'Hare said, the weather was hot and wet. The roads were treacherous, filled with man-made booby traps and nature's own dangers – steep drop offs, dangerous switchbacks and periodic wash-outs.

In the early days, with the American and South Vietnamese troops still spread thin from the Tet offensive, O'Hare said it was difficult to get any supplies other than ammunition.

"I thought I was going to starve to death up there," he said. "And our uniforms were rotting off."

"The conditions were, for lack of a better word, absolutely horrible," he added. "It was abysmal. Horrible weather, leeches, snakes. Then you put the enemy on top of it all."

The brigade lost its first soldier, Staff Sgt. Joe Rodriguez, to a booby trap in the early days of the deployment. Its temporary home in Vietnam, Camp Rodriguez, was named in his honor.

The Golden Brigade wasted no time making an impact in Vietnam. In addition to providing security, paratroopers formed hunter-killer teams to patrol at night, cleared roads of landmines each morning and set a schedule of aggressive patrols that included setting ambushes for enemy troops.



"It was a constant stream of activity," O'Hare said.

And for the paratroopers, there were no true safe havens.

Patrick "Paddy" Barry, a combat engineer with 3rd Brigade, recalled that his base was constantly harassed by enemy mortars.

In May 1968, the outpost was the target of a coordinated attack that began as Barry and

others sat down to watch a movie on a makeshift screen.

"As we're watching, you look up at the screen and you see all these green enemy tracers coming through," he recalled. "Then come (North Vietnamese troops) throwing satchel charges and firing machine guns."

“Everyone was running for cover,” Barry said. “There was a tremendous amount of mortar and rocket fire.”

Once the attackers were beaten back, he said, more than 50 enemy fighters were found killed within the wire.

Barry said the fierce fighting was to be expected. The nation had called 9-1-1. And 3rd Brigade was sent in response.

“We’re the 82nd Airborne,” he said. “We’re not going to play tiddlywinks. We’re going over there to arrange a meeting between the enemy and his maker.”

In early 1968, 3rd Brigade was serving as the division’s ready force, able to deploy on short notice to anywhere in the world. The decision to send the brigade to Vietnam was not made lightly.

Westmoreland, then the top American general in Vietnam, has specifically requested the 82nd Airborne Division when he sought additional troops in early 1968.

A paratrooper himself, Westmoreland had commanded the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment at Fort Bragg and had served as chief of staff for the 82nd Airborne Division. From 1963 to 1964, he was commanding general of the 18th Airborne Corps.

But in the days before the brigade was alerted, President Johnson’s top advisors were telling him not to send the 82nd Airborne Division. They worried that such a move would remove their strategic reserve force.

Then, as today, officials felt that having the 82nd Airborne Division ready to deploy was an important deterrent to threats around the globe.

Fifty years later, and the 3rd Brigade again has that mission as part of what’s now known as the Global Response Force.

“In 1968, the Golden Brigade was given only fourteen days to deploy from Fort Bragg to South Vietnam,” said Col. Gregory Beaudoin, the current commander of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team. “Their ability to deploy thousands of All Americans to Chu Lai is a historical testament to the division’s commitment to readiness.”

Beaudoin said the brigade conducts tough, rigorous training “in the most realistic environment possible” to stay ready for missions today.

“Golden Brigade veterans and their stories are an integral part of the history and heritage of the 82nd Airborne Division,” the colonel said. “Fifty years ago, they deployed from Fort Bragg to fight a determined enemy in the jungles of Vietnam and did so with valor and courage. The legacy of the Panther paratrooper is emboldened by these great All Americans and we stand in the shadow of their accomplishments.”

To mark the 50th anniversary of the Golden Brigade's Vietnam deployment, veterans are planning events during this year's All American Week at Fort Bragg in May and a large reunion at West Point, New York, in June. Hundreds are expected to attend the event in New York.

It will be a celebration unlike anything the soldiers received as they returned home from Vietnam, O'Hare said.

Then, many were mistreated by members of the public. They were shunned by veterans groups.

In response, O'Hare said, the men grew closer, further tightening the bonds of combat.

"These guys are some of the most wonderful people in the whole wide world," he said. "They may appear a little rough around the edges, but the love is so strong they'll do anything for you."

Murill chokes up as he talks about the friendships formed in Vietnam.

"They're outstanding," he said. "When you think about what those soldiers were asked to do... I'm proud of every one of them."

Military editor Drew Brooks can be reached at dbrooks@fayobserver.com or 486-3567.