The 173rd Airborne Brigade History

The 173rd Airborne Brigade was constituted in 1917 as an infantry brigade and deployed to France in 1918 as part of the 87th Division, but did not participate in any named campaigns. Returning to the United States the brigade was demobilized in 1919.

Redesignated as the 87th Reconnaissance Troop, it fought in three European campaigns. Although not part of the Brigade in World War II, the history of the 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment is significant to the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, comprising half of its current fighting strength. The 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment was formed in 1941 at Ft Bragg. They jumped into New Guinea, in September 1943 as part of the first successful airborne combat jump in the Pacific Theater. On 16 February 1945 they jumped onto the island of Corregidor where they earned the Presidential Unit Citation.

The 173rd Infantry Brigade was activated on Okinawa in 1963 as the 173rd Airborne Brigade (Sep). The unit earned the nickname “Tien Bien” or “Sky Soldiers,” from the Nationalist Chinese paratroopers. In 1965, the Brigade became the first major unit of the United States Army to serve in Vietnam. They conducted the only combat parachute jump of the war in February 1967. During more than six years of continuous combat, the brigade earned 14 campaign streamers and four unit citations. Sky Soldiers serving in Vietnam earned 13 Medals of Honor and 1,790 gave their lives. The brigade was deactivated in 1972.

Reactivated in June 2000, the brigade conducted numerous deployments across Europe. On 26 March 2003, the 173rd added to its distinguished history when nearly 1,000 Sky Soldiers parachuted into Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom I. During the operation, nine Sky Soldiers made the ultimate sacrifice and one Sky Soldier was awarded the Silver Star. In 2005, the 173rd deployed to Afghanistan along the contentious Pakistan border in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) VI. Seventeen Sky Soldiers made the ultimate sacrifice and five Sky Soldiers were awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in battle.

Upon returning to Italy in 2006, the brigade transformed into the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team. In the spring of 2007, the 173rd ABCT executed an extended deployment to eastern Afghanistan in support of OEF VIII where 43 Sky Soldiers laid down their lives. Soldiers serving in OEF VIII exhibited incredible bravery earning one Medal of Honor, one Distinguished Service Cross, and 32 Silver Stars. In 2009, the brigade returned to Afghanistan for a third time in support of Operation Enduring Freedom X continuing its proud tradition of selfless service. While executing a difficult build mission south of Kabul, nine Sky Soldiers made the ultimate sacrifice. Today Sky Soldiers continue the distinction of honored service dating back to World War I and proudly represent the Airborne fighting spirit wherever they serve.