



OPERATION HYDRA: AIRBORNE ENGINEERS IN ACTION

By First Lieutenant Matthew Z. Freund

For an airborne engineer unit like the 27th Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Airborne), trained to deploy tailored engineer packages anywhere in the world within 18 hours, readiness is the watchword. So when an emergency deployment readiness exercise (EDRE) sequence began on 7 July 2008, the battalion organized its equipment and personnel in less than a week to execute an airborne insertion into Fort Hunter Liggett, California, as part of a larger joint exercise named Operation Hydra. The training mission was the largest off-post airborne deployment of heavy equipment platforms projected from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for a training mission since 1991. As one of only two airborne engineer battalions in the Army (both of which are stationed at Fort Bragg), the 27th Engineer Battalion has the special capability of conducting the full spectrum of combat and general engineering operations on short notice and in nearly any contingency. The battalion's mission, to upgrade Schoonover Assault Landing Zone (ALZ) at Fort Hunter Liggett, was structured around a notional humanitarian aid scenario.

Soldiers and Airmen have trained at Fort Hunter Liggett, located between the Santa Lucia Mountains and the Los Padres National Forest, since 1940. The post is used primarily for training United States Army Reserve units. The battalion's mission was to widen the crossovers and upgrade the parking apron to raise the maximum on ground (MOG) capability of the ALZ. The crossover and apron expansion increased the usable surface area by more than 25,000 square feet.

The airborne operation consisted of a drop of 127 paratroopers preceded by 10 heavy drop platforms totaling more than 300,000 pounds of engineer construction equipment. The heavy drops included a 950B wheel loader, two 130G motor graders, a deployable universal combat earthmover (DEUCE), a small emplacement excavator (SEE) truck, a 613B water distributor, and an equipment box. Within an hour of parachuting onto the ALZ, two sapper platoons had secured it with a 4-kilometer perimeter, allowing light equipment (LE) Soldiers to retrieve and remove the harnesses from dropped vehicles and equipment. The equipment box—packed with oils, lubricants, and tool boxes—was dropped so that LE Soldiers and mechanics could repair any damaged equipment on the drop zone. Only one of the ten heavy drop platforms—a dump truck—failed to land upright. However, a DEUCE soon arrived at the scene and an operator used its winch to pull the dump truck upright. The wheel loader's bucket and tines quickly moved the platforms from the ALZ centerline, clearing an unobstructed path for aircraft, which landed on the ALZ just a few hours after the jump.

Requirements for the ALZ repair and improvement were varied. First, two taxiways had to be widened by 30 feet. The apron required a 25,000-square-foot extension to increase its MOG. In addition, the apron and crossovers required resurfacing after 6 inches of soil were removed. Working in shifts, three LE platoons completed the mission after 60 hours of continuous operations. As surveyors plotted the dimensions,



A roller operator works on the apron of Schoonover Assault Landing Zone.

two scrapers hauled away 6 inches of soil (a total of 2,082 cubic yards) from the apron and crossovers, which covered 112,387 square feet. The apron's grade was designed to engineer technical letter standards of 1.0 percent to 3.0 percent to account for water runoff. After grading and scraping, the crossovers, apron, and shoulders were resurfaced with approximately 4,000 cubic yards of fill. An Air Force REDHORSE (rapid engineers deployable heavy operation repair squadron, engineer) civil engineering team from Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, contributed to the mission by surveying, directing troops, and operating equipment.

The notional host nation, which received humanitarian assistance from the joint task force in the scenario, provided round-the-clock fuel and water resupply, allowing the battalion to conduct 24-hour operations throughout the mission. Host nation support units at Fort Hunter Liggett also provided additional graders, scrapers, vibratory rollers, and water distributors that allowed the unit to accomplish its mission in less than three days. Supply officers, who arranged for additional food, fuel, and equipment to be pre-positioned onsite, also located a maintenance contact truck that helped unit mechanics repair broken equipment. During the mission, mechanics repaired one grader and one roller, keeping operators at the wheel and preventing delays in the construction project.

While equipment operators repaired and improved the ALZ, crossovers, and apron, two sapper platoons conducted route reconnaissance and route clearance missions to ensure

that the surrounding ground lines of communication were viable. After certification of the ALZ construction by an Air Force special tactics squadron, the engineers were airlifted by C-17 and C-130 aircraft to Castle Airport, a former Strategic Air Command base located just south of Merced, California. In short order, riggers from Fort Bragg's 612th and 647th Quartermaster Companies and 27th Engineer Battalion Soldiers prepared the unit's equipment for the trip back to Fort Bragg.

Earning the title "Tiger Battalion" in the 1960s for its reputation for executing demanding training, the 27th Engineer Battalion lived up to its name during Operation Hydra. Less than a week after notification, the battalion conducted an airborne assault with paratroopers and heavy equipment. In less than 72 hours, the battalion had improved and expanded Fort Hunter Liggett's landing zone, greatly increasing its maximum capacity. The successful execution of all missions displayed the battalion's ability to respond quickly to any call that requires its specialized skills. 

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