

PATHFINDER HISTORY

In the autumn of 1943, CPT Frank L. Lillyman of the 101st Airborne Division was tasked with organizing a unit whose mission was to jump in advance of large airborne forces and mark their drop zones. The unit was designated the 101st Pathfinder Group. Their baptism of fire came on D-Day when, at 15 minutes after midnight, 6 June 1944, the Pathfinders jumped from six C-47 Dakotas becoming the first Allied combat soldiers into occupied France. Each plane load was broken down into sperate teams with specific missions in a support of the overall operation.

From the start, the teams ran into problems. Poor visibility over Normandy caused the Pathfinders themselves to be scattered over the countryside. Many teams were misoriented or too far from their objectives to complete their missions. In some cases individual soldiers became separated from their units and spent the night looking for friendly forces. Fortunately, the same qualities that made these soldiers Pathfinder candidates resulted in some tremendous actions that morning. Some teams conquered adversity and reached their targets. Others, exercising initiative, secured objectives intended for the follow on forces. Overall, the 101st Airborne Division fared better at reaching their targets than the 82nd Airborne Division, due in part to the valiant efforts of the 101st Pathfinder Group.

D-Day was to be the first and last major operation of the Second World War for the unit. The Pathfinder insignia, known as the Pathfinder Torch, was originally awarded as a participation badge for the Normandy operation. The winged torch represents the airborne capabilities of the Pathfinder as well as the mission of "lighting the way".

Following World War II, Pathfinders were utilized in most parachute units. They continued to be an ad hoc type of organization, taken "out of hide" to perform the Pathfinder mission. The coming of age of the helicopter brought about great change. The role of the Pathfinder was expanded to include airmobile operations. In the mid 1960s, the Pathfinder School was established at Ft. Benning, GA. Originally a 6 week course, students were instructed on PZ/LZ operations, air traffic control, external load operations, air medevac procedures, helicopter rappelling and STABO, drop zones and flight landing strips. The pathfinder torch was resurrected as a skill badge and the main classroom dedicated "Lillyman Hall".

As many as 26 Pathfinder units saw service in the Republic of Vietnam, One of them was the 101st Pathfinder Company, assigned to the 101st Aviation Group. The company consisted of three platoons, one for each of the three infantry brigades. The unit saw its heaviest action and suffered its worst casualties in the A Shau Valley. Much like the L Company LRRPs, the Pathfinders designed their own modification of the Screaming Eagle patch, placing a scroll reading "101st Pathfinders" above "Old Abe". The company returned to Ft. Campbell in 1972.

While still performing their operational mission during the 1970s, the Pathfinders also instructed the new Air Assault School and manned the division's Command Demonstration Parachute Team. The company rotated platoons as Air Assault instructors under a separate commandant, and periodically sent NCOs to Ft. Rucker, Al. to validate that installation's Air Assault school.

The unit remained a company until the mid 1980s when a massive TO&E change reduced it to a platoon assigned to the Command Aviation Battalion. The Pathfinder commitments to The Air Assault School and Command Demonstration Parachute Team were dissolved. Strength was reduced from 6 officers and over 150 enlisted to 1 officer and 51 enlisted. In March, 1987, Brigadier General Marsh, the ADC(O), determined that the Pathfinders would be attached to the 2-17th Cav. The unit was moved to the Clarksville Base and redesignated the 101st Pathfinder Detachment, 2-17th Cav.

The Pathfinders lost two soldiers to parachute accidents in the 1980's. In 1984, SPC Jesse Rex Roth fell to his death with a double malfunction as a member of the Command Demonstration Parachute Team. In April, 1989, SPC Brendon Sean Paxton was killed at the National Training Center. His static line broke after he exited a C-141, causing a complete malfunction.

In August, 1990, the Pathfinder Detachment was one of the first units from the 101st in the Persian Gulf, deploying as the advanced party of the 2-17th Cav. While in Saudi Arabia the General Support Team developed the Downed Aircrew Recovery SOP as directed by the Brigade Commander. This SOP is still in effect in the Detachment. In addition, Pathfinders assisted in testing the tandem load, an improved method of slinging 2 HMMWVs with a CH-47. During Operation Desert Shield, Pathfinders could be found performing their mission at King Fahd airport, FOBs Bastogne and Oasis, or at King Khalid Military City.

48 hours prior to the start of the ground war, Pathfinders were inserted from the Iraqi-Saudi border to the Euphrates river, emplacing tactical beacons and placing eyes on planned landing zones. Direct support team members air assaulted on G-Day and G+1 with infantry battalions to conduct ATC at the FARPs in FOBs Cobra and Viper. Meanwhile, General Support Pathfinders ran the huge division log pad. The detachment redeployed to Ft. Campbell in April, 1991.

On 1 November, 1992, in a ceremony on Fiddler's Green, Clarksville Base, the Pathfinder Detachment was returned to its parent unit, the 6th Bn, 101st Avn Regt. Today, the detachment continues its support of the division, whether running drop zones, reconning landing zones, inspecting slingloads or instructing the Scout Landing Zone training course. 1993 will mark the Pathfinder's 50th anniversary. A unit with a rich history and tremendous future, the Pathfinder Detachment continues to live up the their motto, "Semper Primus - First In / Last Out."