

101st Airborne Helmet Markings (+D-Day Dropzones) [Explained]

Intro

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Playing card suits on combat helmets are iconic symbols of the 101st Airborne Division and motifs that have often been used in popular media to represent U.S. infantry as a whole. Probably the most iconic were the spades of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, which were featured prominently in the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*.

But why is it a thing, and how do they correspond to the divisional structure? In this video, we're covering the origins of playing card helmet markings in the 101st Airborne during World War II, giving key context including the divisional organization and the details on the airborne landings they were designed for.

I'm your host Brendan, and this is *Battle Order*.

Rationale

The playing card markings on paratrooper helmets date back to late World War II as the 101st Airborne Division was making its final preparations for the invasion of Normandy. Unlike the 82nd Airborne, D-Day would be the 101st's first action of the war.

Contested airborne insertions, especially at night, were risky affairs. Not only would aircraft be subject to ground fire, but the operation being at night increased the chance of navigational errors and made the prospect of reassembling on the ground a challenging one.

These risks were not lost on divisional and regimental leadership at the time. A couple of weeks before D-Day, histories suggest that the 101st Airborne's staff and regimental commanders assembled for a meeting to brainstorm ways to make regrouping on the ground easier.

Helmet markings were one of the answers. Each subunit of the 101st Airborne would get a distinctive marking on the sides of their helmets to aid in friendly identification.

John O'Brien — historian at the Brigadier General Don F. Pratt Museum — claims that the division's infantry regiment commanders drew playing cards at that staff meeting, which cemented their regiments' distinctive markings. Other subdivisions got their own helmet markings that were more symbolic.

Additional tic marks were added around the symbol to denote either battalions under regiments or separate companies or battalions in support units. In the infantry regiments, a tic at the 12 o'clock position denoted a headquarters and headquarters company and service company, one at the 3 o'clock denoted 1st battalion, 6 o'clock was 2nd battalion, and 9 o'clock was 3rd battalion.

Division Organization

On D-Day, the 101st Airborne Division had 4 infantry regiments. The 501st, 502nd and 506th were Parachute Infantry Regiments, while the 327th was a Glider Infantry Regiment. Divisional fires were provided by the Division Artillery, a flexible command with several artillery battalions. These were the HQ and HQ Battery, 81st Airborne AA Battalion, 321st and 907th Glider Field Artillery Battalions, and 377th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion.

The division was further supported by the 326th Airborne Engineer Battalion and 326th Airborne Medical Company. This all came under the purview of the Division HQ, which had some of its own subunits. Ones of note included the Division HQ and HQ Company, Recon Platoon, Signal Company, 426th Airborne Quartermaster Company, 801st Airborne Ordnance Company, and Division Band.

Drop Zones

In terms of where the 101st Airborne was meant to drop, their area of responsibility was east of Route Nationale 13. It consisted of drop zones "A", "C" and "D" for parachute drops, as well as landing zones "E" and "W" for glider landings, the latter of which is shared with the 82nd Airborne's area. The 82nd Airborne Division had an additional 3 drop zones, "O", "N" and "T".

Drop Zone "A" west of St-Martin-de-Varville was designated for the 502nd Regimental Combat Team, which was the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment reinforced by the 377th Parachute Field Arty Battalion. This DZ was aimed at seizing Causeways 4 and 3 off Utah Beach and securing the 101st's northern flank. Although dropping with a parachute artillery unit, the 377th lost all but 1 of their 75mm pack howitzers, so that unit fought mainly as infantry until 8 days later when they received replacement howitzers from Utah Beach.¹

Drop Zone "C" near Hiesville and St Marie du Mont was for the first two battalions of the 506th and the 501st's 3rd battalion, aimed at Causeways 1 and 2. Positioned away from the bleeding edge of the division's flanks, this area would be the 101st Airborne's Divisional Reserve, and would also be where the Division HQ landed. It shared space with Landing Zone "E", which could receive glider resupply and reinforcements.

Two anti-tank batteries from the 81st Airborne AA Battalion, equipped with a total of 16 57mm AT guns, and elements from the airborne engineering and medical units landed via glider at Landing Zone "E". The engineering units that did land via glider included a bulldozer to clear glider landing zones of obstacles. However, the division's glider infantry regiment and the rest of its glider field artillery units landed amphibiously on Utah Beach, beginning with the second assault wave.

Lastly, Drop Zone "D" south of Vierville was designated for 2 battalions of the 501st and 1 battalion of the 506th, who were charged with securing Saint-Côme-du-Mont and bridges over the Douve river on the division's south flank. Charlie Company of the 326th Airborne Engineer Battalion also jumped into Drop Zone "D" to blow bridges crossing the river.

¹ <https://www.ww2-airborne.us/units/377/377.html>

Of course the airborne units on D-Day were miss dropped and scattered, often a far distance from their drop zones, but that was the plan. Drop Zone D had the most accurate drops of the division's drop zones.

Given the nature of the objectives, which had to be completed at night, save for individual initiative the ability for units to quickly reform was crucial.

Helmet Markings

In came the helmet markings.

The 501st Regiment, callsign "Klondike" was denoted by a diamond. The 502nd Regiment callsign "Kickoff" had hearts, the 506th Regiment callsign "Kidnap" had spades, and the 327th Glider Regiment callsign "Keepsake" had clubs. This included the 1st Battalion of the 401st Glider Infantry Regiment, which acted as the 327th's 3rd battalion as part of the division reserve.

One interesting quirk of the 506th specifically is that for D-Day, due to confusion, their tic marks were applied incorrectly, so they had the 1st battalion's 3 o'clock tic mark as well, although this was corrected after the operation.

The Division Artillery received a white circle symbolizing a cannon ball. DIVARTY HQ and HQ Battery callsign "Kingfish" had a tic mark at 12 o'clock, the 321st Glider FA Battalion callsign "Kansas" at 3 o'clock, the 377th Parachute FA Battalion callsign "Kite" at 6 o'clock, and 907th Glider FA Battalion callsign "Kilogram" at 9 o'clock.

Not relevant for D-Day, but the 463rd Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, callsign "Keynote", was hastily attached to the 101st through unofficial channels when it was getting ready to deploy to Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. At this time, it received the DIVARTY circle with two tic marks at the 6 o'clock position.

The division's medical company callsign "Kindergarten" received the Geneva cross, while the engineering battalion callsign "Kiwi" received an E.

The 81st AAA battalion received a triangle, perhaps symbolic of its anti-tank/anti-aircraft mission which was higher velocity than their field artillery counterparts.

And lastly, the division HQ received a square. The HQ and HQ Company, callsign Klaxon, and Recon Platoon, callsign King, had a 12 o'clock tic mark. The Signal Company, callsign "Kilowatt", had a 3 o'clock tic. The 426th Airborne Quartermaster Company, callsign "Kitchen" had a 6 o'clock tic and, finally, the 801st Airborne Ordnance Company had a 9 o'clock tic.

A little more esoteric was the division band, who received the lyre, a string instrument not unlike a harp.

Outro

And now I just want to thank our Patreon supporters, especially our producers!

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We also have a poster featuring the 101st Airborne Division's helmet markings during the war. You can pick that up at our shop linked in the description.

Thanks for watching everyone, and I'll see you all in the next one!