
The Airborne and Special Operations Museum

Museum Review

Jim Werbaneth

The Airborne and Special Operations Museum is not one of the largest military museums in the world, nor the most famous. Those would include the Imperial War Museum in London, the War Museum in Overloon, Netherlands, and the National Museum of the United States Air Force. Each requires at least a full day to tour intelligently, and the last in particular would require at least two days to see everything. Nor is the Airborne and Special Operations Museum similar to the small, specialized museums that dot United States Army bases, or the small regimental museums found in Britain and Canada. It ranks somewhere in between in terms of size and specialization, and takes perhaps two or three hours to see.



Figure 1. Entrance to museum and statue of General Hugh Shelton, photo by author.

In addition, unlike those smaller facilities and for that matter the National Museum of the United States Air Force, this one is not located on a military post. Rather than being located on Ft. Bragg, the home of both the Army's airborne and

special forces, it is about eight miles away, in downtown Fayetteville, North Carolina. It is extremely accessible, and does not just have more than adequate parking, but is literally next to the Fayetteville Amtrak station. Thus, there is a clear alternative to driving for the out of town visitor.

The museum offers a striking approach and entry to the visitor. The first part that one notices is the exterior memorial park, in front of the main entrance. This is dominated by two bronze statues; “Iron Mike,” just outside the door, represents a World War II enlisted paratrooper. A little further out, there is a statue of General Hugh Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1997 to 2001, wearing the beret of the 82nd Airborne Division. Of the two, Iron Mike is the more prominent, and something of a signature piece; the enlisted man gets pride of place. Surrounding them are stones commemorating the full range of Army airborne and special operations units going back to their early Second World War beginnings.

As the name and circle of stones indicate, this museum concentrates on the US Army’s airborne forces, and special operations. There is nothing about other services and their units, such as the Navy SEALs and Marine Raiders and “Para Marines,” nor the Central Intelligence Agency’s paramilitary arm; the focus here is on the Army. Its coverage, naturally, starts with parachute and glider infantry in World War II. Though they were far more likely to take landing craft into battle than parachutes, the early Rangers are also subjects of exhibits. However, the Airborne and Special Operations



Figure 2. “Iron Mike,” photo by author.

Museum does embrace the Office of Strategic Services, along with its Jedburgh units in Europe and Kachin Rangers in Burma, as well as Merrill's Marauders. The emphasis is on unconventional warfare, without the condition that the units jump out of airplanes, just as long as there is an Army connection.

At the same time, the museum gives recognition to one unit that pioneered aerial insertion, but not into combat. This was all-African American 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion. In a segregated Army in a similarly segregated America, they were not deployed overseas, and thus lack the prominence of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions. However, the battalion is of lasting influence, as it pioneered smoke jumping as a means of fighting forest fires started by Japanese balloon bombs.

The museum's stories continue into the Cold War. The Korean War is not widely remembered for its airborne operations, but there is an exhibit of a drop by the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team north of Pyongyang. Yet surprisingly, there is nothing about its actual commitment to battle, when transports lifted it to Kimpo Airfield after the Inchon landings.



Figure 3. World War II exhibit, with a 75mm pack howitzer in front of a Waco glider. Photo by author.

Other actions of the Cold War figure more prominently than one might expect. One is the 1965 civil war in the Dominican Republic, in which Marines and the 82nd Airborne Division intervened. This episode is largely forgotten today in the United States, lost in the glare of events in Southeast Asia, but the Airborne and

Special Operations Museum commemorates it.

Understandably, Vietnam receives a great deal of attention. While there was but one significant parachute drop, this war witnessed the first large-scale helicopter-borne airmobile operations. Additionally, the new emphasis on counterinsurgency coincided with the maturity of the Special Forces, and their patronage by John F. Kennedy. As one would expect, the museum spotlights the Green Berets; interestingly, one exhibit employs photographs published in a glowing, almost propagandistic, article in *National Geographic*. It also addresses units that one might not expect, especially the “Red Hat” advisers embedded with the South Vietnamese army, including its own elite airborne and ranger units.

The post-Vietnam seventies were an era in which American military power was, arguably, at its Cold War nadir, something that the museum’s exhibits recognize, at least implicitly. At the same time, there is recognition of the rebuilding that began then, including the reestablishment of the Ranger battalions as elite, airborne light infantry. Further, there are exhibits on Delta Force, starting with the abortive raid on Iran to rescue the American embassy hostages in April 1980 and, thirteen years later, the “Black Hawk Down” battle in Mogadishu, Somalia, in which Delta and Rangers both fought. One of the ironies of the museum, owing perhaps to the secretiveness of Delta and the other quiet professionals of the United States Army’s special operators, is that some of the more prominent events commemorated are defeats. Undoubtedly, there are victories and successes still classified and not yet ready for open history.

The Airborne and Special Operations Museum’s coverage extends into Panama, Grenada, Desert Storm then the much longer and controversial conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The last two might not get all the attention that they deserve, perhaps due to their ongoing nature, still-classified events, as well as controversy. Yet they are covered to a significant degree.

One of the more striking and maybe questionable elements is the way that the museum addresses the individuals who were key to the formation of the Army’s airborne and special operations forces. There are no obvious inaccuracies, but they tend to be curiously incomplete at times. For example, Matthew B. Ridgway is rightfully profiled for his role in leading the 82nd Airborne Division and XVIII Airborne Corps in World War II, but that is where his story stops. There is no mention of how he later reversed the fortunes of the American and United Nations forces under his command in the Korean War, nor his subsequent service as Army Chief of Staff. Similarly, there is a short biography and youthful picture of William R. Peers, who led OSS agents in Burma and China in World War II. There is no mention though of a later and significant service, when he held

both divisional and corps-level commands in Vietnam. One of his greatest contributions was heading the Peers Commission that investigated the lessons of the My Lai Massacre, and it too is ignored.

In the main, the museum's exhibits rely on smaller artifacts, such as weapons and uniforms. It does incorporate some larger items into very good effective full-scale dioramas, with historically dressed and equipped mannequins. Some museums get this wrong; the figures in the fortress of Eben Emael in Belgium are an assortment of multi-ethnic, long-haired men with seventies facial hair, looking as though they were looted from a Sears store on its last legs. Those in Fayetteville meet higher standards of craftsmanship and historical appearance. The largest setup centers on the largest item in the museum, a Waco glider, and portrays the night landings in Normandy. One of the most effective shows Rangers in Panama in 1989, operating with an M551 Sheridan airborne reconnaissance tank on a city street. Another portrays Delta Force operators on an AH-6 "Little Bird" helicopter in Mogadishu.

The overall atmosphere of the museum is subdued and muted with some prominent exceptions. These include the urban, desert, and mountain environments of Panama, Iraq and Afghanistan especially. Nonetheless, the main approach of the design is on understatement. Also, while much is included in a building that is moderately-sized, none of it seems cramped. Instead, it is well planned and laid out very effectively, with a logical, chronological flow.

The Airborne and Special Operations Museum is not the most imposing military museum in the world, no more than it is the most famous, nor is it likely to be the main destination for any vacation, even by the most historically minded traveler. It is more probably a side trip for someone in the Raleigh-Durham-Fayetteville area, or just passing through. Regardless, it is worthy recognition of America's sky soldiers and quiet professionals.

The Airborne and Special Operations Museum is located at 100 Bragg Blvd., Fayetteville, NC 28301. Its website is at <https://www.asomf.org/>.

Jim Werbaneth is an Assistant Professor of political science at APUS, and an adjunct instructor of history and political science at La Roche College in Pittsburgh, as well as a published wargame designer. He earned his MA in political science from Duquesne University in 1985, and a second MA, with honors, from American Military University in 2016.