Corporal Louis E. Laird, of the 101st Airborne Division, fully equipped, boards a C-47 transport aircraft for an exercise in the spring of 1944. The complete division, together with the 82nd Airborne Division, was dropped over France on the eve of the Allied landing on Normandy on 6 June 1944.

1. US Paratroopers in History

Military parachuting in the US Army began as a consequence of experiments in this field after WWI and observing the successful outcomes in other countries such as the Soviet Union and Germany in the 1930s. The use made by the Germans of their parachute troops in the Blitzkrieg, spearheading assaults on the Netherlands and northern Europe in April and May 1940, was particularly important for the effect it had on the development of parachute techniques in the United States and Great Britain.

In April 1940, after a year spent studying how to define parachuting in the US Army, authorization was given for a test unit to be formed, the Test Platoon of Airborne Infantry. This order had materialized by the middle of the year at Fort Benning, in the form of a platoon with a lieutenant, six non-commissioned officers and forty two privates detached from the 29th Infantry Regiment. This test platoon, under the control of the Infantry Board, performed an eight-week course comprising rigorous physical training, learning landing techniques and jump practice from a 125-foot tower. By mid-August, each m an had made several jumps from an aircraft and, in the final week, on 29 August, a mass jump was conducted.

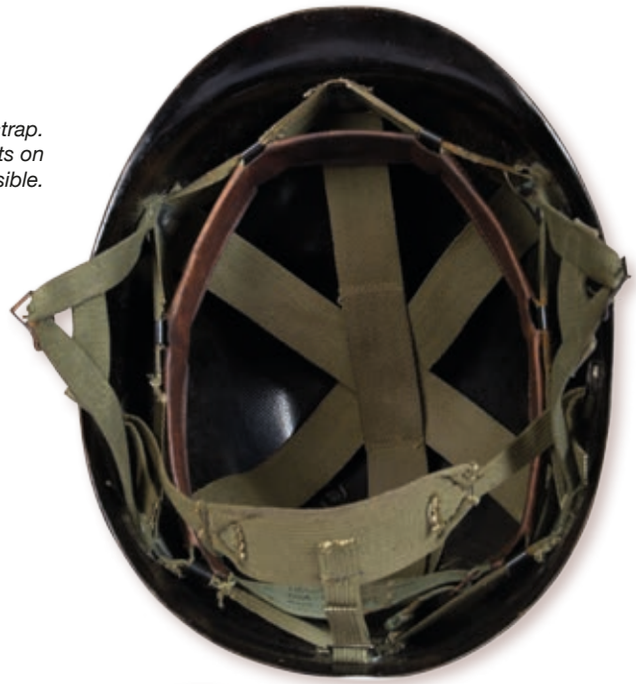
In September, after the success of the test platoon, the 1st Parachute Battalion was founded, the first parachute combat unit in the US Army (later renamed 501st Parachute Battalion).

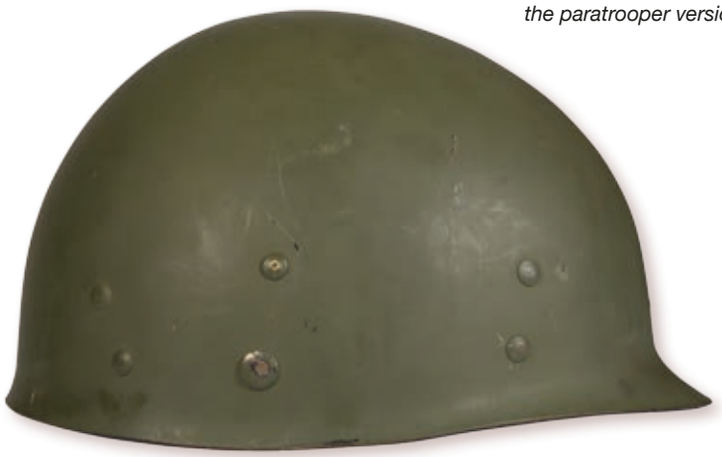
In 1941 this battalion gained further experience and continued to train paratroopers. By year's end the Department of War decided to create three further parachute Battalions, the 502nd, 503rd and 504th Parachute Battalions. Since the test platoon, these units were made up of volunteers, some of whom, owing to the small number of places, renounced their non-commissioned officer ranks in order to become paratroopers.

Having passed the basic jump course, they received their silver paratrooper's wings and went on to a 16-week period of exercises at squad, platoon, company and battalion level. As well as receiving their paratrooper rating, the men underwent physical training, long

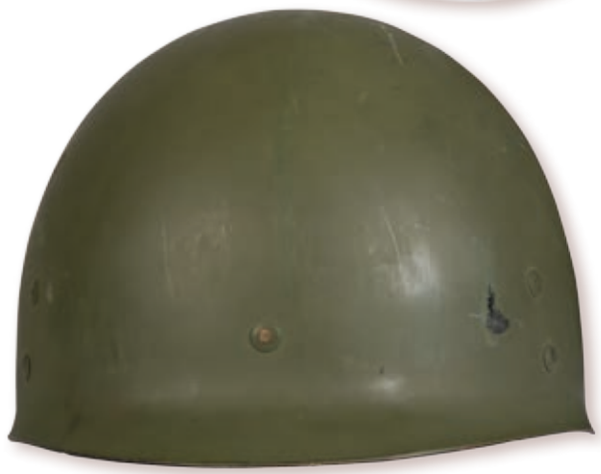
General Eisenhower, Commander of Allied troops in Europe, speaks to the paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division moments before their deployment over France on D-Day.

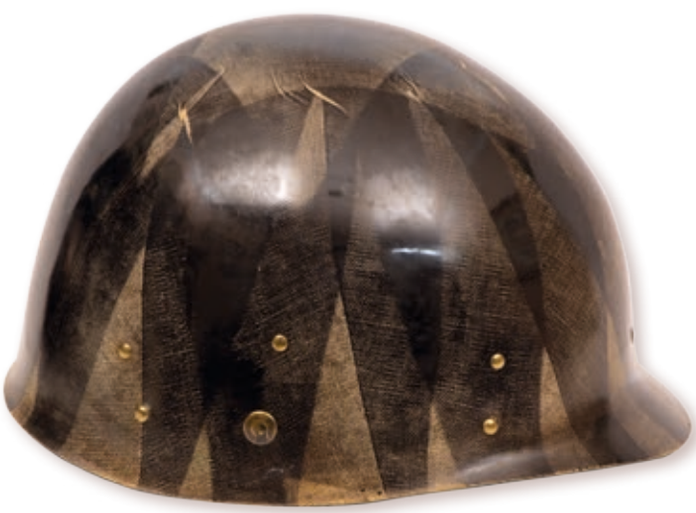
Detail of the liner A-straps and neckstrap. On the exterior, the additional rivets on the paratrooper version are visible.

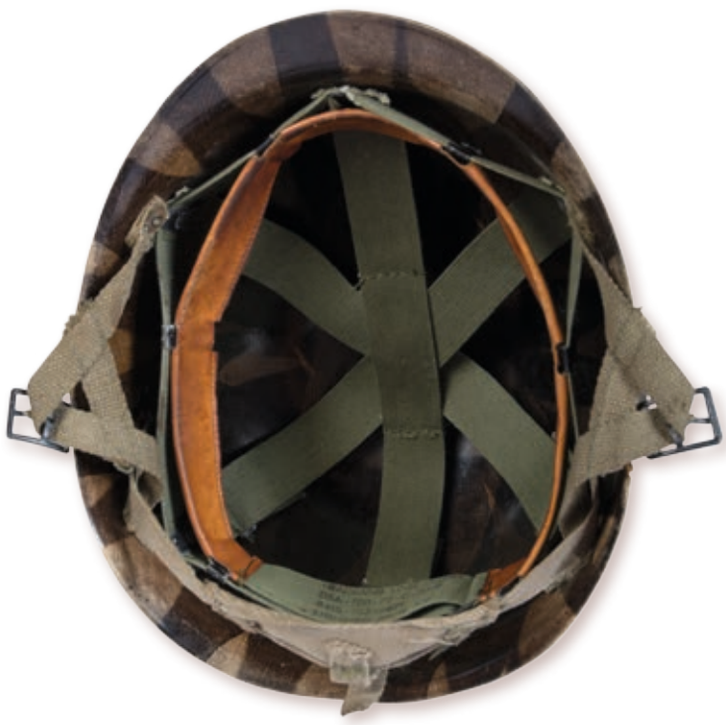




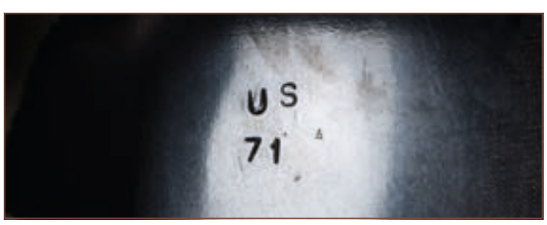
Interior markings on the liner indicate the manufacturer and the year, in this case 1968.





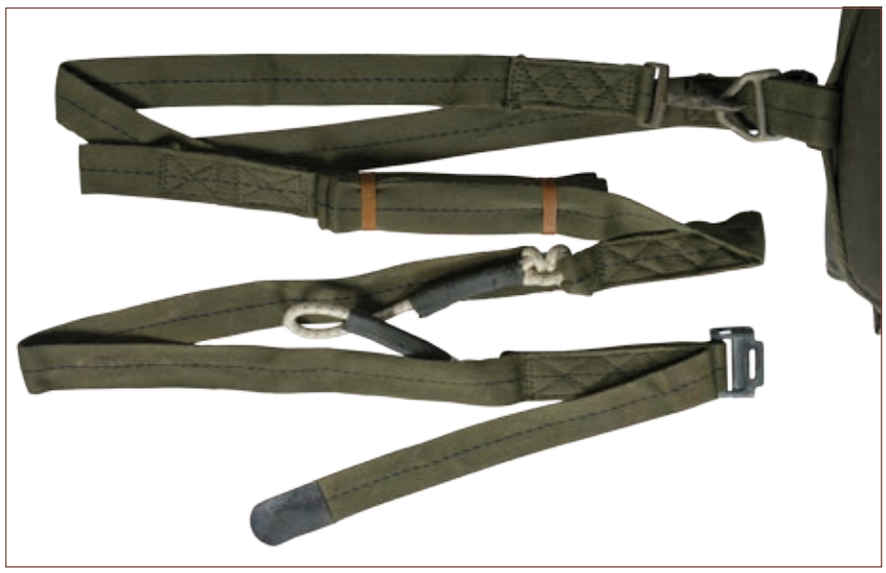


The construction of this paratrooper helmet (unpainted) liner can be seen, consisting of fine layers of fabric and resin.



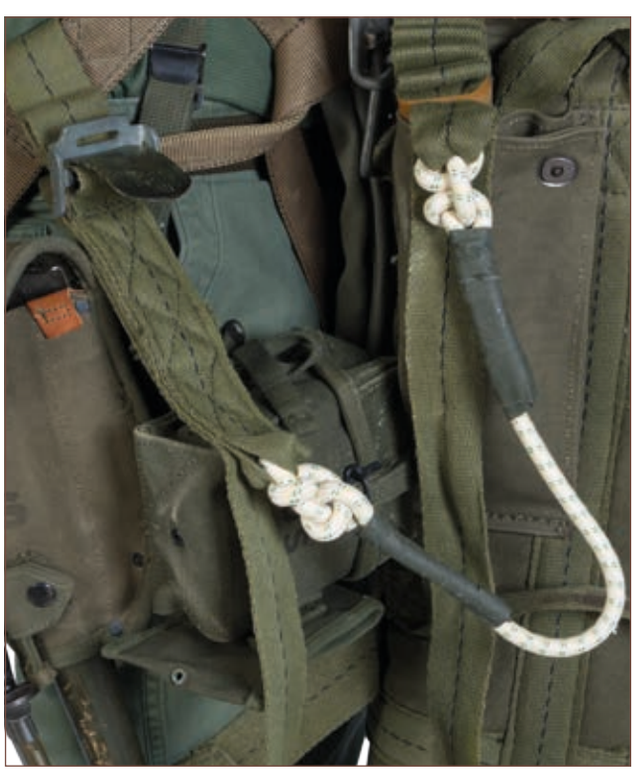
The markings in this liner tell us it was made in 1971.

PFC James E. Stadig and other members of Co D, 2nd Bn, 35th Inf, 3rd Bde, 4th Inf Div, come out of a cave after checking it for Viet Cong men or equipment during a one day search and destroy mission in the Quang Ngai Province, 8 km west of Duc Pho. (NARA archives).



Lowering strap assembly.

The container also featured a lowering strap, similar to that on the M1950 weapon case, with a stretch of shock absorbing cord. The lowering strap was attached to the container by the handle on the top, and the other end of the strap was attached to the parachute harness, between the right main lift web and the right rear back strap loop. The slack in the lowering strap was folded and stowed in an exterior pocket on the container, as on the weapon case.



Detail of the shock absorbing cord.

After exiting the aircraft, the paratrooper followed the same procedure as with the weapon case. First, he released the retaining strap and at 200 feet he freed the quick-release snap hooks taking care not to collide with other jumpers. If the load was fragile, soldiers could be ordered not to release the container but to hold it on the quick-release snaps until after landing. It was also recommended not to release the container when landing among trees, as it provided protection against impact with branches. However, in the event of landing on power lines or on water, it had to be released completely and allowed to fall freely.