

Down From Heaven:

The 11th Airborne Division in World War II
Volume 1: Camp Toccoa to Leyte Campaign

Copyright: Jeremy C. Holm

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Find out more about the author and upcoming books online at www.jeremyholm.com and www.511pir.com.

Prologue

January 12, 1946
New York City, New York

The sun shone brightly over the streets of New York City. The day's radiance was matched only by the smiles of an estimated 3,500,000 of New Yorkers who braved the crisp air that morning to witness such a historic event.

World War II had been officially over for four months and with the war's end had come four months of victory celebrations the likes of which the world has rarely seen since.

And yet, New York City's victory parade promised to be one of the biggest yet, one that wasn't just for some general or world leader. No, this parade was for the average G.I., the boys from Brooklyn and Atlanta and San Diego, "all the guys who walked through the mud--the sloggin G.I." who won the war for their Uncle Sam, for their ma's and pa's and for the girls back home.

Cameras rolled as Major General James M. Gavin, just 38 years of age, led 8,000 men of the 82nd Airborne Division, the All-Americans, at the front of the 13,000-man march through the Washington Square Arch and down Fifth Avenue to the thunderous roars and cheers. The crowds packed the city's sidewalks, balconies and rooftops. It was a spectacular affair with a ticker-tape blizzard pouring down on the four mile-long procession that thrilled a nation still laboring to heal from the wounds of a war. 400,000 young American lives had been lost in the war and those now marching past the Flatiron Building and Madison Square Park did so to honor all those who did not come back.

General Gavin's 82nd Airborne was proud to lead the way and as one headline declared, "Millions Acclaim Airborne Troops," including New York's governor Thomas E. Dewey, NYC's Mayor, William O'Dwyer, and the city's former mayor Fiorello LaGuardia.

Appropriately, the review stand was on 82nd street and was also "manned" by former WWI-82nd Divisioners General Jonathan Wainwright and Sergeant (now Major) Alvin York.

This was the second such event for the the 82nd Airborne which had participated in the Berlin Victory Parade on September 7, 1945. And just as in Berlin, each of the 13,000 marching men wore battle dress with uniforms adorned by appropriate decorations.

45 C-47s from the 316th Troop Carrier Group soon roared over the city, each towing a WACO glider surrounded by 100 P-47 Thunderbolts of the 1st Air Force. It was an impressive display of America's air and airborne power and one of the division's chaplains proudly proclaimed, "No other outfit pulled together like the 82nd!"

A few days later, and 7,000 miles away, in Sendai, Honshu, Japan, one of the United State's most experienced airborne commanders disagreed.

Major General Joseph May Swing, commander of the historic 11th Airborne Division, sat in a darkened room at Camp Schimmelpfennig as a recording of the 82nd's Fifth Avenue march played through a projector.

His headquarters staff sat quietly as "Jumping Joe" watched General Gavin's men march smartly through the ticker tape storm as tens of thousands of cheering New Yorkers waved American flags.



Hailing from Jersey City, New Jersey, Swing was prematurely grey, Hollywood-handsome and was recognized throughout the service as a pioneer in airborne concepts and tactics. Swing had graduated from the United States Military Academy in the famous Class of 1915, the Class the Stars Fell On since of the 164 graduates, 59 (36%) attained the rank of general, more than any other class in the history of the Academy. Swing excelled at West Point alongside his roommate and football teammate Dwight Eisenhower (Omar Bradley also played with them under head coach Charles Dudley Daly).

In 1916 Swing served as a young 2nd Lieutenant under General "Black Jack" Pershing in Mexico during the "Punitive Expedition" against Pancho Villa in the 4th Field Artillery. When America entered World War I, he served in France between 1917-1918 with the 8th Field

Artillery under Chief of Staff General Payton C. March, earning France's Legion of Honor and a position as March's aide de camp.

Swing returned stateside to marry March's daughter Josephine on July 8, 1918 then graduated with honors from Fort Hood's field artillery school in 1926. Swing taught at Hood until 1931 when he entered Washington's Army War College until 1935 then bounced between units from 1935-1942.

As the film of the 82nd Airborne Division's 1946 New York victory march continued, Swing must have thought back to 1942 when he was assigned command of the 82nd Infantry Division's (later Airborne) artillery where he helped his old teammate Brigadier General Omar Bradley organize the division's units.

Had he stayed with the 82nd, perhaps Swing would have marched alongside (or in place of) General Gavin down Fifth Avenue. But given his penchant for daring leadership, Swing was instead given command of America's third airborne division, the 11th Airborne, at Camp Mackall in November of 1942 and promoted to Major General.

General Swing had led the 11th Airborne on its own extraordinary march through the history books as "saviors of the airborne" during the Knollwood Maneuvers of 1943 then on to literally helping to save the Philippines from the cruel domination of Imperial Japan in 1944-1945. 2,431 of Swing's men had become casualties in the liberation of Leyte and Luzon and over six hundred had made the ultimate sacrifice for the cause of freedom.

Swing and his men had successfully liberated over 2,100 men, women and children from behind enemy lines at Los Baños, had helped destroy the last remnant's of the enemy's forces on Luzon, had been hand-picked by General Douglas MacArthur to be the first foreign unit to land on Japan in that country's long history and form MacArthur's Honor Guard for his historic landings at Atsugi on August 30, 1945. When the well-tanned GEN Swing dropped his six-foot frame onto the Atsugi tarmac at 0600 on August 30 (Z-Day), he was the highest-ranking Allied officer in Japan.

MacArthur himself would land several hours later, and while England's Prime Minister Winston Churchill noted, "Of all the amazing deeds in the war, I regard General MacArthur's personal landing at Atsugi as the bravest of the lot," the fact that General Swing landed at Atsugi with only his 8,000 Angels around him

speaks volumes of “Jumping Joe’s” courage and daring nature.

As one of those Angels, HQ3-511’s PFC George Doherty noted, “It was.... the most courageous and daring maneuver by a conquering general and his army of occupation in the history of the world.”

A few days later, Swing’s Boys had then guarded the departure docks for the Surrender Ceremony onboard the USS Missouri on September 2 and then admirably performed Occupation Duty as “ambassadors of democracy” until 1949.

Indeed, as Secretary of War Robert Patterson once noted, “They are the best representatives the nation could have...an army of which the American nation can be proud.”

General Swing and his staff noticed that while all the soldiers in the recording of the New York City parade wore the 82nd’s “AA” on their left shoulder, nearly 5,000 wore the patches of the 101st Airborne’s Screaming Eagle, the 17th Airborne’s Golden Talon or the younger 13th Airborne’s Golden Unicorn on their right.

Swing was painfully aware that the patches represented four of America’s five airborne division, including the 13th which had not even seen combat in the war. Only his beloved 11th Airborne Division had been left out of the day’s celebrations.

The recording ended and a few staff officers quietly smoked cigarettes. The lights stayed off, as if to match the darkened feelings of the room. No one felt anything close to resembling the celebratory atmosphere of the New York Victory Parade. Instead, the mighty Angels, even their recent transfers, felt... overlooked.

After minutes of painful silence ticked by, General Joe expressed everyone’s sentiments when he whispered to no one in particular, “That should have been us. That should have been us.”

After asking the film to be played again, Swing got up halfway through and walked out with tears in his eyes.

His greatest fears were already beginning to be realized: after achieving the impossible on Leyte, effecting the improbable on Luzon, and just plain making history in Japan, his beloved Angels of the 11th Airborne Division were being relegated to a footnote in the history of the war, one that would continually be overshadowed by the legacies (and publicity) of the 101st and 82nd Airborne Division’s for decades



to come. Thousands Swing's Angels would live long, well-earned lives and then die without such fame, attention or fanfare.

None were seeking publicity. Rather, as one of those combat-hardened Angels would tell me nearly 70 years later, "I'm afraid we are being forgotten. Soon no one will know what we did over there. What I buried my friends for. Where is our movie? Our documentaries? Our newspaper articles? Does no one care? The world should know about the Angels."

It was sentiment that was shared with me time and time again I befriended and interviewed Angels for my book, **WHEN ANGELS FALL: FROM TOCCOA TO TOKYO, THE 511TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY IN WORLD WAR II** first published in 2019.

When that book hit the shelves, readers, World War II-enthusiasts and even some historians were incredulous. "There were airborne troops in the Pacific?!"

This book is dedicated to Major General Joseph May Swing and the thousands of Angels, including my grandfather 1LT Andrew Carrico III of D-511 PIR, who fought under his command.

May it, and we, forever honor "The Band of Brothers of the Pacific."

It is also dedicated to our modern Angels, and their families. When we first heard from USARAK that the 11th Airborne Division was going to be reactivated, there was excitement and pride.

I pray this book only serves to strengthen the resolve of the re-activated 11th Airborne Division's leadership and troopers to wear the 11th Airborne patch with honor as they serve out great country.

May they never forget those who have gone before them, whose story is told in this historical series, and who look "DOWN FROM HEAVEN" as they carry on the traditions of the Angels.

I must thank the numerous Angels, Angelettes, family members and museum staffs who helped make this volume possible, who opened their archives, treasure chests, memories and hearts. The challenge became which stories to tell and which to leave out as the story of the Angels is far too large to tell everyone's story to satisfaction. I confess to moments of worry over what to include and what to painfully cut.

This book is the first in a two-volume series that is my effort to tell the full World War II history of the 11th Airborne Division. Since the history of the 511th Parachute Infantry Regiment, the subject of my first book WHEN ANGELS FALL, is part of the division's history, readers of that book will find selected pieces and portions in this book. I hope that such repetitions can be forgiven since they deserve to be told and the full history of the 11th Airborne could not be told without them as the 511th PIR played an integral role on Leyte.

To all who read this book, and WHEN ANGELS FALL, as well as the second volume of this series, I feel the words of HQ-188's SGT Edward Hammrich said it best: "I do hope that I, in some small way, have given you an insight of the thoughts and reactions of the civilian soldier trained and led by my estimation, one of the best leaders in military history, General Joseph Swing."

Down From Heaven Comes Eleven! Airborne all the way!

-Jeremy C. Holm

Salt Lake City, UT 2022

Historian, 11th Airborne Division - 11thairborne.com
& 511th Parachute Infantry Regiment - 511pir.com



I am a trooper in the 11th Airborne Division of the United States Army—a protector of the greatest nation on earth.

As a soldier, I uphold the principles of freedom for which my country stands.

As a trooper, I am a superior soldier—in physical fitness, combat readiness, military bearing, courtesy, character and self-discipline.

My actions always reflect my pride in my country, my flag and my uniform.

I trust in my God and in the United States of America.

I am an American soldier.”

-The 11th Airborne Soldier’s Creed