Veteran Paratroopers Join Elite Fraternity In Ritual Known As `Prop Blast Ceremony'

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By ALAINE GRIFFIN, Courant Staff Writer

Walter Hughes literally jumped at the chance to get hazed Sunday, pretending to parachute out of a C-47 in Hartford so he could join an elite fraternity of veteran paratroopers.

Forty of his comrades joined him for the 82nd Airborne Division Association of Greater Hartford's first-ever "prop blast ceremony," a ritual begun more than six decades ago to foster fraternity and morale among airborne troopers.

That's how long it took Hughes - a highly decorated World War II veteran with two combat jumps - to earn the rite of passage that at one time was available only to officers.

Thirteen paratroopers stationed at Fort Benning, Ga., started the prop blast ritual in December 1940, naming it after the blast of air that jumpers felt after exiting aircraft. The ceremony lost its luster when it became more about drinking and hazing. The military frowned on it during the Vietnam era after deaths of paratroopers from acute alcohol poisoning were reported.

"Over the years it had a checkered history," said David Cole, chairman of the airborne division's local chapter and an organizer of Sunday's ceremony. "It became more like a college fraternity thing."

Today, only regimental commanders or officers may authorize prop blast ceremonies. Those officials preside over the event, making sure no one is abused, harassed or hazed.

Cole, 73, of Norwalk, carries a yellowed and worn card in his wallet that marks the day he was "prop blasted" on July 8, 1967. Cole, who was Sunday's "jump master," couldn't resist doing a little of his own hazing at Sunday's initiation, held inside Foot Guard Hall on High Street.

Before troopers could make the simulated jump, they were subjected to a round of trivia in which the men were asked about the history of the 82nd Airborne Division and to name weapons and Army gear.

Cole, a walking military library, was in good company as many rattled off the model numbers of rifles as if they had fired them a day earlier.

Sunday's ceremony was a party and reunion for veterans throughout New York
and New England, and a history lesson for the paratroopers born just years before the crumbling of the Berlin Wall.

"I've waited 60 years for this," Hughes, 81, of Port Jervis, N.Y., said to fresh-faced Ryan McKenna, 21, an Army sergeant from Manchester who recently served in Iraq and Afghanistan. "God, I never thought I'd live long enough to do it."

McKenna said he was humbled by the resumes of his new fraternity brothers, a graying group with hearing aids and a slowed march.

"They look like a bunch of old guys with canes," said John Moriarty, 68, of Somers, a paratrooper in the mid-1950s, as he watched his fellow veterans on the stage, doing bunny-hops out of a pretend door of a makeshift C-47. "But what you're really looking at is part of the best fighting force America ever had."

McKenna said today's paratroopers could benefit from a rebirth of the prop blast initiation, as long as the event is conducted like Sunday's ceremony.

McKenna admitted he was a bit nervous leading his group into initiation. But the upbeat ribbing matched with the mutual respect McKenna said he received bonded him with an extraordinary group of men. "This really gives you a sense of camaraderie," McKenna said. "I feel like one of them."

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