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By Sgt. David Bedard

**Alaska Guardsmen undertake final airborne operation**

**JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska** — Jumping out of a perfectly good aircraft – that's how some would describe what Pfc. Edgar Sandoval was prepared to do the drearily cloudy Alaska morning of Aug. 5.

The perfectly good aircraft in question was a UH-60 Black Hawk piloted by 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation Regiment, Alaska Army National Guard. The helicopter's cargo was six Guard paratroopers of B Company, 1st Battalion (Airborne), 143rd Infantry Regiment.

The helicopter may have been good, but the weather wasn't. During a low flyover of Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson's Malemute Drop Zone, the UH-60 passed in and out of the low cloud ceiling. The cold fog of the massive cloud formation pressed on the skin of the sheetmetal whirlybird, enveloping much of Sandoval's legs as they dangled out of the open door. The paratrooper was tethered to the ceiling of the aircraft by a static line sprouting out of his MC-6 parachute, ready to deploy – if only the weather would cooperate.

For the time being, the jump was scrubbed. The drop zone safety officer on the ground couldn't see the aircraft for much of its route, and the paratroopers would potentially have to jump through 200 feet of foggy soup before emerging in the clear.

Lt. Col. Jeffrey Roberts, 1st Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment commander, said though the risk would be worth it in combat, the conditions were too dangerous for a training jump.

It was supposed to be the last jump for paratroopers of B/1-143rd Infantry before deactivating the unit, but it would seem for the moment the airborne gods had other plans.

Chapter's end

High winds in Bethel cancelled the unit's previous attempt at a final jump last winter. Despite the Western Alaska town harboring the company's headquarters, the last hurrah was not to be.

When the unit deactivates this year, its Soldiers will integrate into the newly formed 1-143rd Infantry, a non-airborne unit, ending the Alaska Army National Guard's airborne era for the foreseeable future. Roberts said he mourns the loss of airborne status, but the transition offers other opportunities.

"It's kind of bittersweet, because as an airborne paratrooper myself, I love jumping," the colonel said. "But it takes a lot of time, and – as National Guardsmen working on the weekends – we don't have a lot of time to spare. The good thing is we will be able to focus more on our tasks: (to) support communities and also train for war."

Several family members gathered at the drop zone to witness their beloved Soldiers exit a chopper at a thousand feet.

Leah Stoner, wife of platoon leader 2nd Lt. Brandon Stoner, corralled her two sons, Caiden, 4, and Emerson, 1, for the jump. Caiden clutched a toy helicopter, his imagination coming to grips with the thought of his towering father getting shoehorned into the mechanical wonder. He spoke with his mother using his outside voice about the prospect of his dad jumping from the safety of the machine, while he looked intently at the rotors of the plastic facsimile.

If only the elements would cooperate.

A go for launch

The Black Hawk returned to Bryant Army Airfield to wait out the weather.

If Sandoval knew one thing, it's that he didn't want to jump into a white wall of cloud, losing the benefit of his sight to discern the drop zone and his fellow paratroopers. A recent graduate of the Basic Airborne Course at the U.S. Army Airborne School, Fort Benning, Georgia, this would be his seventh jump.

Up to this point, Sandoval had only jumped from fixed-wing jet- and propeller-driven aircraft, and adding another element of the unknown was disconcerting to say the least, he said.

Fortunately, as if on cue, the cloud ceiling lifted – slowly at first and then precipitously as though to clear a path for the flying green machine and the six paratroopers huddled inside.

During this run, Sandoval had his sight back. He could see the drop zone to ensure he wouldn't find himself stuck in a tree. He could see the other paratroopers to ensure he wouldn't collide with them midair. Any trepidation he had melted into confidence in his training, equipment, the jumpmaster and the Black Hawk crew.

Sitting on the sill of the helicopter door, it would be more of a hop than a jump as in the case of exiting an airplane door at speed.

The order was given, and Sandoval submitted himself to the inexorable pull of gravity. He tucked himself into a tight L-shape, feet and knees together, hands on his reserve, chin welded to his chest to weather the opening shock.

The static line trailed the paratrooper until it ran out of length, forcibly pulling the MC-6 parachute out the deployment bag, blossoming into the most beautiful sight a paratrooper can witness: a fully deployed canopy.

Having exited the perfectly good aircraft provided by 1-207th Aviation, Sandoval slowly floated to the safety of terra firma.

Soldier, father, sky trooper

As inexperienced a paratrooper as Sandoval was, Lieutenant Stoner was incrementally less experienced. He graduated Airborne School July 9, and this was his first and last jump with the unit. More importantly, it was his first jump outside the confines of the Airborne School.

Leah acknowledged the trials of having her husband, a traditional part-time Guardsman, away for training. The lieutenant left for the Infantry Basic Officer Leaders Course – also at Fort Benning – when Emerson was 10 days old.

“It definitely has its challenges,” Leah said of the separations. “But it's cool to see how proud he is when he comes back.”

Because this was his first jump with the unit, Lieutenant Stoner volunteered to wear a red helmet customarily worn by neophyte paratroopers. He would have the honor of signing it and, more

importantly, it would allow son Caiden to pick him out of his stick of six jumpers – even at a thousand feet.

When the helicopter emerged over the horizon, Caiden burst into a precocious enthusiasm only sustainable by a 4-year-old. When the crimson-helmeted officer emerged from the UH-60 like a giant green dandelion seed, the boy was ecstatic.

“My dad jumped out that thing!” Caiden proclaimed.

The musings surrounding his toy helicopter and the imaginary Soldier inside suddenly became a reality.

As the lieutenant approached the surface of the drop zone, he turned his body perpendicular to his direction of drift. Landing wasn't always gentle, and he would have to perform a parachute-landing fall to make it as pleasant as possible.

When he hit the ground, he hit the balls of his feet, the side of his calf, thigh, hip and back. Rolling like a wheel, the progression of impact spread the shock of landing throughout his body. His first and last jump with the unit complete, Lieutenant Stoner reflected on what was different about jumping from a helicopter.

“You can see the ground the whole time, and it's kind of scary,” he said. “But it's fun. It's serene when you exit the aircraft, because it's nice and quiet. You don't have the prop(eller) blast from the plane pushing you hard. It's fun.”

For Leah and family, the jump coalesced inklings of what the father and husband does in the Army into concrete understanding.

“It's exciting (for the children) to see, because we always talk about him being gone for training and Army work,” she said. “Now, they can actually see what Army work is all about.”

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#### **PHOTOS:**

1. **Flickr links** includes an event album with the complete selection of full-resolution, free downloadable images. (Flickr is not generally accessible from .mil computers.)  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/albums/72157671150712690>
2. **DVIDS** link includes story and selected full-resolution, free downloadable images. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.)  
<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/206862/last-chalk-alaska-guardsmen-undertake-final-airborne-operation>



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Alaska Army National Guard Soldiers with B Company, 1st Battalion (Airborne), 143rd Infantry Regiment, jump out of a UH-60 Black Hawk for the unit's final jump before they retire their airborne status, Aug. 5, 2016 at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska. The Soldiers will remain in Alaska but fall under the 1st Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman James Richardson)



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Paratroopers of B Company, 1st Battalion (Airborne), 143rd Infantry Regiment, exit a 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation Regiment, UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter over Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson's Malemute Drop Zone, Aug. 5, 2016. The helicopter can carry six paratroopers. It was the last Alaska jump for B/1-143rd Infantry before the unit deactivates. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. David Bedard)



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Second Lt. Brandon Stoner, B Company, 1st Battalion (Airborne), 143rd Infantry Regiment, greets son, Emerson, 1, and wife, Leah, at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson's Malemute Drop Zone, Aug. 5, 2016. The family was invited to watch the last jump for B/1-143rd Infantry. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. David Bedard)