

The Patch

Article and pictures by Jonathan B Hutchens AKA "Hutch"

After graduating from Jump School at Fort Benning on 29 May 1962, I was assigned to Okinawa. I arrived at my new duty station and was assigned to Delta Company 2/503 Infantry Combat Team. Along with Delta Company there was Alfa Company, Bravo Company, Charlie Company, HQ Company, Echo Company, 319th Artillery, Mortar Battery, and Support Company, all of which made up the 2nd Airborne Battle Group

503rd Infantry. As a Battle Group we were loosely assigned to the US Army's 1st Airborne Division headquartered in Hawaii where our fate was controlled. We never felt we were an important element of the 25th since we were not permitted to wear any shoulder sleeve insignia except the Airborne tab, even though I, from time to time, did see a few Airborne guys (usually newly arrived) wearing the 25th patch which was not authorized at that time. The US Army Division bureaucracy was just too cumbersome for a quick strike force like the 2/503 and we soon were freed from all the restrictions by the redesignation



to a Brigade organization. Our Delta Company occupied an area known as Macinado, along with Echo Company and the 319th Artillery. The other units of the 2/503 were located in an area known as Sukiran. Sukiran also was the home to a large contingent of the 3rd Marine Division which by the close proximity caused many friendly competitions, although some say they were physical confrontations—but that’s another story. From about October 1962, which encompassed my first jump into Taiwan (Tien Bing II) and various other adventures in the South China Sea area, including a 30-day gig training the ARVN forces at the village of Ibudaki, another Taiwan exercise (TIEN BING III) and the large SEATO exercise in the Spring of 1963 when we parachuted into Thailand, landing about 20 miles from the Laos border as a show of force when that SEATO country was being threatened by communist takeover during the Laotian crisis, we constantly honed our skills. Our 2/503 ABG Commanding Officer was

Colonel Robert L. Rowan who stayed with us until the 2/503rd Airborne Battle Group was reassigned to the newly reactivated 173rd Airborne Brigade (SEP). We were now the 2nd Battalion 503 Infantry in March 1963. The 1st ABG 503rd Infantry from Fort Bragg joined us on Okinawa and was renamed the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry of the 173rd Brigade. The other elements of the 503rd Battle Group were also incorporated into the

173rd Airborne Brigade (SEP). The new Brigade organization required a General officer to lead and General Williamson filled that slot. [The Army had dropped the Battle Group designation at this time and adopted the Brigade format.]

During early 1963 I was in 2nd platoon and toiling away as the platoon’s armorer when a friend of mine, Pfc Willie Bestal asked me if he could paint an eagle on “my” arms room floor. Willie always seemed to be drawing sketches and caricatures during any spare time he had between all the continuous training exercises we did. I said

“hell yes, go ahead” because I thought it would be cool and would be the only floor art in the whole of Delta Company, maybe even the 503rd

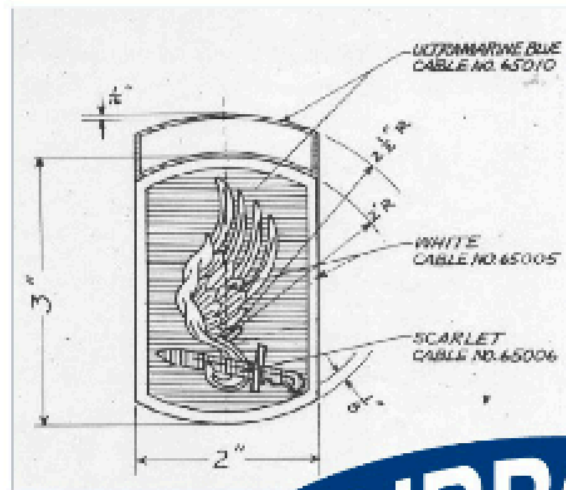


Battle Group. He did the painting and the result was unforgettable, causing any troops entering the area to consciously avoid stepping on it lest they violate some unknown rule. I subsequently moved to the company supply room as the supply sergeant, replacing SSGT George Minor

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who was rotating to CONUS, and remained there for the duration of my tour making sure my buds got everything they needed from Supply. During the Thailand exercise, my team got out of the C-124 very late because we were upstairs—and that too is another story...

During the reorganization, our Delta Company Commander, Captain Robert Losik, announced a contest to design our new 173rd Shoulder Sleeve Insignia. Please understand that since we thought of our unit as being the most STRAK (*if you don't know what that means, ask an old timer*) of all Airborne units, we deserved a shoulder patch, not just the Airborne tab, but a real patch. I mean, the 82nd had a patch and the 101st had theirs. (*When I enlisted in 1961, I didn't care what I did or where I went, as long as it was with the 101st Airborne. I didn't know any better, but somehow I got real lucky and ended up with the 2/503 on Okinawa*



and was never happier during my time in service with the US Army.) Willie Bestal was encouraged to submit a design and won the contest hands down. His reward was to be spirited away by HQ Company to, as he told me, to "create posters and things". I saw him only one more time and that's when he stopped by our company

barracks to say goodbye. And that, troopers, is how we came to be wearing that very special 173rd Airborne Brigade Shoulder Sleeve Insignia. It signifies the best of the elite and only the best deserve to wear it.

