

ROMANIAN MILITARY PARATROOPERS - 80 YEARS OF HISTORY FOR ROMANIA (PERIOD 1941-1945)

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Abstract: *In 2021, the military paratroopers celebrated 80 years of existence, since their establishment as a specialty, within the Romanian Aeronautics, later as a distinct weapon and generating, in turn, new military specialties, so necessary for an army that wants to be modern and performant.*

This specialty, established in the Romanian army at the beginning of the Second World War, was an attempt to respond and align with the needs and, why not, the modernity of the time.

Passed through the fire of August 1944, disbanded immediately after the war and reborn from its own ashes in 1950, it managed, despite many hardships and sacrifices, some particularly painful, to impose itself as an elite weapon in the panoply of a modern Romanian army.

Side by side with the military aviators, who always supported them with aircraft and aerodrome infrastructure, the paratroopers wrote history for Romania.

Keywords: *military paratroopers, aeronautics, aerodrome, elite weapon.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence and development of parachuting, first as a means of rescuing pilots and airstrikes in difficulty, then as a military specialty, has been closely linked to the evolution of air transport and their ability to provide opportunities to launch people, materials and fighting technology.

Initially used to rescue pilots, then to set altitude records, the parachute would become, at the beginning of World War II, the means by which fighters of special units would leave the board of transport aircraft to reach, along with weapons and materials from endowment, in the enemy's field or behind it. This is how airborne troops were born.

Among the first special airborne missions can be mentioned, those executed in the First World War. In November 1914, the French "deposited" a "customs officer" south of Cotelet in order to obtain information about German troops, followed by 12 other similar missions [1]. Similar actions were executed by the Italians of the 25th "Young Italy" Squadron. Among the pioneers of this kind of actions were the Romanians who submitted agents and launched manifestos behind the German front, in Nămolosa and Mărășești. The Germans, in turn, carried out the same kind of special missions in 1916 and 1917. In 1918, the Italians carried out several other similar missions [2].

2. ROMANIAN PRIORITIES IN PARACHUTING. SPORTS SKYDIVING - FORERUNNER OF MILITARY PARACHUTING

After Romania's entry into the First World War, in 1916, together with the Entente states, the war materials that France sent to Romania included those necessary for the endowment and modernization of captive balloons. The parachute suit also included parachutes, made of cotton cloth and linen pendants. If we consider that the airmen used the parachute during some combat missions to save themselves from the damaged balloons, we can consider them as the first Romanian military paratroopers. Thus, on July 2, 1917, the lieutenant aviator Gheorghe Demostene Rally, in the nacelle of a captive balloon at an altitude of 1200 meters as an aerial observer during the battles on the Mărăști-Mărășești-Nămoloasa alignment, was attacked by a formation of enemy aircraft and parachuted, saving himself with the documents on board [3]. In the same year, he was rescued for the second time with a parachute during a storm, when he was thrown out of the balloon nacelle. Lieutenants Dan Bădărău, who will later be noticed as a great philosopher, Mihai Mihalcea and Aurel Secărescu [3] also jumped from the nacelle. These airmen may be joined by aircraft crew members who, for various reasons, have been forced to leave their aircraft and rescue themselves with parachutes.

In 1937, the first parachute school in Romania was created, in order to prepare pilots for parachuting. In that year, the company IRVIN AIRCHUTE, Co. from Buffalo, USA, won the tender for the manufacture of parachutes that were to be equipped by the Romanian Aeronautics. The IRVIN parachute factory was installed on Măgurele Road, and at 1st Aerostatics Fleet from Pantelimon the same company also installed an 80 meter parachute tower, for the training of pilots. In the first series of students, trained by the American Robert Kokrill, was also the mechanical lieutenant of aviation Ștefan Șoverth, who remained an instructor within the school.

Simultaneously with the improvement of the parachute as a means of rescuing pilots in difficulty on board planes or balloons, there was also the concern to set records in the field of parachuting, so that a new branch of aeronautical sports emerged: sports parachuting.

On July 5, 1928, in Germany, Smaranda Brăescu performed the first parachute jump, together with the engineer Otto Heinecke (the inventor of the parachute of the same name), becoming the fourth patented parachutist in the world and inscribing Romania's name on the list of world priorities in this field next to France, Czechoslovakia and Switzerland. On October 21, 1931, she made a jump from 6000 meters, from a plane piloted by the Romanian aviation ace Alexandru Papană, and landed 28 km west of Slobozia. The jump was approved as a world record by the International Aeronautical Federation, and King Carol II decorated it with the order "Aeronautical Virtue", Golden Cross class. On May 19, 1932, Smaranda Brăescu performed, in Sacramento, California, a world record jump, from 7223 meters, a result approved by the Washington Aeroclub (surpassed only in 1951 by a Romanian, Traian Dumitrescu-Popa, who jumped from 7250 meters). Her name is also linked to several other priorities in the field: in October 1932 she was the first European to receive a US pilot's license, attending a US Army pilot school, on April 27, 1936 she flew through the mountainous area of Yugoslavia, to cross the Mediterranean Sea from Rome to Tripoli (1100 km) on May 19 of the same year after a flight of 6 hours and 10 minutes [4]. Along with Traian Dumitrescu – Popa, Smaranda Brăescu was hired in 1941 as a parachuting instructor in the first subunit of military paratroopers in the Romanian army, actively contributing to their training.

3. ESTABLISHMENT OF THE FIRST SUBUNIT-SCHOOL OF MILITARY PARATROOPERS. PREPARATION AND ENDOWMENT OF THE PARACHUTE BATTALION

The diminution of the country's territory and military potential as a result of the territorial abductions in the summer of 1940 and the inclusion of the Romanian state in the Axis powers system, required the adoption of a reorganization plan of the army, which took into account, among other things, the adequacy of organizational structures and the financial resources of the country and equipping large units with modern means of combat. In the spring of 1941, the establishment of the first subunit of paratroopers in the Romanian army proved more than necessary, given that most European states had established parachute units, and the efficiency of the German and Soviet ones, after the rapid successes achieved in 1940 and 1941 in Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Crete, Finland and Romania were just as many arguments for the attention paid to the air landing military structures in the Romanian army.

General Ion Antonescu notified in time the role that the air landing forces can play on the eastern front, simultaneously with the "sabotage" missions behind the enemy lines. The victories of the German paratroopers in the spring of 1940 determined him to consider the creation of paratrooper and air infantry structures, following the German model, but adapted to the specifics and, especially, to our possibilities of endowment and training.

In this sense, in June 1941 General Ion Antonescu signed *Decree-Law no. 93/1941* [5] for the establishment, organization and operation of air infantry units (transported infantry units and parachute units, organized by companies, battalions and regiments) within the Military Aeronautics. The Decree-Law entered into force on June 10, 1941, marking the birthday of military parachuting in Romania.

The conditions of recruitment and admission in these units, the promotion of officers, non-commissioned officers and troops, salaries and special allowances were rigorously argued and highlighted the special attention that the head of state pays to the establishment of this category of troops.

With *Order no. 12910/3 October 1941*, the Air Staff ordered the "discharge" of the parachute company from the Aeronautics Training Center (located in Popești-Leordeni) to the 1st Flotilla Aerostation from Pantelimon, as a task to mobilize it. At the command of the company, Lieutenant Gheorghe Iordăchescu was appointed. Shortly afterwards, Lieutenant Ștefan Șoverth was appointed commander of the company.

At the beginning of September 1942, Aviator Squadron General Gheorghe Jienescu, Undersecretary of State for Air, supported the maintenance of the parachute battalion within the Air Force, arguing that "the training and instruction of parachute personnel can only be done in close connection with Aviation, parachute elements and airplane being the basis of the training of paratroopers, as means of transport in the air environment, indispensable for fulfilling the missions that can be entrusted to this weapon; the use of parachute units in operations, for most of their missions, can only be done in a system of combined air operations, in which all categories of air weapons are called to compete - information, hunting, bombing; the transfer of parachute units to the staff of the State Chief of Guard's Regiment would dislodge this weapon from its natural environment of development and use, would entail the deployment of other units - transport and training aircraft, parachuting, technical echelons - which today serve and Aeronautics, so it would lead to a dispersion of means - and so few - instead of keeping them centralized.

Consequently, both in peacetime and in war, the life of these units cannot be detached from the life of the air weapon, and the same spirit, with the same mentality, characterizes this weapon as the air weapon. In fact, wherever it exists, the parachute and air infantry units are part of the Air Force” [5].

At the beginning of 1942, the Air Force General Staff was ordered to organize a parachute battalion. On March 31, 1942, the second parachute company was established, and in June 1942, the 4th Parachute Battalion was formed, within the 1st Aerostation Fleet. Captain Enea Bordan was appointed commander of the battalion. He was followed by Major Ion Ghita and Major Teodor Dobre.

The patent as a military parachutist was made by performing 3 parachutes, but it was considered completed only after completing the entire period of specific training. The uniforms, equipment rights and money (balances and special allowances) were those of the Air Force flight crew.

The combat training of the subunits focused on parachute tactics (tactical training of the soldier, group, platoon, parachute company), specialized air training, parachute knowledge and folding, training in aircraft silhouettes and ground launch tower, meteorology and aviation equipment, parachuting theory, topography, pioneering (destruction), special means of combat (intelligence, sabotage, terrorism), geography, transmissions, public administration. Particular attention is paid to physical training (running speed and endurance, gymnastics, boxing and jiu-jitsu) and driving different categories of vehicles (tanks, cars, mopeds, motorcycles).

The tactical applications were executed with or without parachute launches, with or without combat firing, in August 1942 being experienced the possibility of resupplying the troops by air, at an exercise by parachuting in the Bucegi Mountains. In fact, special emphasis was placed on specific instruction in the mountains, mountaineering, orienteering, use of access roads in the mountains in low visibility conditions. The platoon with special missions was prepared through specific actions (diversion, sabotage, etc.) to real civilian and military objectives.

At the order of the upper echelons, soldiers from the battalion were sent to the front, to carry out special missions behind the enemy device. Within the battalion, cadres from other categories of forces were also trained to carry out special missions.

4. CONCERNS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A PARACHUTE CORPS AND AN AIR CORPS. THE PARTICIPATION OF THE ROMANIAN PARATROOPERS IN THE DEFENSE OF THE NORTHERN PART OF THE CAPITAL (AUGUST 24 - 28, 1944)

Carrying out a detailed study, in comparison with the bases of organization and functioning of the parachute units from other countries, the General Staff of the Air submitted, in March 1943, to the Undersecretariat of State for Air a "Study on the constitution of the Romanian Parachute Corps" [5] in which he proposed the doctrine of the use of Romanian parachute units (combat units of paratroopers and special paratroopers), to adopt the German methods and procedures of action, the organization of a parachute battalion and two air infantry battalions, in the structure of an air corps).

It should be noted in this study the distinct position and status established for special paratroopers, who will be recruited, trained and constituted secretly and separately from the General Staff or State Security, participating with the unit only in parachute training. As an essential condition for the recruitment of these fighters was mentioned the need for a perfect knowledge of the language and environment of neighboring countries.

On this study, the Undersecretary of State for the Air, Squadron General Gheorghe Jienescu, recommended, in the resolution, that the parachute units continue to join the Air Force, showing that "for the beginning we are only interested in paratroopers - as fighters, infantry "in the near future" [5], arguing that "Romanian realities do not allow the organization of large air units with strategic missions; we will fight in the immediate vicinity of the battle line in the tactical field" [5].

It was also believed that by creating airborne infantry, it could come to the aid of paratroopers and save paratroopers and transport aircraft. However, this, in turn, was dependent on the transport capacity of the gliders, on the safety of the landing field, on the fact that the transport could only be done during the day, protected by the hunting aviation.

Decree-Law no. 3188 of December 11, 1943 provided for the establishment within the Romanian Royal Aeronautics of a Corps of Military Paratroopers, comprising combat units (battalions, regiments, large units) and a Parachute Training Center with the necessary specialized schools.

In the conditions in which the material base was more and more difficult to achieve, and the recruitment of volunteers did not give the expected results, the regiment expected to be created in the spring of 1944 remained in the intention stage. So is the Corps of Military Paratroopers and the Airborne Infantry Corps.

Until August 23, 1944, the Romanian army had managed to have only a parachute battalion ready for battle (a platoon of special missions, two parachute companies, a heavy weapons company and a rolling stock). Although he had an adequate level of training and equipment, it was not used in combat until the summer of 1944.

After the events of the evening of August 23, due to the danger posed by the German troops in the northern part of the Capital, it was necessary to engage in combat and the Parachute Battalion. The way he acted for the victory of the Romanian troops in the Bucharest area remains emblematic for the history of this weapon.

The "Captain Mihai Țanțu" Operational Detachment was sounded the alarm around 23.00 and its entry into the device was ordered, with a platoon of paratroopers at Băneasa airport, a platoon at Boteni (Titu) aerodrome, where the General Staff of Air, a platoon to guard the Undersecretariat of State for Air (Bucharest) and a platoon at the Anti-Aircraft Artillery Command (ACA/Aircraft Defense) in Carol Park. The other forces of the detachment, under the command of the paratrooper captain Mihai Țanțu, were waiting, ready for action.

The German attack on the Romanian capital began on the morning of August 24, with a massive bombardment of the Royal Palace and other targets in the city center. At the same time, the German subunits in the camp in the Băneasa forest, trying to occupy the city, opened fire on the Romanian soldiers who entered the defense device. For the defense of the northern area of Bucharest (Băneasa-Pipera-Herăstrău) the Military Command of the Capital constituted the "Comandor Marin Anton" Detachment, initially formed by two companies of students of the Aviation Training Center, to which were later added the Parachutists of the Detachment Operative "Captain Mihai Țanțu", a Brandt launcher platoon and a 57 mm cannon section. Only on August 24, around 19.00, the Military Command of the Capital made available to the group an infantry battalion from the recruits of the 27th and 10th Infantry Regiments, and on the evening of August 25, the Instruction Guard Division. Other subunits entered the battle in the following days: an aviation platoon (Aero Transport Group), a gendarmerie battalion (on the evening of August 26), a battery from the 13th Artillery Regiment.

In this composition, the "Comandor Marin Anton" Detachment, having as main protagonists the fighters of the Parachute Battalion, successfully participated in the rejection of the group of German forces from Băneasa-Pipera-Herăstrău area, contributing together with the other units of the Romanian army to defend Bucharest, where the Germans were determined to reissue the reprisals, they inflicted on Warsaw in early August 1944.

On the morning of August 28, the Parachute Battalion was ordered to regroup on Pipera airfield, in order to return to the barracks of the 1st Air Station in the Pantelimon forest.

In these battles, the paratroopers captured several prisoners, 5 planes, weapons and several vehicles, noting in this sense the paratrooper lieutenant Ioan Țetcu who, together with 6 subordinate soldiers, captured 25 cars and 150 German soldiers [6].

In the battles for the defense of the northern part of the Capital, the Romanian paratroopers paid their blood tribute, the battalion having 19 dead, 59 wounded and 3 missing. For the acts of weapons committed, the officers, non-commissioned officers and the troop were summoned by agenda and proposed for decoration. The commander of the Parachute Battalion, Major Teodor Dobre, was decorated with the "Mihai Viteazul" Order, 2nd class, with swords.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Following the restructuring (disbandment) ordered by the Allied Control Commission (Soviet), on December 15, 1944 the Parachute Battalion was transformed into a guard battalion, and on March 1, 1945 the Air Force ordered its disbandment, along with other units of the Air Force. . Thus, the existence of a military structure was suddenly stopped, which the Romanian army considered an elite unit, whose high degree of training was proved in the actions of defense of the north of Bucharest. Many of the paratroopers chose the armed struggle against the communist regime imposed by the Soviets, joining the National Resistance Movement, taking the risk of being arrested and sentenced to years in prison.

The spirit of the body and the feeling of belonging to an elite weapon were preserved and transferred to the new parachute unit, re-established in November 1950.

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