

New memorial for paratroopers dedicated at Miramar National Cemetery



Airborne Veteran Sgt. Augustin M. Tejeda stands near the just-unveiled monument to Airborne paratroopers at Miramar National Cemetery Saturday. (John Gastaldo/U-T)



By **Carl Prine** - Contact Reporter

MARCH 17, 2018, 3:30 PM | MIRAMAR

Standing in their green uniforms, their trousers bloused in their boots, the former soldiers quipped that they were used to being surrounded by the enemy because they parachuted behind them.

Now, a special monument to paratroopers is surrounded by a sea of gravestones marking their friends in all the armed services.

More than 70 veterans gathered Saturday morning at Miramar National Cemetery to dedicate a hip-high marble memorial to honor the men and women who have worn silver parachute wings, the uniform badge that signifies someone has passed paratrooper training.

Although dedicated to all the armed forces, nearly all of the vets gathering in the drizzle wore the maroon berets of the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade or the 82nd Airborne Division.

Nonprofit associations tied to both units raised the funds to pay for the nearly \$5,000 memorial and staged Saturday's solemn ceremony to unveil it.

It took nearly two years, but the paratrooper monument now stands next to five similar memorials erected to honor the sacrifice of Jewish war veterans, Korean War vets, the Navy's Seabees and Nurse Corps and the Army's Special Forces.

"We wanted to honor all these guys," said Jon Hutchens, 76, the project's director and the president of the Escondido-based chapter of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Association. "If your family wanted to bury your father or brother here, they're in good company. They'll never be forgotten."

Administered by the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs](#), the 313-acre Miramar National Cemetery rubs against the northwest corner of the Marines' air station. After Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery closed off its grounds to most casket burials in 1966, Miramar was designed to hold the remains of 235,000 San Diego County vets.

Although it's in a region best known for its large number of Marines and sailors, the cemetery on Saturday drew local paratroopers who had served during every war since the founding of the Army's airborne school in 1941.

Near the back was John Short, 94, a retired U.S. Postal Service mechanic from Rancho Bernardo. A former smoke jumper in Idaho, he was drafted into the "Thunderbirds" of the Army's 501st Parachute Test Battalion, a forerunner at Georgia's Fort Benning for all future sky units.

He stood across from retired Army Staff Sgt. Miguel Alatorre, the keynote speaker who was wounded in Afghanistan, and Alfred "Al" Gonzalez, a paratrooper who fought in Korea and now volunteers his time as an officer in the San Diego chapter of the 82nd Airborne Division Association.

"We wanted the memorial to be a legacy for the younger people," said Gonzalez, 86, a former engineer for General Dynamics and other government contractors. "We wanted them to see who we are and what we do, what risks we take to protect the freedoms of our country. By having it here, when they see the memorial we hope it inspires a lot of people who want to serve their country to consider becoming paratroopers."

Visitors will find the new monument alongside the cemetery's Memorial Walkway, about two blocks inside the main entrance and just behind the columbarium, where funeral urns are kept. The grounds are open from sunrise to sunset daily.