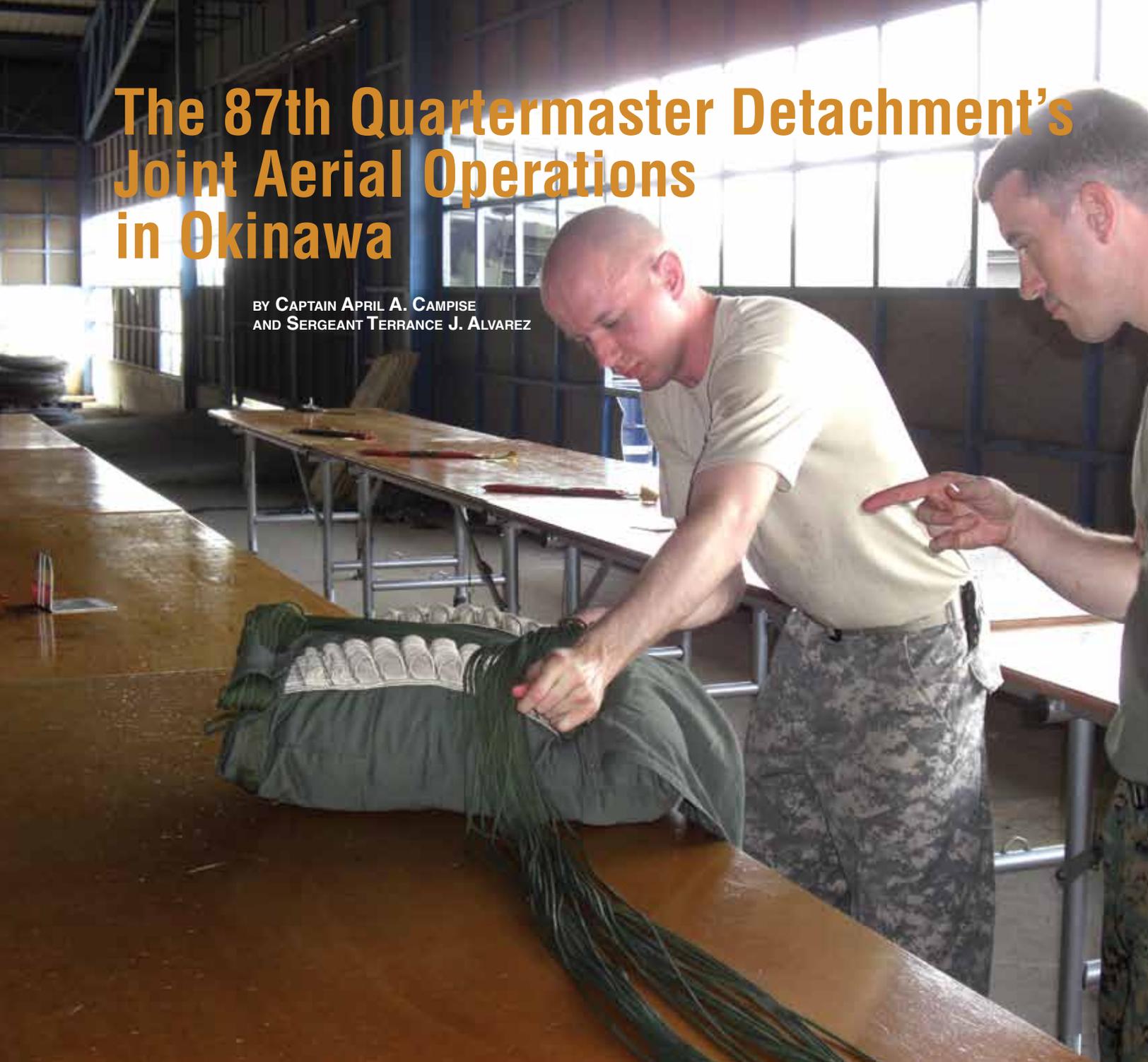


# The 87th Quartermaster Detachment's Joint Aerial Operations in Okinawa

BY CAPTAIN APRIL A. CAMPISE  
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**T**he 87th Quartermaster Detachment (Parachute) has served a unique role as the sole Active Army airborne unit in Okinawa, Japan, since 2005. The unit will inactivate as part of a scheduled Army drawdown in the Pacific theater this year. Made up of Army parachute riggers, the detachment is responsible for servicing and maintaining all equipment for aerial delivery contingency operations in Okinawa and the rest of Japan. Annually, the detachment packs and inspects an average of 14,000 pieces of aerial delivery equipment at Sagami General Depot, near Tokyo, and

maintains hundreds of wartime contingency parachutes stored in Okinawa.

## Operation Cobra Gold

Annually, the 87th Quartermaster Detachment participates in Cobra Gold, a bilateral exercise built around the exchange of military training and experience with the Royal Thai Army. During past Cobra Gold exercises, the detachment has built important and lasting multinational and joint relations with both the Thai Army and the U.S. Marine Corps stationed in Okinawa.



***A Marine sergeant watches an Army sergeant pack an MCI-1D parachute.***

For the past 3 years, the 3d Marine Logistics Group and the 87th Quartermaster Detachment have deployed paratroopers from Okinawa to Thailand to serve as the combined aerial delivery element in support of Operation Cobra Gold.

For years, Marine and Army parachute riggers in Okinawa have been combining efforts to conduct joint parachute rigging operations in the Pacific. Historically, the riggers have executed a broad range of aerial operations, including packing and performing hundreds of day and night low-level static-line parachute and military free-fall parachute jumps. The riggers also have dropped more than 16,000 pounds of cargo, all of which hit the drop zone without a single malfunction or incident.

These missions have provided great opportunities for combined training and team building among the services and have helped to foster an enduring relationship among Army and Marine Corps riggers. All training conducted by the parachute riggers is executed with the safety of the community and participants in mind. All actions

taken by the U.S. participants follow well-established safety procedures. This training remains essential for U.S. troop readiness, the mutual defense of Japan, and regional peace and security.

### **Army and Marine Corps Collaboration**

In October 2010, the 87th Quartermaster Detachment and the 3d Marine Logistics Group signed a memorandum of agreement to operate jointly out of one facility. Since then, both units have strategically combined resources and linked efforts on airborne operations and

daily missions such as inventories and shop maintenance.

The collocation of the two units has been a beneficial learning experience in joint operations for both services. Working closely with one another has enabled an exchange of experience and knowledge that has helped each service grow and learn from the other.

According to Army rigger Sergeant Terrance Alvarez, “Even though we have the same basic skill sets, there are differences in techniques the two branches use to accomplish the same task.” Marine riggers, for example, follow slightly different packing protocols than Army riggers.

Each unit has its own strengths and weaknesses. The Marine riggers are known to be experts in heavy drops (loads greater than 500 pounds). Although Soldiers from the 87th Quartermaster Detachment also are proficient in executing the same containerized delivery, bundle, and platform drops, they have more expertise in static-line personnel drops. As a joint force, the units have relied on each other’s experiences to become better riggers overall. During exercises, Army jumpmasters work hand-in-hand with Marine jumpmasters to safely execute joint airborne operations.

When it comes to establishing and running a drop zone, standard operating procedures largely remain the same. However, Marine and Army riggers contribute to the shared operation by providing experience and input from their respective services.

“Working with the Marines has provided me with insight into a different world of parachute rigging [that] I wouldn’t have otherwise been privy to,” said Army Corporal Edwin Bocanegra-Torres. “We reach the same end state, but the process we use for getting there can vary. I wouldn’t say one method is better than the other, but the Marines have definitely shared techniques and capabilities with us that we wouldn’t otherwise have been exposed to in a standard Army environment.”

The bottom line for both units is that as a combined force, they share the same overall goal. “When we conduct an operation together, it isn’t about being an Army Soldier or being a Marine; it’s about being a rigger,” said Army Specialist Kyle McNary. “It’s about getting people out of the bird safely and getting the equipment to the ground in one piece.”

### **Advantages of the Joint Relationship**

The joint relationship these units have built is rare and special for tactical-level parachute rigging operations. Working as a team has enabled both services to streamline their operations and obtain the most effective use of resources, funding, and training opportunities. Serving as a joint capability in Okinawa has also provided a distinctive learning experience for Soldiers. According to Army jumpmaster and Quartermaster detachment noncommissioned officer-in-charge Staff



*A Soldier inspects another Soldier's jump gear before a jump.*

Sergeant Archie Gadsen, “Serving with Marine jumpmasters has been a broadening experience, and it’s unlike anything else I have done in the Army. We are better Soldiers and technical experts because of this experience.”

“The day I leave this island will be a sad day because this is the only place in the military where parachute riggers from the different services can work together, said Army Corporal Jorge Alaniz. “It’s been fun, I’ve made lots of friends, and I have enjoyed this opportunity to work with the Marines.”

When asked about serving with the Army riggers, Marine Corporal Elizabeth Myers said, “Out of my 5 years of service, [working with Army riggers] has easily been one of the greatest experiences I’ve had in that time. The Army riggers brought diversity to not only the job we do but also the daily work environment.”

This year, all personnel from the 87th Quartermaster Detachment will be reassigned to other units as the detachment inactivates. By official standards, this means that the detachment could be called back to active duty years down the road. However, for now, the aerial delivery mission in the Pacific must be handed over to another unit.

Although the detachment is inactivating, many feel history has been made through this experience. As Staff Sergeant Gadsen put it, “The relationships that have been made between the Army and Marine parachute riggers cannot be replaced. Even with the unit inactivating, these friendships will last a lifetime, and the lessons learned will stay with us forever.”

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