

The PLA Air Force's "Thunder Gods" Airborne Commando Unit

OE Watch Commentary: In the Chinese military, the airborne forces—with the exception of parachute-trained members of special forces units from other services—belong to the PLA Air Force (PLAAF). China's Airborne Corps, formerly the 15th Airborne Corps, has been reorganized to adopt new missions, equipment and improve command and control. One area that has seen significant expansion is its special forces component. PLAAF Special Forces are tasked with carrying out penetration operations, killing key enemy figures and destroying enemy command and control facilities. Initially only a regiment, this has been upgraded to a brigade. In September 2011, the "Leishen" (thunder god) Commando Unit [雷神突击队] was founded as an elite force within China's Airborne Corps; its development over the past several years is noted in the accompanying excerpted articles.

Tasked with "reaching all regions, taking advantage of all opportunities, overcoming all difficulties, and defeating all opponents", the Leishen unit, as elite parachutists, have acted as a test bed for innovations in the airborne corps. They train jumping from different aircraft and using various parachute configurations and maneuvers. Members of Leishen have attended Venezuela's "Hunter School" to learn jungle warfare and participated in several international special forces competitions.

As a "special force within the special forces," the Leishen commandos have strict physical standards and expect soldiers attempting to join the unit to already have advanced skills. In addition to requirements common to all special forces—and differentiating them from regular members of the Airborne Corps—candidates to join the Leishen unit must have participated in multiple major drills and be able to jump under the "three 'no'" conditions that emphasize realism in training: no ground command, no target guidance and no support personnel. They must also be proficient in using four different types of parachutes. After acceptance, the recruits into the unit face intense training commando training that has a roughly 50 percent washout rate.

China has traditionally lacked the transport aircraft needed to perform a major airborne operation. With the Y-20 heavy lift transport entering mass production and upgrades to smaller aircraft being rolled out, that situation is changing. Although still in its early stages, PLAAF special forces units like the Leishen commandos have laid an important foundation for building a strong strategic deterrent and power projection capability. **End OE Watch Commentary (Wood)**

“The program organized drills, focusing on more than 20 high-difficulty subjects such as helicopter parachute jumps, penetration operations from high-altitude using wing-type parachutes, low-altitude parachute assault, and ground long-distance penetration.”

Source: “雷神’突击，天降奇兵，” (“Thunder Gods’ Surprise Attack”), *People’s Daily*, 2 December 2013. http://kj.81.cn/content/2013-12/02/content_5672125.htm

Shi Jianchang [史建强], commander of the Leishen Commando unit: “The advantages of precision parachute and helicopter landing are important features differentiating airborne special forces from other special forces.”

...According to Major General Li Fengbiao [李凤彪], commander of the Airborne Forces, over the past two years, the commando team has focused on the joint operational requirements under the conditions of informationization, fearlessly changed the traditional training methods, determined the tasks according to the operational tasks, and creating an environment that better reflects operational requirements. The program organized drills, focusing on more than 20 high-difficulty subjects such as helicopter parachute jumps, penetration operations from high-altitude using wing-type parachutes, low-altitude parachute assault, and ground long-distance penetration.

Source: “In-depth: A close look at Chinese airborne troops,” *China Military*, 30 August 2017. http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-08/30/content_7736996.htm

The special operations regiment that was directly affiliated to the corps were expanded into a special operations brigade. While increasing the number of special forces in the airborne troops, this also indicated one of the future directions of the airborne troops - special operations...

As the new airborne troops are reorganized into brigades, the brigades will be more professional and modular in the future, and each, assisted by the support unit, will be an independent unit that is able to undertake a battle-size airborne combat.

“In this way, the airborne troops will have better maneuvering capability and can reach the destination in every theater.” According to Zhao Jinjun, deputy chief of staff of the airborne troops, this makes the input of troops more flexible and mobile either for independent combat or the combined combat of several theaters.

Chinese special forces units including the “Leishen” commandos practice infiltration using Harbin Y-12 aircraft like the one pictured here.
Source: “Harbin Y-12e” By Mike-tango, CC-BY-SA-3.0 7 November, 2008. <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c8/Y12e.jpg>.

