

The Swing Cap, 1944-1947

The Swing Cap was widely worn immediately after the close of World War II by 11th Airborne Division troops while the unit served as an occupation force in Japan. The name comes from the World War II 11th Airborne Division commander, Major General Joseph M. Swing. The cap soon disappeared and as a veteran of that time stated, “new headgear concepts aren’t new.”

The cap itself generally resembles the billed fatigue or utility cap of World War II, but with a larger crown. General Swing had the first caps made in Lipa City, the Philippines, and one of the World War II division members thinks that Swing even wore the cap during the signing of the surrender papers on the U.S.S. Missouri. Use of the cap really started in Japan, where local tailors made them from olive drab wool or khaki cotton shirts, nominally to match the seasonal uniforms. Despite the olive drab and khaki color versions, photos show some soldiers wearing color mismatched caps and uniforms. Some men also wore the cap with the herringbone twill utility uniforms.



The Parachute Maintenance Company of the 511th Parachute Infantry Regiment initially made the caps, starting in the Philippines, as the company had the machinery and skilled operators, but as demand grew during the occupation, civilian tailors in Japan took over. A former clerk-typist at the 511th Regimental Headquarters recalls his was made in 1946 by someone who had a contact in the local town, Hachinohe, Japan.

Bill lengths varied as did the height and blouse of the crown. Insignia often included a parachute overseas patch on the side, right for officers and left for enlisted, just as on the garrison or overseas cap, although some surviving caps and photos indicate not everyone wore the parachute patch.



While units in Europe and the United States appear to have started wearing the red-edged, dark blue cap patch with the combined white parachute and glider shortly after the end of World War II, while in Japan the 11th Division apparently wore only the cap patch of a white parachute on a blue circle with white edge, although sometimes these patches were black or dark blue velvet if made in Japan. Many Swing Caps also sported an airborne tab on the front and some officers wore the rank below the airborne arc. At that time the army assigned men to the

11th Airborne Division who had not been to airborne school and the division conducted local parachute training, after which they earned their parachutist badges.



Troopers preferred the Swing Cap to the authorized headgear not only because it was unique and distinctive (highly trained soldiers from special outfits always like to stand out), but the cap with a bill was more functional than the standard overseas or garrison cap. Bureaucracy ruled the peacetime army, even in occupied Japan, and General MacArthur, who wore his own special uniforms at times, outlawed the caps in early 1947.



The 11th Airborne Division in World War II and in the Japanese occupation period included the 511th Parachute Infantry Regiment and the 187th and 188th Infantry Regiments. Both the 187th and 188th initially were glider regiments, with the army converting the 188th to parachute status in the summer of 1945. The army activated the division in February 1943 at Camp Mackall, NC, and it soon went to New Guinea. After fighting on the Philippines, at the end of August 1945 the division started to arrive near Tokyo. In mid-September 1945 the division moved to northern Japan to control half of the island of Honshu and all of Hokkaido. The division rotated to Ft. Campbell in 1949 where it became a training division, and in 1956 it moved to Germany for two years. After the transfer to Ft. Campbell the 187th Infantry became an airborne unit separate

from the 11th Airborne Division. During the Korean War the regiment became the centerpiece of the 187th Regimental Combat Team, serving with the 674th Field Artillery Battalion. The army reactivated the 11th Division at Fort Benning and made it the test air assault division just prior to the Vietnam War. Now the 11th Division, like the Swing Cap, is now just a memory.