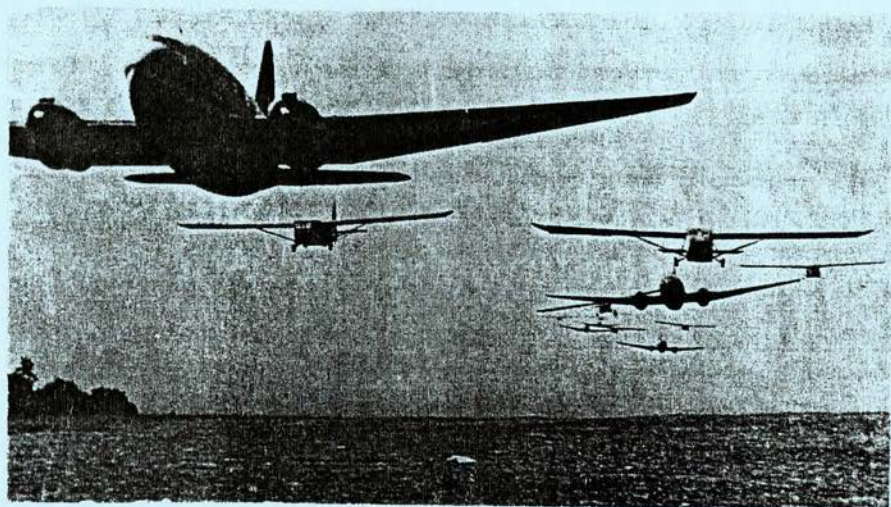


# On Silent Wings

By Kathleen McAuliffe



Military Gliders as used in  
World War II

# Crossing the lines on silent wings

*Kathleen McAuliffe*

*D-Day was their finest hour, but all through  
the war, unsung men of the glider service  
flew and fought risky and decisive missions*

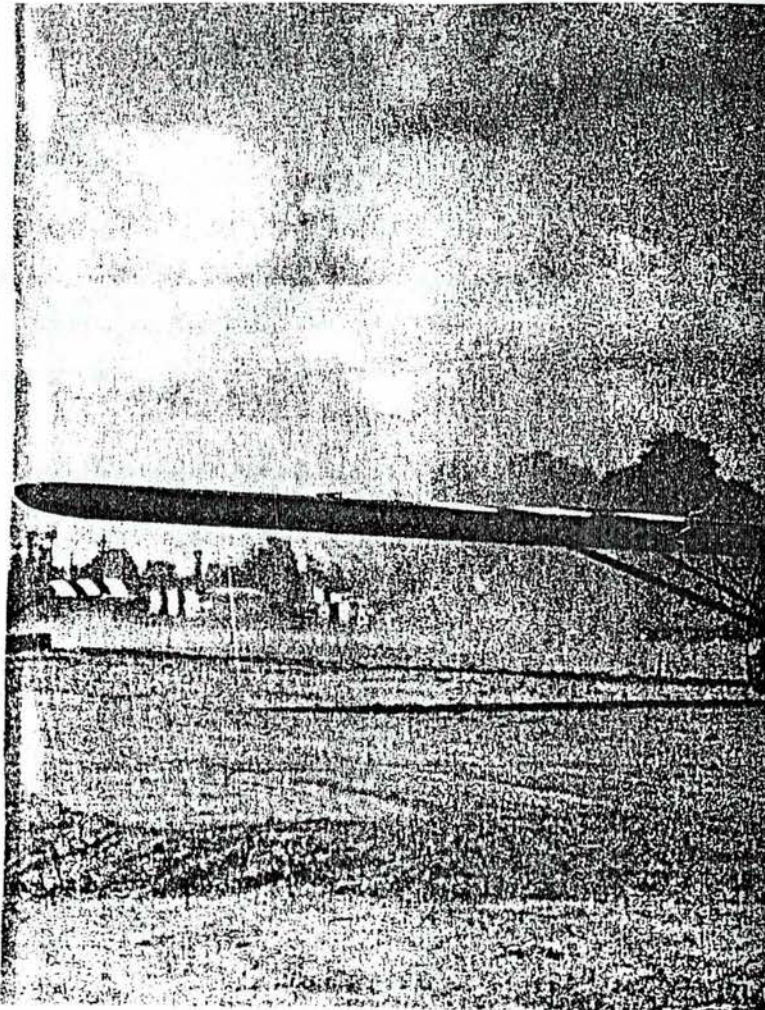
"See this 'G,'" said Earl Shoup, pointing to the letter on the silver Air Force wings fixed to his lapel. "Do you know what that stands for?" His buddies, all sporting the same 'G'-wings, beat him to the punch line: "Guts!" they chimed in unison, their battle cry since their beer-guzzling days back in the service.

Overhead, F-18s swooped in for a 600-mile-per-hour flyby, dazzling the spectators who flocked to the airshow at McChord Air Force Base in Tacoma, Washington. As the rolling thunder of jet engines trailed off to a whisper, an official seized the opportunity to announce the 70 World War II glider pilots gathered as honorary guests at the VIP stand. "Let's give 'em a big round of applause!" he rallied the crowd.

"Glanders! You guys flew gliders in World War II?" The middle-aged Korean War vet couldn't believe his ears.

"Jesus!" boomed a voice from a neighboring bleacher. "I didn't know that—and I was there."

With supersonic warbirds crisscrossing the clouds this fine afternoon five decades after World War II, it was hard to imagine that dinky motorless craft ever set off on death-defying missions into enemy territory. But the men who volunteered to pilot those "flying coffins," to little or no fanfare during the war, have not forgotten.



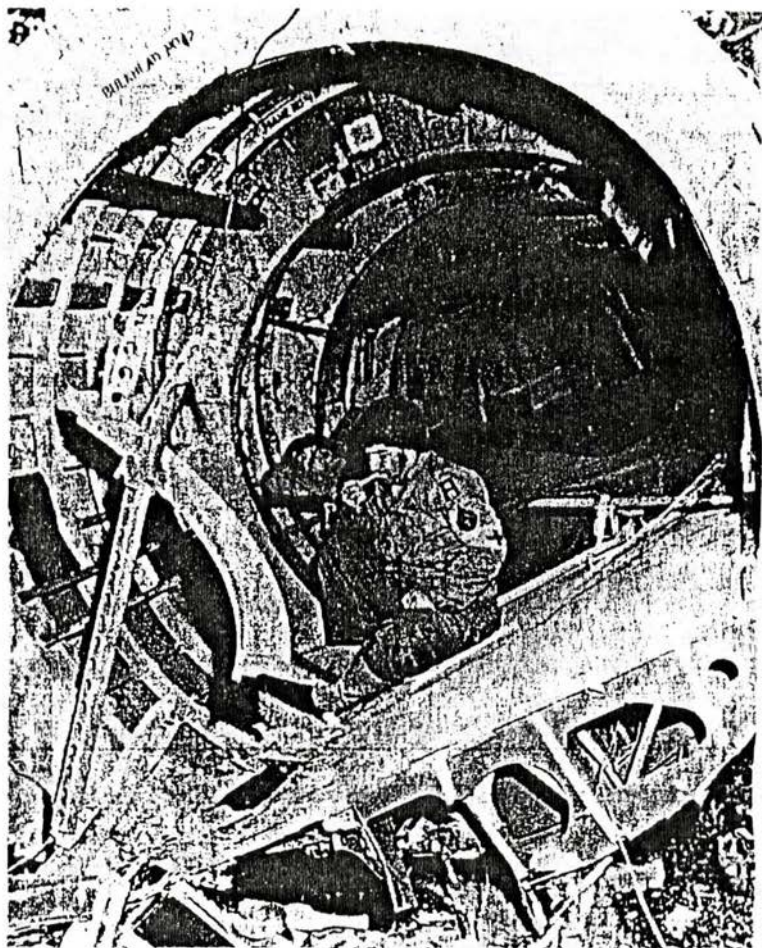
Gliders with special D-Day invasion stripes kick up dust while landing.

Though celebrated airborne divisions like the 82d and 101st with whom they served are justly famous, glider men went largely unrecognized. All these decades later they still resent the fact, and they have astonishing tales to tell—of luck, terror, heroism, as well as plenty of snafus, aloft and aground. “We’re still swapping lies about it,” Shoup told me.

This was long after the fighting. Some old pilots each year inevitably tend to get subtracted from the group, among them Shoup, who died not long after I met him in Tacoma to talk about the glider war. Embellishments aside, glider pilots suffered some of the highest casualties in World War II. As Walter Cronkite, who rode a glider during combat in Europe in 1944 as a young war correspondent, said of the experience: “It was a lifetime cure for constipation.”

Although history relegated them to obscurity, glider pilots were at the vanguard of almost every major U.S. engagement of the war: D-Day in Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, the liberation of Holland, the crossing of the Rhine into Wesel, as well as earlier assaults on Sicily, southern France and even Burma. Their sneak night landings north of Mandalay in 1944-45 kept Japanese troops on the defensive. There were only 6,500 glider pilots in all—a tiny fraction of total Air Force personnel. But they were the only men who both flew aircraft and fought as infantry on the ground.

Glider pilots also pioneered an attack concept called vertical envelopment. After being borne aloft by a tow-line attached to a powered plane, the pilot would cut loose over the target and silently descend behind the lines in enemy territory where—with luck—his craft could be set down on a back road or a pasture amid grazing cattle, or even in five feet of standing corn. Basically, glider pilots served a function similar to helicopter pilots today—transporting men, fuel, ammunition, Jeeps and medical supplies. Only once down, they were down for good. What they had to do then was fight.



Medics (above) use wrecked glider as battlefield aid station.

On the ground, the commander in the air suddenly found himself taking orders from members of the airborne division, which typically consisted of about 4,000 glider infantry and 8,000 paratroopers. Scattered all over the landing zone, these mixed units assembled in small bands as best they could and launched attacks against enemy defensive positions to clear the way for the main invasion forces.

Their goal was to knock out artillery batteries and seize bridges, railways and airports. If all went well, the bulk of the Allied army would then join up with the airborne division a few days later, relieving the glider pilots

so they could be shipped back to the air bases from which they departed. At least that was how it was supposed to work. But often, former glider pilot Lee G. Hampson noted, "it was like flying a stick of dynamite through the gates of hell."

Imagine, Hampson said, floating at treetop level on "a flimsy, fabric-covered glider loaded with 13 infantrymen or cartons of highly explosive ammunition, gasoline and TNT, through a murderous barrage of heavy flak, and then crash-landing in a tiny field surrounded by 80-foot trees and planted with anti-glider poles. As you crawl out of the wrecked glider you are charged by big tanks and enemy soldiers tossing hand grenades and firing small arms, mortar and machine guns at you."

If flying a glider into combat sounds like a fiendish idea, it should come as no surprise that the scheme was the brainchild of the Führer, Adolf Hitler himself. By early 1940, the German Army had swallowed up Austria and the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia, and had divided Poland with the Russians. Thus freed on the southern and eastern flanks, Hitler turned his attention to the conquest of Northern Europe. He quickly ruled out a headlong assault on France's Maginot Line.

The obvious solution was to punch past it near the Belgian border and sweep around to the north. But there—in the direct path of his war machine—

stood the "impregnable" Belgian fortress of Eben Emael.

Towering over several key bridges at the juncture of the Meuse River with the Albert Canal, Eben Emael stood in the way of the German force set to invade Belgium, Holland and France. The German high command estimated that it would take 6,000 crack ground troops months to seize the heavily armored installation. Unhappy with that timetable, Hitler conceived the daring plan of using a new, and untested, weapon—the glider.

Shortly before dawn on May 10, 1940, in one of the brilliant small tactical feats of the war, ten gliders carrying 78 men landed on the grassy, 1,000-yard-long roof of the fortress. Before stupefied Belgian machine gunners could stop them, the Germans burst out of their gliders and raced to the fort's steel cupolas, which they quickly piled with recently invented 100-pound demolition charges. Even the Germans were stunned by the force of the blast, which tore into the bowels of the fort, incinerating gun crews and other soldiers trapped below. Twenty-eight hours later, the 780-man garrison surrendered. The critical fortress had fallen to Hitler at a cost of only 6 Germans killed and 20 wounded.

Shocked by the news of Eben Emael's devastating defeat, the British raced to develop military gliders. They were followed a year later by the



On D-Day, the 6th of June 1944, two rows of gliders flanked by towplanes line up on a runway in England, ready to take part in the Normandy campaign.

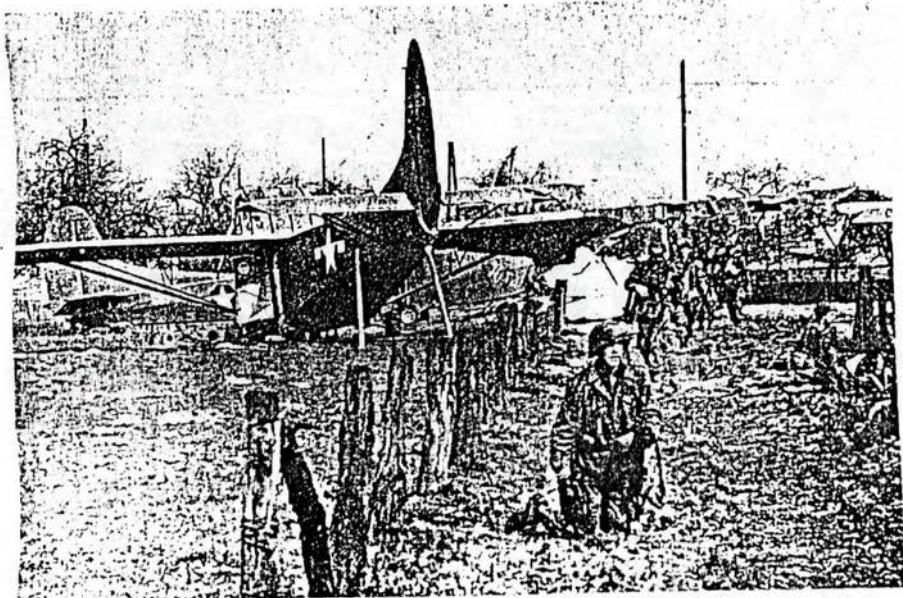
Americans, whose initial reluctance to embrace the idea was rapidly overcome by Pearl Harbor and a second successful glider assault by the Germans during the capture of Crete. The top brass in Washington, however, could never quite decide just what flight qualities a glider should have, or even what exactly a glider group was to do. Eventually, the Army settled on the CG-4A. A boxy prototype designed by the Waco Aircraft Company of Troy, Ohio, it was better suited for hauling cargo than performing the kind of surprise tactical missions the German gliders had pioneered.

It did not inspire confidence in the men expected to pilot it. Resembling a flying crate, the fragile contraption consisted of a fabric-covered tubular steel frame with plywood flooring. With a wingspan of almost 84 feet, it could carry a pilot, copilot and 13 infantrymen. When the human payload was reduced, it could accommodate a 75-millimeter howitzer, a bulldozer or a Jeep. Some CG-4As later

flown into Japanese-occupied Burma were even outfitted with mule stalls, since Jeeps were considered unsuitable for mountainous terrain. Mulehands stood by with shotguns ready to dispatch the notoriously cantankerous beasts should they kick up a ruckus in flight, but this proved an unnecessary precaution. The mules took to the air like naturals—leaning against the pitch of the craft and taking the shock of landing often with much more calm than the humans there to pacify them.

The British glider fleet mostly used the Horsa, a craft with almost twice the payload of the CG-4A. They also created the gigantic Hamilcar, which could actually bear a 20-ton tank aloft. These cumbersome contraptions had wing flaps to slow their speed at landing—a feature the CG-4A lacked. Still, they were much less maneuverable, and on rough impact their all-wood frames

*Florida freelancer Kathleen McAuliffe writes mostly on science and history, and is not related to the World War II General McAuliffe who said "Nuts!"*



Glider troops of the 17th Airborne Division, who have just been dropped behind the German lines across the Rhine near Wesel, regroup for action.

tended to collapse like a barn in a windstorm, sending deadly splinters in every direction. Most pilots—if given the choice—would take their chances with the CG-4A. “Without a motor, maneuverability was everything,” veteran Miles C. Wagner explained. “After all, you couldn’t put your foot on the gas and take a second spin around looking for a bigger clearing.”

All gliders had a yoke linked to the stabilizers to control up and down motion, and foot pedals that operated a rudder for turning, to provide control in three dimensions. Many pilots compensated for the lack of a gas pedal by using gravity to give them the extra push needed to clear unexpected obstacles. In a maneuver known as a “British blitz,” the pilot would push the yoke forward, sending the glider into a nosedive. Sweeping within a few feet of the ground, he would then violently

yank the yoke back, using the acceleration from his plummeting descent to hedgehop over fences, trees or any other objects that suddenly appeared in his path.

Such airmanship took considerable mastery; just learning to fly a glider in the first place was difficult enough. For one thing, despite the name, military gliders could scarcely glide, at least in the sense that sailplanes flown by sportsmen did and do. Burdened with their whole 4,060-pound payload, they lost altitude twice as fast as light sport gliders. “For that reason,” said Floyd J. Sweet, who headed one U.S. glider instruction program, “early glider training in sports planes turned out to be a poor substitute for the reality of flying a combat glider.”



Much of the training was done in California, Texas and other Southern states. Two hundred pilots, volunteers from all branches of the service, were in the first group, with the first class graduating in December 1942. At least half of them went on to become instructors. With CG-4As in short supply, some pilots learned in regular aircraft whose engines were shut down sporadically in midflight—thus intentionally creating an emergency situation dreaded by pilots. Veteran Ed L. Keys: "Today you couldn't pay me enough to shut off the engine of a plane and land in some of the stamp-size South Dakota fields we set those planes down in. You kept your eyeballs peeled and your head on a swivel trying to spot the best place for a 'dead-stick' landing. And if you thought daytime landings were bad, think of the paranoia at night."

The situation hardly improved, even when the first gliders had rolled off assembly lines. Much less sturdy than training planes, the CG-4A bounced off the rising thermals "like a brick hitting a wall," as glider pilot Rowell Houghton, a retired lieutenant colonel, put it. During advanced training, the pilots also had to learn a hair-raising "snatch" technique for the retrieval of gliders on the ground. The glider's towline would be strung between two vertical poles in front of it. Then the engine-powered towplane would swoop down with a hook dangling below it on a long line reeled out from a revolving drum. The trick was to snag the horizontal rope and keep flying despite the initial dead-weight shock of the grounded glider you were trying to

haul into the air. Within seconds, the tow craft was hurled from a standstill to 120 miles per hour. One glider pilot recalled, "It was a sensation unlike anything I had ever experienced, even on wild carnival rides." In actual combat, it turned out, most gliders were wrecked beyond salvage during their crash landings. If they survived impact, they were often torched by the enemy.

Accidents were common, even in training. The aviation industry was overburdened by the demand for warplanes, so production of gliders often fell to manufacturers with little knowledge of aeronautical engineering. The largest builder—the Ford Motor Company—at least had expertise in mass production. It turned out more than 4,000 of the 13,900 CG-4As made during the war. But many small subcontractors were skilled only at making pianos or wooden ice boxes—or, in one case, pickle barrels. They made serious glitches, many of which weren't discovered until too late. During a demonstration flight at Lambert Field in St. Louis in 1943, a glider built by a local manufacturer lost a wing and fell from the sky, horrifying onlookers and killing more than a half-dozen of the city's prominent leaders who had gone along as passengers. The cause of the crash turned out to be a defective part furnished by a former manufacturer of coffins.

Small wonder that the Air Force had to resort to razzle-dazzle recruitment tactics—if not downright lies—to get men to join the glider program. Initially volunteers were required to pass the rigid physical exams given power pilot candidates. They had to be between 18 and 26 years of age and could not have flunked out of a military fly-



Dirt scooped up during a rough landing pours out of a CG-4A glider, as a Jeep emerges from the hinged cargo bay during combat maneuvers.

ing school. But when glowing words in ads like "Soar to Victory" failed to generate a rush on the recruitment office, the Air Force drastically lowered entrance qualifications. "You could be a washed-out cadet, or be as old as 35," one glider pilot said, "or wear thick-lensed glasses—and they'd take you." "We were the bastards nobody wanted," another pilot admitted.

Adding to a recruitment problem, the first Allied glider mission on the island of Sicily in the summer of 1943 was a fiasco. Glider-borne troops were supposed to take the Ponte Grande, a bridge near the ancient port of Syracuse—and demolish nearby artillery batteries aimed at the shoreline where the amphibious forces of British general Bernard Law Montgomery would be invading the island. On the evening of July 9-10, towplanes hauled 144 gliders—mostly CG-4As—into the sky for the four-hour flight from Africa. In all they

carried 1,300 British glider troops and supplies. Ill-prepared for navigating in the dark, many of the towpilots lost their way and mistakenly released their gliders off the coast far from their targets. By daybreak, only 54 gliders had landed in Sicily, only 9 at their designated landing zones. Although Montgomery's forces did eventually secure the bridge, the Allied commanders were appalled to learn that 300 glider troops had drowned at sea.

The tragedy in Sicily, which virtually coincided with the heavily publicized crash at Lambert Field, nearly brought an end to America's glider program. But at the last moment a world-renowned aerial stuntman, Mike Murphy of Findlay, Ohio, orchestrated a Hollywood-style demonstration that won over even the severest critics of the program.

As a high-ranking glider officer, Murphy escorted a team of top Air Force

commanders to a bleacher in the middle of the training field at the Laurinburg-Maxton Army Air Base in North Carolina. It was dusk. Unbeknownst to the Air Force brass in attendance, more than a mile away a fleet of CG-4As were getting ready to release from their towplanes. When dusk had deepened, making it almost pitch-black outside, Murphy's voice, as he gave a short talk on the virtues of combat gliders, was booming out of the loudspeaker. The gliders were then approaching the field, but Murphy's amplified voice successfully concealed the muffled thumps and whine of skids as the planes touched down directly in front of the bleachers. Murphy yelled "Lights!" and to the amazement of the unsuspecting audience, there were ten menacing-looking gliders directly in front of them.

Thus converted, the military went ahead in many theaters of the war, where, through trial and error, they learned the terrain and conditions in which motorless aircraft could be used to the best advantage. Night missions gradually were phased out—the damage from crashes proved worse than enemy fire in the broad light of day—and much greater care was given to the preparation of pilots. Before the invasion of Normandy in June 1944, for instance, the men spent hours studying three-dimensional maps of the landing area, memorizing the terrain, the layout of houses and even the names of the farmers who occupied them.

In many ways that invasion was glider command's bravest hour. The top-secret mission called for the deployment of 1,200 American CG-4As and 300 British Horsa gliders. They were to



Deadly crash in 1943 almost ended the combat glider program in the USA.

strike early in the dark dawn of D-Day, June 6, 1944—some five hours before the amphibious assault troops hit the beaches. From various airfields in England, gliders and paratroop carriers brought three full airborne divisions several miles behind Nazi lines at points near Ste. Mère-Eglise, Carentan and Caen. Their task was to touch down on opposite ends of the Allies' wide Normandy beachhead and seize control of key bridges and roads to protect the landing troops from early counterattack.

In case they were caught behind enemy lines, glider pilots, like other pilots, were given an escape packet that included a photograph ID in civilian clothes, along with a foreign alias. Lennie Williams, who flew into Ste. Mère-Eglise on D-Day, was glad to

report that thanks to his comprehensive briefing, he did have an intense sensation of déjà vu coming in to land. "I felt as if I was driving through my own farm," he recalled. "It was unbelievable. I knew where everything was—every tree, every fence, every house and the names of the occupants, to boot."

Intelligence information sometimes proved dangerously faulty, though. Trees in Normandy said to be 20 feet tall in fact towered to 80 feet. Hedgerows, which the pilots were told to plow through in an emergency, often hid centuries-old stone walls. Men who hit them paid for it with their lives.

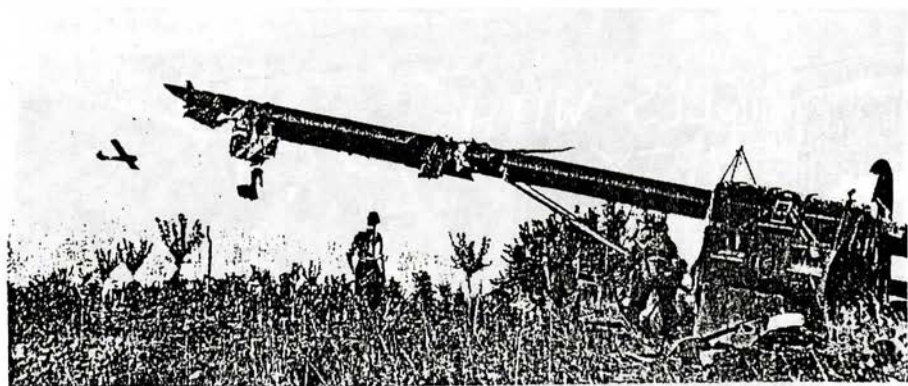
Even in the air—especially in the air, some pilots would say—gliders were never really reliable. Many simply disintegrated in turbulent skies. On hitting a downdraft over the English Channel, one of Britain's behemoth Hamilcar gliders dropped a tank through the floor, sending the tank and its crew to a watery grave. Approaching a crowded landing zone during the invasion of southern France later in June, a glider pilot was astounded to see a Jeep tumbling down from the sky—testimony to one of many midair collisions.

Landing was often a nightmare. Because the Nazis feared surprise landings, fields were flooded or impaled with the infamous anti-glider poles unaffectionately known as "Rommel's asparagus." Usually 12 feet tall, they were arranged in long rows 15 to 40 feet apart and tied together by wires, which when hit were intended to activate mines planted at their bases. Fortunately, the Germans rarely found time to fuse the mines. What's more, in their methodical zeal they often planted the posts at too-regular intervals. By

shearing off the wings of his craft, a skilled or just lucky glider pilot sometimes brought down the plane more or less intact—amid a field of stakes!

Of course, those who survived hedgerows, flying Jeeps and Rommel's asparagus had to worry about enemy fire. As they neared the landing zone, the pilots were terrified of groundfire shooting up through their legs—and often placed their helmets in a strategic position. Although parachutes were routinely issued to fighter and bomber pilots, no such luxury was afforded the glider pilot. According to Gerard Devlin, aviation historian and author of a book on glider pilots, "The 13 infantrymen in the back of the glider had to do without them because of the excessive weight. Given the circumstances, a pilot wearing a chute would have been looked upon most unkindly."

With no way of bailing out, some pilots broke the rules and took additional protective measures against groundfire. Before the massive airborne invasion of Wesel, Germany, the morning of March 24, 1945, Earl Shoup fitted a piece of armor-metal plating to the floor under his feet. The mission, establishing a bridgehead on the far side of the Rhine, involved a staggering number of aircraft—1,346 gliders and 1,591 power planes. But less than 20 miles from Wesel, in an elevated and heavily forested area, 50,000 German troops—including several panzer divisions—stood guard with an estimated 100 tanks, self-propelled guns and a large number of anti-aircraft weapons. The heavy armor plating was strictly against regulations. But Shoup had no apologies. In the last few minutes of flight, the plate bounced up from the floor, thrusting his knees toward his chin, three times in a row—



This combat glider has delivered troops even with its wings badly chewed up by "Rommel's asparagus"—stakes set to sabotage the airborne landings.

each one the result of a direct enemy hit.

Although Shoup came through unscathed, his glider did not. A phosphorus shell set one fabric-covered wing on fire, and while descending through the smoke screen for an emergency landing, Shoup suddenly caught sight of high-tension power lines. "We'd been taught to go over the power lines," he told me, "but in a situation like that, who the hell cares! I slipped her right under and landed in a big field."

Many glider pilots were not so fortunate. Severely injured by groundfire during the invasion of Holland in September 1944, George F. Brennan holds the distinction of being the only man to crash-land a fiery glider with just one hand, one leg and one eye—and live to tell about it. Miraculously, he brought the crippled glider to rest in a small field, where the burly Irishman and a passenger managed to crawl into a ditch. There, they opened fire, killing or wounding a patrol of a dozen or more Germans who came to scavenge supplies from the burned-out wreck in which they assumed no one had survived. Eventually, a farmer in

the Dutch Resistance came to their rescue and transported them—hidden under a pile of hot manure in a creaky two-wheeled cart—to a Catholic hospital. There Brennan's body was bandaged like a mummy. The Sisters put him in a maternity ward and placed pillows on his belly to make him look like one of the many pregnant women. The ruse worked long enough for him to survive—even though, Brennan chuckled, "I never did deliver."

Just as vivid as these moments of terror were the cheering welcomes crews received from residents of Nazi-occupied Europe, many of whom first learned of their impending liberation when they heard the bewildering thud of a glider crash-landing practically on their doorsteps. On D-Day, an innkeeper in Bénouville, Normandy, awoke to just such a bang in the night. The man, Georges Gondrée, fled with his family to the cellar, but on hearing conversation overhead that lacked the guttural sounds of German, he finally summoned the courage to climb upstairs and confront two men with coal-black faces. "It's all right chum,"



Before taking off for a cross-Channel glider assault, some British airborne troops help boost morale of folks back home with thumbs-up sign.

they said. Overjoyed at hearing English, Gondrée burst into tears. Soon his wife and children were kissing the soldiers, becoming coated in black camouflage paint in the process. By daylight, a small detachment of glider troops overwhelmed German defenses at nearby Pegasus Bridge, a critical objective for the success of the entire Normandy invasion. To celebrate, the innkeeper began uncorking 98 bottles of champagne prudently kept hidden for just such an auspicious occasion.

Captured during the invasion of Holland, American pilot Marion Case may have received the most emotional welcome of any glider pilot during the war. Case arrived as a prisoner under guard at a war camp in Germany just after the Red Cross had completed an inspection to verify that the POWs were not being tortured or mistreated,

in compliance with the Geneva Convention. While being hustled through the barbed-wire enclosure by a gauntlet of SS guards with snarling German shepherds, Case spotted the emaciated inmates—mostly Frenchmen—devouring chocolate bars distributed by the Red Cross. Suddenly someone pointed to the American flag on Case's sleeve, and riotous elation swept through the camp: at long last, here was living proof of the much-rumored arrival of American troops in Europe.

The starving men showered Case and the other captives in his group with their candy bars. The guards yelled "Halt!" But like the ticker tape in a parade, the candy bars continued to rain down on the American pilots. The Germans opened fire, killing two of the French prisoners at point-blank

range. Still the candy bars kept coming. "We screamed 'Stop! Stop!' and finally they stopped," said Case, who 50 years afterward still flinches recalling this suicidal act of defiance.

Glider pilots made up far less than 1 percent of American military personnel in World War II, and the "bastards nobody wanted" are understandably piqued that the general public has still barely heard of them. Their many heroic deeds have gone unrecognized even within the military.

On December 26-27, 1944, for example, American glider pilots braved intense enemy fire to come to the aid of the surrounded troops of Brig. Gen. Anthony C. McAuliffe during the Battle of the Bulge. When the Germans demanded that he surrender or be annihilated, McAuliffe gained fame by replying "Nuts!" But despite his display of bravado there was precious little gasoline, and nearly 500 badly wounded U.S. parachute and glider troops were in desperate need of treatment. With Gen. George S. Patton's troops still hours away from a chance of breaking the German grip, glider pilots flew to the rescue, delivering surgical teams and gasoline through a blinding barrage of flak. Many pilots were wounded or killed. Their effort earned them little more than a pat on the back, while some of the medical officers they brought in ended up with individual decorations.

The men each have their own pet theory to account for this and other enduring snubs. "We fell through the cracks," said Brennan, who is still painfully crippled from his war injuries. "When we hit the tow release, we severed our

administrative umbilical cord to the Air Corps. So you had this crazy situation in which the Air Corps thought the Army would be handing out the decorations, while the Army, in turn, thought the Air Corps would be taking care of us." Gerard Devlin blames the "mind-set" of Air Force officials. "In their attitude," he says, "if you didn't fly a plane that could shoot down another aircraft or bomb somebody to oblivion, you weren't a real man." Indeed, out of eight thick volumes that the Air Force produced on its role in World War II, fewer than three pages are devoted to glider pilots.

This oversight notwithstanding, the old boys looked like a happy crew—as cocky and irreverent as ever—back at a motel bar after the airshow. Many still fly sailplanes and power planes for fun. And although the combat glider was eclipsed by the helicopter in the 1950s, the vets have been cheering its come-back in the guise of the modern space shuttle, which they are quick to remind everyone, *lands* without engine power. They had an especially good laugh over an autographed photograph that three astronauts sent to the glider pilot association. Penned across the top was the message: "At least the natives were friendly where we landed."

In September 1944 Dutch villagers and a policeman watch gliders carrying units of the 82d Airborne Division toward a target behind the German lines.





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