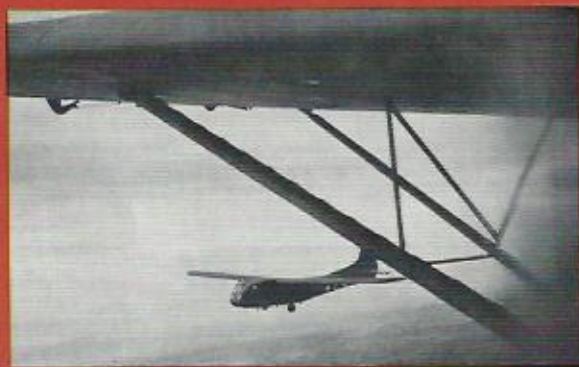


# SILENT WINGS OF THE GLIDER GANG

BY HENRY M. HOLDEN



Courtesy of Fred Fournier



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**For these pilots, life was usually monotonous, until the time came for one of the six major glider missions: often, the flight meant a one-way ticket.**

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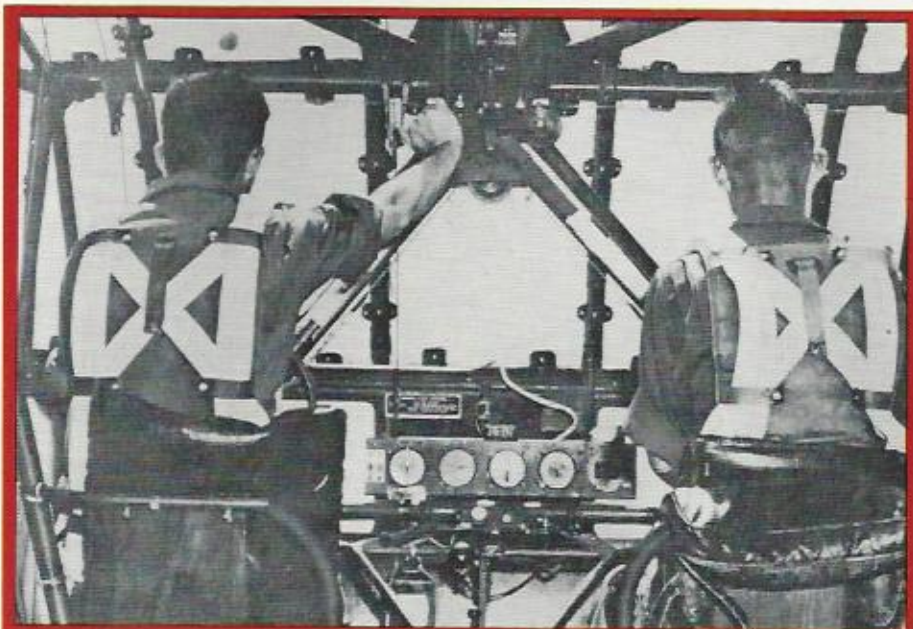
Combat glider pilots are among the unsung and unknown heroes of World War II. Flying 40-foot-long wood and canvas Waco CG4-A gliders, they endured enemy flak, foul weather and aircraft that shed parts in flight. Landing the silent, motorless giants (loaded with 13 men or an artillery piece) behind enemy lines, under the best conditions, was described as no more than a controlled crash.

The gliders had only the most basic flight instruments. Air speed, vertical speed, turn and bank indicators and a compass were all they carried. Their pilots said the compass was superfluous, because "how much navigation do you need when every direction is down?"

The pilots, like the gliders themselves, were considered expendable. They shunned parachutes because none of the

troops they carried wore them. And on a combat mission, their destiny was assured: It was a one-way trip, with only the tow plane pilot having any chance of making it back to base.

The Allies launched the first glider assault in Sicily. The campaign was a success, and although the glider assault was a tactical victory, it was also the glider pilots' baptism of fire. Storm conditions,



*Glider instrumentation was minimal, and the pilots were considered expendable*

and heavy enemy as well as misdirected Allied naval gunfire, permitted only 54 of 144 gliders to get through.

D-Day (June 6, 1944) saw the largest armada of gliders ever assembled. 1,100 Waco and 300 British Horsa gliders carried thousands of Allied troops and supplies into Normandy. The British Air Chief insisted to General Dwight D. Eisenhower that, after their experience at Sicily, a glider invasion of heavily fortified Normandy would be a certain disaster. Eisenhower, in spite of some British and American sources estimating 50 to 70 percent casualties among the glider personnel, committed the gliders. Without them, he knew the beach landings would fail.

The predawn hours saw the first of the glider serials take off for Europe. Low clouds, unmarked landing zones, flooded fields, darkness, and accurate enemy flak caused predictably high casualties.

One former pilot admits: "Secretly, none of us thought we'd make it. A C-47 ahead of me took a hit in the right engine and started going down." The glider pilot cut loose from the doomed tow plane and, several seconds later, was set afire with flaming wreckage from the exploding plane.

"Another glider took the full blast of a flak explosion. It disintegrated into little scraps of burning wreckage. Whatever it was carrying fell to Earth in a ball of flame."

Another pilot recalls, "When I cut loose from my tow plane, it was like rush hour traffic with an insane traffic cop directing it. Spiraling gliders were everywhere, all trying to stay clear of each other. I remember touching down at 90 miles an

hour, hearing the sickening crunch of an antiglider pole tearing at my glider and then, nothing ... The next thing I remember, I was laying along side of my glider, or what was left of it. It was crushed and broken like an eggshell."

The official report states, "Safe landings were the exception rather than the rule." Fifty-two gliders comprised the second wave to invade Normandy. "Some 22 gliders were destroyed and all but a dozen were badly damaged." Normandy would be the last night combat mission for the glider gang.

One troop carrier wing later reported that of approximately 400 gliders only two were still serviceable after the landing, and only 26 could be salvaged.

Milton Dank, author of *The Glider Gang* (Lippincott, 1977) and an ex-glider pilot himself with four combat missions, was asked about his most vivid recollection after 40 years. "Monotony," he replied. "Don't forget, there were only six major glider missions: Sicily, Southern France, Normandy, Holland, Bastogne, and the Rhine. We all had secondary duties like Mess Officer, Assistant Operations, Intelligence, Supply, etc." Another pilot summed it up as, "Months of monotony, followed by moments of madness."

From a 40-year perspective, Dank stresses, "It was a job. We volunteered for it, we were selected for it, we trained for it, and finally we did it – and lost a lot of good friends. But in the end, it was just another lousy job that someone had to do."

S. Tipton Randolph, national secretary of the Glider Pilot's Association and veteran of four airborne missions, described the glider pilots as, "An individualistic

bunch by necessity, that adapted quickly to the realities of a combat mission. They made quick decisions in spite of the chaos going on around them, and still, somehow managed to get those birds on the ground." Forty years later, his most poignant memory "... is the excitement of the mission, and the fear that none of us would ever make it."

The history of the 101st Airborne describes the glider pilots as, "The most uninhibited individualists in the Army, who successfully defied all attempts at organization."

Glider pilots suffered high casualties for what appeared to be a thankless job. General Anthony McAuliffe, commander at Bastogne said, "The supplies brought in by gliders and dropped by C-47s, particularly ammunition, played a vital role in the defense of Bastogne ... The volunteer surgical teams that came in by glider saved many lives."

Again, the price glider pilots paid was high. In one glider serial, 35 landed within the Bastogne perimeter. Fifteen of the glider pilots touched down in enemy-held territory and were either killed or captured.

The Rhine mission saw 906 Waco gliders launched. The landing zones were in disputed territory and artillery fire, mortars, machine gun and rifle fire greeted the hapless pilots as they tried to land. "Less than one-quarter of those that reached the assault area came through undamaged," the report reads. Their sacrifice, however, contributed significantly to the Allied victory. More than 3,400 troops, 271 jeeps, and 66 guns were landed.

The glider pilot and his fragile craft were born in the combat of World War II and they faded from the scene quickly as the war ended. Warfare had been refined and the concept of vertical envelopment with the motorless aircraft became obsolete.

The artifacts the glider pilots left behind are gone now. The shattered glider frames, the blood, and the debris virtually melted into the soil. Lush green landscapes cover the ugly scars of an old war. All that remains are small, white grave markers standing as silent sentries, guarding the hallowed ground.

Was the price worth it? Ask the survivors. They'll shrug, or nod slowly. Their eyes may glaze as their thoughts go back 40 years. The loss of friends, the wounds of so long ago have not completely healed. It is still too soon to answer that question. **A**