

Silent TARGETS

The glider gang behind the lines

BY SPARKY BARNES SARGENT

Twelve glider infantrymen of the 193rd Glider Infantry Regiment prepare to climb aboard a Waco CG-4 named *Sad Sack* for a training mission at Camp MacKall, North Carolina during October 1943. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



During the National WW II Glider Pilots Association's 41st reunion in Oklahoma City in October 2011, glider pilots George L. Williams of Idaho and Norman C. Wilmeth of Oklahoma shared memories of their D-Day glider missions with the author.

MISSION ELMIRA **Normandy D-Day**

Flight Officer George L. Williams flew seven glider missions during World War II. Fresh out of high school when he enlisted, he was excited to be a part of the war. He had the opportunity to fly both the large British Airspeed Horsa glider and the relatively smaller American Waco CG-4A Hadrian glider. The wooden Horsa's fuselage was 67 feet long, its wingspan was 88 feet, and it had a loaded weight up to 15,500 pounds. The American Waco's tube-and-fabric fuselage measured 48 feet, 8 inches long, its wingspan was 83 feet, 8 inches, and it had a loaded takeoff weight of 7,500 pounds (or up to 9,000 pounds at emergency load weight).

Horsa vs. CG-4A

When asked to compare the two gliders he flew, Williams recalled, "During Normandy, I flew the Horsa glider. It was like a Mack truck — you couldn't maneuver it very well. A Horsa really shouldn't be cross-controlled (for example, performing a slipping maneuver to lose altitude), especially with a load in it — it might not recover to controlled flight again. But the CG-4A — that was a Mercedes by comparison!"

Several glider missions were flown on D-Day in Operation Overlord. Mission Elmira was flown during the early evening of June 6. Williams related his experience of flying a Horsa glider during that mission:



Teenager on D-Day

"Briefing and training were extensive and very good for D-Day," reflects Williams, adding, "They made a great big mosaic map of the whole area and told me the name of every farm close to where I was landing. I had a 38-year-old copilot and I was barely 19 then. I flew a British Horsa glider with a jeep, a trailer full of ordnance and mortar ammunition. I had 19 fully equipped airborne troopers. I was overloaded by approximately 3,000 pounds when we took off from Greenham Common — that was the base in England about 60 miles west of London. The runway length was way more than we should have needed, and there was a construction area down at the end. It was a pretty smooth road leading out from the runway. Anyway, I got to the end of the runway and still wasn't off the ground! The C-47 was off the ground, and that tow pilot knew what my problem was, so he held the C-47 down and was going just as fast as he could. He wasn't 10 feet over that runway, and he told me just before I lifted off the ground, 'If you don't get that thing off the ground by the time we get to that building, you're going to be off the [tow] rope.' That is bad news when

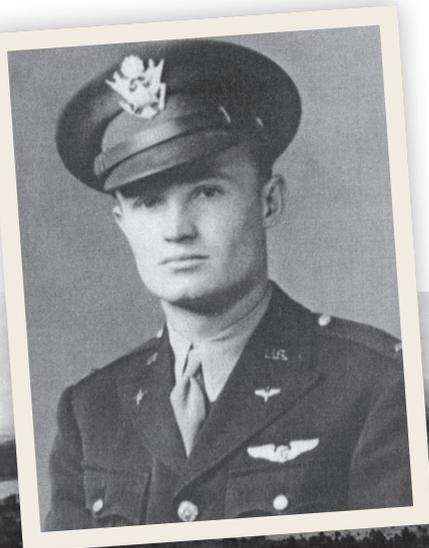
he disconnects his end of the rope — it has a big hook up there and the nylon rope approximately 10% before it snaps — so if he disconnects his end, that thing is stretching and boom! It'll tear the whole nose apart practically!

Overloaded

"I got off the ground at the last second and was just mushing for half an hour. I wasn't really climbing very much. We circled for a long time because there were thousands of gliders coming in. I finally got up to about 600 feet and asked the commanding officer of the ground unit on board to come forward behind the pilots' compartment. I asked him, 'Did you supervise loading this glider?' He said, 'No, I didn't, and I'm mad — I saw what you did to struggle off the ground.'" Well, I knew it was overloaded because we had figured out a way of testing before we took off. We jumped up in the air and grabbed the glider's tailskid, and if the tail came down like this (gesturing to a height above the ground), it was okay. If it came down like this (gesturing with a quick downward motion), it was tail-heavy — and that's what this Horsa did. So I knew that, and I had rolled the trim tab forward and did everything I could to try and keep the nose down because I couldn't buck all that weight.

Bottom: C-47s of the 72nd and 74th TCS, 434th TCG are waiting to queue up with their Horsa gliders at Aldermaston in preparation for the KEOKUK afternoon resupply mission on June 6. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

Inset: Flight Officer George L. Williams. (Photo courtesy of author)





Hastily applied invasion stripes greet this somber group of airborne infantry as they ready to board a Horsa glider for their June 6 daylight delivery to Normandy. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

“The air was very smooth and there was no turbulence, so when the [towplane made a quick maneuver], the jeep suddenly got loose and rolled forward! The Horsa’s nose came down all of a sudden, and I thought, ‘Oh, God!’ I could feel the difference in my stomach! That is the only time I ever got scared.

Landing hazards

“We got the glider level again and I asked the tow pilot, ‘What the hell did you do back there? You’re jerking me all over!’ Then I told the crew that because of the load I had, I was going to come in really fast. I could see Normandy, but it was a little ways away. I said, ‘When we come in, we’re going to be hot. Normally, too much speed coming in means you’re asking to be killed because you can’t get the damn thing stopped. But, I said to myself, ‘I don’t have spoilers, I’ve got “barn door” flaps.’ They were big things, like this (gesturing with arms spread wide). So first, I rolled the trim forward and both of us grabbed hold of that control wheel because I didn’t want the nose to come up — the glider would have stalled. Then I dropped those flaps just before I was going to land. I was going about 115mph — way too fast — when I pulled those flap handles on.”

The Germans had erected hundreds of wooden poles, nicknamed “Rommel’s asparagus,” which were sunk partway into the ground and strategically placed throughout the fields in Normandy as hazards to glider landings. Williams saw those in his target landing area, so he chose another field about two miles south of Sainte-Mère-Église. Newspaper accounts reported: “On reaching the

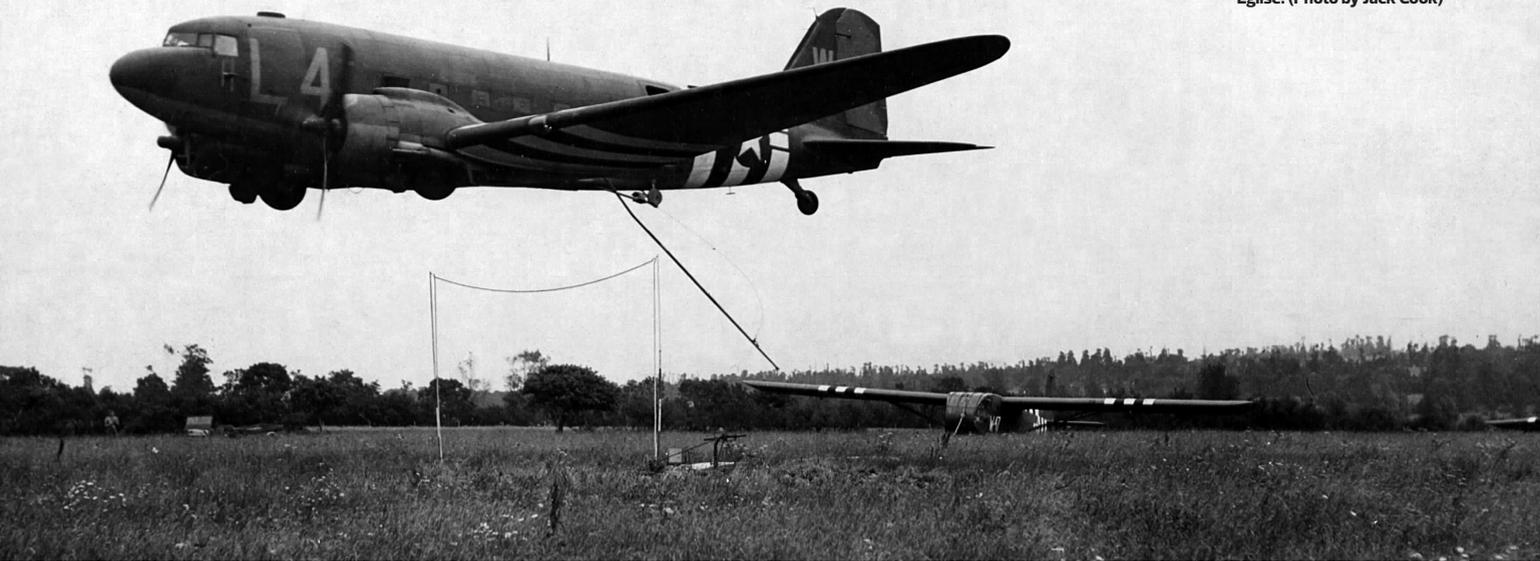
French coast, Williams’ plane drew fire from 20mm antiaircraft guns and rifles. Farther inland, German soldiers used machine guns to try to bring the plane down.”

Williams recalled, “The tow pilot had a certain way he was supposed to fly to avoid ground fire — if the intelligence was correct. After the glider released, he’d bank a wing over an area where they dropped the nylon towropes on the ground. Normally we released about 300 feet above the ground. Well, after I released, I lost 290 feet immediately! I did that on purpose. I could see we were going to land in water because the Germans

One of the primary design functions of the Waco CG-4A glider was to bring light transport and field artillery to the battlefield. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



A C-47 Skytrain flown by First Lt. Gerald Berry of the 91st Troop Carrier Squadron about to snag the pick-up line and make the first recovery of a glider from liberated France on June 23, 1944, near St. Mere Eglise. (Photo by Jack Cook)



had opened some irrigation ditches and flooded that field until the water was several feet deep. I went down and hit that water hard and fast, and that quickly stopped my forward speed — and that's what can kill you. The Horsa didn't have the protective nose device like the CG-4A, which was equipped with a bolt-on Griswold nose consisting of four pikes that came down a big steel plate that could knock down small trees or poles.

A nice view of a CG-4 glider in flight from the cockpit shows a slight climb with an airspeed of 110mph. Both the 350' nylon towline and the left wing of the C-47 Skytrain tow plane are visible through the glider's canopy. (Photos by Jack Cook)

Behind enemy lines

"As soon as we landed, I told everybody to get out of the glider, but not to unload anything until we knew where the enemy was. If we'd landed one field over, we'd have known immediately! The 88th Squadron really got it. I had quite a few

bullet holes in the tail of the glider, but I didn't know that until I got out. At that time of the year, they were in double daylight saving time. It was pretty light out, but it did get dark after midnight for a while. After we got down on the ground and it was finally dark, we used hand-operated 'cricket' clickers for communicating."

Along with other pilots in his squadron, Williams was interviewed afterward, by war correspondent Ted Malone, on radio (which was recorded by Westinghouse Corporation, and unknown to Williams at the time, a copy was later given to his father back in the States). The interview reported that the glider pilots had landed in German territory and "spent three-and-one-half days filtering through the German lines back to friendly soil. While making their way back to their own lines, the men surprised 43 Germans and took them prisoner. They were forced to hide in trees, holes, or barns of peasants while attempting escape. After meeting American troops, the men piled in jeeps and started back to the beaches to join their forces."

Getting back to base

Williams recalled that the glider pilots had been ordered to "proceed [by walking] to Utah Beach for evacuation, first by an Army DUKW from Utah Beach to the LCI (Landing Craft Infantry), and next by LST (Landing Ship Tank) — but it was having engine trouble, so we transferred to a PT boat for the trip back via the Channel to England. There, C-47s took us back to Greenham Common. Our main job after landing was guarding prisoners and crossroads."

A hometown Idaho newspaper ran a story about Williams' participation in D-Day, stating that he was awarded an Air Medal for "outstand-





ing gallantry” in his glider mission. A portion of the Air Medal citation reads as follows: “Magnificent spirit and enthusiasm was displayed by F. O. Williams, and combined with skill, courage, and devotion to his duty, he remained at the controls of his glider, without regard to personal safety, against most severe enemy opposition and landed his glider astride Hitler’s Westwall.”

MISSION HACKENSACK (Normandy D-Day + 1)

Second Lieutenant Norman Wilmeth flew six glider missions during World War II. At age 26, he was older than many of his peers in the service. Briefly reflecting on his missions, Wilmeth commented, “Most people only have one experience in their life like that and I have had several. I flew four glider combat missions and two more, which were special missions into Germany.”

During Operation Overlord, Mission Hackensack was one of two glider missions that were made on the morning of June 7, 1944. Wilmeth recalled his mission:

Heavily loaded Horsa

“I flew the Horsa glider and had 30-some troops aboard; our D-Day mission had been postponed by one day because of weather. That gave the troops time to think about wanting to have another bandolier — another round of mortar ammunition. Because of this, my load was more than normal, since the fellows had been in combat before and thought that they needed extra supplies. We were heavy, and when we took off, the towplane was airborne with the wheels up in the well, but we were still on the runway, trying to get off. We traveled the full length of the runway, and then the grass, before we finally wres-

ted it off the ground. Once we were airborne, and passed 90mph indicated, it flew fine.

Antiaircraft fire

“Our flight was uneventful until we passed by the east coast of Cherbourg, when I noticed splashes in the water off our right front. I first thought the splashes were from dropped belly tanks from fighters in the area. Then one of the splashes was a surface burst, and I realized that we were at the extreme range of shore ground fire. The splashes were from projectiles, not belly tanks. And soon we would receive the green light to cut loose and land. We were briefed to do a 270-degree turn to the left, instead of a standard glider release turn to the right. That was odd, and I never have figured out why we did that, when we could have done a 90-degree turn to the right. But anyway, we did a 270-degree turn to the left, and what I observed was that when I’d roll-back my airspeed — if my memory’s right — to about 75 or 80mph indicated, the needle on the rate-of-descent instrument was pegged straight down. So, I increased the airspeed to 90mph indicated, and that reduced my rate of descent.

“The Horsa had a cockpit with a door behind the pilot and copilot, and the sergeant was standing there in the doorway, and I told him, ‘Sit down, shut the door, and prepare for a crash landing’ — because I figured we were going to land in the trees. And he did. I rolled-out on a heading and prepared for a crash landing in the trees. All of a sudden a little area opened up, and I



Top: Before Allied soldiers reached the beaches, U.S. and British paratroopers were landed behind German lines in Normandy. Shown here on the right is a British Horsa glider and on the left and the background are two Waco CG-4A gliders. (Photo courtesy of EN Archives)

Inset: Second Lt. Norman C. Wilmeth. (Photo courtesy of author)



A restored WACO CG-4A on display at the Silent Wings Museum in Lubbock, Texas. (Photo courtesy of Silent Wings Museum)

called for full flaps, and on the Horsa, the bottom of the wing flaps would be as large as a conference table on both sides, so it would really come down at a very steep angle. Well, my copilot was also a power pilot, and he was a little slow about putting the flaps down. So, I reached over and slapped the control down myself and got the flaps lowered.

Crash landing

“The flaps and brakes were operated by compressed air, and before we took off, they came around and aired up every Horsa’s air tank. We touched down fast at 90mph indicated, and I struck one of those glider poles (“Rommel’s asparagus”). I saw it just fly up out of the ground, like a toothpick flipping up into the air, so it wasn’t planted very deep. I had time to hit right-rudder, left-rudder, and correct my direction of flight. When I came to a hedgerow, I had enough forward speed to pull back on the yoke and raise the nose up, where I could hit the belly on the hedgerow. So, the Horsa took the shock of the crash on its belly, and we opened the door and everybody jumped out. The only injury on that flight was one of the troopers, who sprained his ankle on the jump out of the door. We were high enough off the ground that it was quite a fall.

“We had the windshield shot out; some other gliders had come to this same field and they had received small arms fire. One of them had gone kind of slant-ways through the trees, and the Horsa was all wood — so there was a lot of splintering on it from going through the trees. My troops thought I was a pretty golden boy, since they were all safe and sound.

Firefight

“As soon as we got organized, I started walking down a road and got into a firefight. I got hit from the back with the first round — if I’d been playing football, it would have been a 15-yard penalty for clipping. The sergeant assigned a trooper to look after me, after we got through that firefight, but I said, ‘Sergeant, you go ahead and take this trooper and put him somewhere else. I’m a trained infantry officer and I’ve got enough sense to get down out of the line of fire — I don’t have to be knocked down.’ So that took care of that. We went on and I joined some other glider pilots and we meandered along toward the coast.

The long way home

“A half-track came by and we hopped on board, going on down to the coastline. We got on board a ship and the next morning we were in Portsmouth, England. The glider pilots were the first ones off of the ship, even though they had prisoners and those who had been wounded aboard. They had trucks there for us, and we loaded up and drove about an hour to this camp area they had set up with a mess hall. We went over to the mess hall, and what did they feed us? Steak! Oh, was it good! Then we loaded back up and drove a few miles to another camp area where we were going to stay all night. And what did they feed us? More steak! So we had two steak dinners in less than six hours — that was their reward for us coming back from behind enemy lines. We stayed there until a troop carrier plane came by that airfield and picked us up. Then they dropped us off at our different air bases.” †