

1944, INDIA / BURMA WAS THE GLIDER SNATCHING

CAPITAL OF THE WAR.

The India Burma campaign is an interesting subject to study regarding gliders. They used gliders to their full potential early on and they snatched gliders on a regular basis. They had the most difficult terrain of all the Theaters and the terrain often destroyed the gliders. They also carried the most unusual cargo than any of the Theaters. Mules were frequently part of a troop movement by gliders with a maximum of three mules to a glider, a handler and the pilots or just the pilots. Whether pilots or handlers, one always had a pistol at the ready during flight to shoot any mules that went berserk. This may sound horrible to the animal rights activists but with a glider made of steel tubing and doped airplane fabric it would take nothing for a mule to kick out the side of a glider putting the crew and other two mules in the glider at risk. The good news was the mules did not seem to mind their glider rides.

Snatching gliders was a vital necessity to the success of the war in Burma; It was in most cases the only way to get in men and equipment and get the wounded and refugees out due to the difficult terrain.

PROJECT NINE WAS ALL ABOUT GLIDERS

A Group was put together in the U.S. in late 1943 early 44, called Project 9 [once in India during the Burma Campaign they became 5318 Provisional Air Force, then later the 1st Air Commandos]. Project 9's C-47s were equipped with a strange looking hook and arm apparatus that was attached under the door near the underside of their "Dakotas". [They used the British terms for both the C-47 and CG-4A glider (Hadrian) because Project 9 fully supported British Major General Orde C. Wingate's Chindits.]

The men of Project 9 were frequently asked what the apparatus was, but they were unable to answer because they were under strict orders not to tell anyone what they were doing. The Project 9 C-47 crews began, unofficially, calling themselves the "Question Mark Squadron" and painted a big blue question mark over a white circular field on the tail surface of each Dakota.

On their flight jacket was a question mark inside a tan circle.

Their secret apparatus was to snatch gliders. They proved to the British that snatching gliders fully loaded could be accomplished.

According to John T. Correll (who was the Editor in Chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and whose article on operation THURSDAY is posted on our Burma web page) wrote the following:

In January [1944], the air commandos and the Chindits performed 16 practice snatches. In one instance, 300 soldiers and their mules were inserted by glider into a demonstration site and grabbed out again. [Brigadier General] Wingate, who was aboard the first glider snatched, had a message for the doubters: "Tell the RAF that I have not only seen it but I have done it."



Flight Officer
John H. Price, Jr

THE GRIT OF GLIDER PILOTS

The grandson of Flight Officer John H. Price, Jr, Chris Price, contacted our research team to share a fantastic story. His father had to walk out of the Burmese jungle trekking over 130 miles after his glider was damaged. F/O John H. Price was the nephew of Major General Arthur "Red" Simonin, WWI flying Ace and pioneer of the present Air Force. Chris sent a photo of his grandfather, and the Citation that was written up in the 1st Air Commandos' historical report in 1944. Further research uncovered an interesting story that reinforces the grit, resilience and determination that made up the character of the WWII Glider Pilot.

THE FIRST GLIDER BEHIND ENEMY LINES: MORE RECONNAISSANCE THAN EXPECTED

ON FEB. 28, THE FIRST GLIDER COMBAT MISSION WAS PERFORMED. ONE GLIDER CARRYING 13 SPECIAL BRITISH TROOPS WAS PUT DOWN ON THE EAST SIDE OF THE CHINDWIN NEAR MINCIN. THE GLIDER WAS DAMAGED DURING LANDING AND SEVERAL PASSENGERS SUFFERED MINOR INJURIES. THE

MISSION WAS CARRIED OUT IN DAYLIGHT AND WITHOUT FIGHTER ESCORT. THE TWO GLIDER PILOTS LEFT THE BRITISH PATROL, AS IT INTENDED TO WALK INTO BURMA TO SECURE INTELLIGENCE INFORMATION AND TO MAKE DIVERSIONARY RAIDS AND WALK THRU THE JUNGLE TO SAFETY” 1st Air Commando historical diary February 1944 (Air Force Historical Research Agency-reel B0680 pg. 1373).

What is documented as being the first glider combat mission in Burma behind enemy lines, occurred on 28 February 1944, consisted of one glider. The pilots were, Flight Officer John H. Price, Jr and Flight Officer John E Gotham. They were tasked with the job of landing the glider behind enemy lines loaded with a special British Intelligence Patrol for the “express purpose of projecting a reconnaissance party.” The plan was for the C-47 pilot, Major William T Cherry, Jr and Co Pilot 1st Lt Vincent L. Ulery to tow the glider to a predetermined landing area deep behind enemy lines. After delivering the reconnaissance team the tug would snatch the glider and pilots back to their original air field.



The red circle is Lalaghat air field, the yellow wide band is the Chin Hills and the arrow ends at sandbank LZ along the Chindwin River near Minsin

The route took the C-47, with glider in-tow, over the Chin Hills requiring an altitude of 7,500 feet. These mountains usually held very dense cloud formations making for blind flying. They left from the Tea Garden Valley in Imphal, Air Field Lalaghat. After clearing the Chin Hills they flew east of the Chindwin River landing near Minsin, Burma. Unfortunately, the sandbanks near the river were not inviting. According to the citation for this mission the sandbank was “so deeply

rutted as to make landing without cracking up very nearly impossible.

In spite of these hazards, due to the extreme skill of the pilots, the landing was accomplished with only slight injury to personnel aboard the gliders...” Only the injury to three British Patrol were mentioned in the citation. What is mentioned in an account in the book, Any Place, Any Time, Any Where, by R.D Van Wagner, was that flight Officer Price was badly injured. To make matters worse, Maj Cherry had to leave the



T/O JOHN PRICE JR. (LEFT) AND JOHN GOTHAM AFTER THEY HAD WALKED 130 MILES IN 13 DAYS TO ESCAPE JAPS WHEN THEIR GLIDERS CRASHED.

air space when it became apparent that the glider was too damaged to be snatched from the landing area.

On the 29th Flight Officer Gotham made the decision to walk out of the Burmese jungle. He burned the CG-4A glider, as was the instructions when having to abandon a glider in enemy territory and helping Flight Officer Price and the three injured British patrol they began their trek. On their journey they encountered a skirmish with a Japanese patrol. In the fire fight two Japanese soldiers were killed. They floated seven miles down the Chindwin River in a native boat and walked “150” miles through the

Burmese Jungles before safely reaching their home base 15 days later.

“The Vital information gained by the Patrol on this flight proved of great value in planning future offensive missions against the enemy in this area. The display of a devotion to duty and a degree of efficiency above and beyond that normally expected reflects great credit upon these officers and upon the Army Air Forces of the United States.

John E Gotham, T-622, Flight Officer, Air Corps. Home address: 6934 Looms Boulevard, Chicago, Illinois.

John H. Price Jr., T-657, Flight Officer, Air Corps. Home Address: Box 177, Midvale, Ohio.” --General Order No 58, c. s., dated 24 April 1944. “

Had the mission been successful it would have resulted in the first time a glider would have been snatched from behind enemy lines.



**319th Troop Carrier Squadron,
1st Air Commandos
Names available**

However, it wasn't long before this first snatch did occur. While Lt Gotham began to walk out with his party through the Burmese jungle the 16th Brigade called on gliders for assistance. Two gliders were dispatched flown by Flight Officer James S “Mickey” Bartlett and Flight Officer Vernon “Needlenose” Noland carrying the following:

Two Mark 2 and four Mark 3 folding boats
Two 9.2 HP and four 5.8 HP outboard engines
Twenty bamboo poles,
Thirty-six paddles
And 80 gallons of gasoline.

Flight Officer Noland's glider was damaged when he landed but the load stayed intact. After all the material was delivered from both gliders the operational glider was snatched. Flight Officer Bartlett piloted the CG-4A glider. The pickup C-47 flown by Captain Edwin J. Coe and First Lieutenant William W Johnson, Jr. flew by the starboard side of the glider just 25 feet off the ground with the snatch pole extended. The pole caught the loop pulling the glider into the air in three seconds making this the first snatched glider behind enemy lines. As the Burma Campaign continued there would be many more snatches saving lives of the wounded and refugees. Back in the 1980s Glider Pilot Doug Wilmer interviewed glider pilots Harry McKaig and Harlie Johnson who flew the Broadway mission. Harry McKaig said, about his time in Burma, he flew 28 snatch pickup missions evacuating the wounded.

To understand the snatch process, check out the snatch page on the glider pilot's website at <http://www.ww2gp.org/OurTowShips/snatches.php>

OPERATION THURSDAY

On the night of 5th/6 March 1944 a fleet of 28 C-47 tug planes took off from the Tea Garden Valley of Silchar, climbed 8,000 feet over the Chin Hills and released their gliders 250 miles to the east, 100 miles behind enemy Japanese lines. It was the spearhead of an airborne invasion into the heart of northern Burma; an operation unprecedented in this theater and in many respects entirely novel to military history.

UNIT HISTORY OF THE FIRST AIR COMMANDO FORCE April 1944:

“On the 2-3-4 of March, considerable missions were flown by the fighters and bombers to observe activity on the supply lines, R.R. and rivers leading to the area of Broadway and

Piccadilly [the landing areas for the gliders in Operation THURSDAY]. D-day was set for the night of March 5-6 and on the afternoon of the 5th a B-25 was sent out to take last-minute photo coverage of the area to be used. Briefing was set for 1730 and at 1700 enlarged photos of the areas were rushed to Col. Cochran and Gen. Wingate and it was discovered that the Piccadilly clearing had been rendered unusable by the enemy dragging trees and logs, in uniform pattern, across the cleared area where the gliders were to be landed. It was originally contemplated that the two areas would receive equal numbers of gliders so as to prepare strips for the transports. The situation was "G2'd" [analyzed] and it was decided that the Japs had foreseen this being used as a landing strip. It was at this field that a British DC-3 had landed in the spring of 1943 and evacuated some of Gen. Wingate's men and it had been publicized in various popular magazines. There was only one decision to make. Eight-two gliders were ready to go, with troops standing by, so it was decided to divert all gliders to Broadway. It would be a tremendous task as the gliders would have to be landed at short intervals on a field that was practically wilderness.

"The first transport took off at 1815 with 25 more transports, each towing two gliders ready to go. The run on the takeoff required 5000 of the 6000 feet available and the ships would then begin their slow climb to 8000 feet before starting over the 7500 ft. range that lay between Burma and India. High power boost was required, and the ships were only climbing 150 ft. a minute which indicated that possibly the load was too great. It was learned later that additional weight had been put in each glider, over and above that amount set as maximum. [The first serial of gliders on D-day carried resolute Chindit soldiers armed with Tommy guns, carbines, rifles, pistols, and hand grenades. All of them unwittingly carried considerable extra ammunition grossly overloading the gliders, making them dangerous to fly.] Each transport took off at two-minute intervals and things were proceeding without a hitch until two glider cut shortly after take-off to avoid a collision shortly after they left the ground.

"Finally, the ships headed towards their target, the field 200 miles behind the enemy's front line.

It was SOP that all navigation lights be turned off after reaching the Imphal Valley and here is where trouble started to develop. The gliders began to surge and tow ropes broke while in flight. Ten gliders were forced out on their own landing at Tulihal, along the East bank of the Chindwin, near the Jap Hq. at Pinlebu and two on the Irrawaddy. An amusing incident took place when one of the gliders carrying assault Gurka troops landed at Tulihal. The glider made a good landing and before it came to a stop, the Gurkas were already streaming out, their guns cocked and ready to shoot anything in sight. Fortunately, no one was near, and they were advised of their whereabouts [Japanese HQ].

"The first tow plane piloted by Major Cherry, arrived over the area shortly before midnight. The two gliders, one piloted by Major Taylor and the other by Col. Alison, carried assault troops, landing field lighting equipment and some radio equipment. They fanned out in the area, setting up defensive patrols and arranging the lights. These two gliders landed without incident and soon they were bring in other gliders. Shortly after several had touched down it was found that there were hidden logs in the grass and also log tracks, some several feet deep, that were completely grown over with grass. Some of the gliders struck these obstacles, damaging the undercarriage and consequently could not be moved out of the way quickly enough. As all gliders had a one-way ticket, it was necessary to bring them in in the best manner possible. Two of the gliders crashed into the jungle short of the field and others crashed into stalled glider in the area. It was a heartbreaking job to get them in and in the meantime the radio crew was working feverishly assembling the radio. One of the gliders carrying radio equipment had failed to arrive and vital equipment was lost.

"Meanwhile, back at Lalaghat Col. Cochran ordered that the second wave of transports would not be double but single tow and as the first contingent of transports arrived back at the base, they were refueled and took off again. As the last tow ship took off on the second trip, word was received from Broadway, the first message, to cancel all flights. Twelve of the tow ships that had taken off were contacted and ordered to

return to the base but the others that could not be reached delivered their cargo safely.

“At Broadway there was much activity. The wounded were being attended to and the Airborne Engineers, ... were hard at work making a strip suitable for DC-3 landings the next night. Casualties were not heavy



Invasion of Burma at landing zone Broadway. Gliders brought in three bulldozers; within 24 hours, airborne engineers had prepared a landing strip 300 feet by 5,000, ready for use by more gliders and Troop Carrier Command C-47s, bringing in more men, animals and supplies. NARA posted on Olive-drab.com

considering that the large element of the force to come had been landed safely and a secret strip was on its way to being a certainty. One of the glider pilots carrying a bulldozer designed by Gen. Godfrey, the head Airborne Engineer had miraculously escaped death. He had had the foresight to tie a rope on a pulley from the dozer to the hinged nose of his ship. Unfortunately, he made a crash landing and the dozer broke from its moorings, hurtled forward the rope connected to the hinged nose pulled this upward, carrying the pilots up with it and the dozer shot out the front of the glider underneath the pilots. When the nose snapped back the only injury to the pilots involved was a broken finger.

“Six of the gliders lost the night before were located by pilots of the 51’s and 25’s and no sign of life was observed although it appeared that all had made successful landings. Several had been burned as per instructions. They were scattered from a point just east of the

Chindwin, right in the middle of the Jap lines to a point about 40 miles from Broadway and it was a foregone conclusion that although the probable loss of personnel was tragic, the tactical advantage that must have resulted from the enemy being confused and bewildered at the idea of striking forces at ten different places in his rear was tremendous and gave impetus to the operations success.

“During the month all but four of our flying personnel that were in the forced down glider, walked thru the Jap lines to safety and one party walked into Broadway after a ten-day harrowing experience with Jap patrols.”

If the objective is completed the mission is always considered a success and that was the case with operation THURSDAY. On the first night 539 personnel were delivered along with three mules, 29,972 pounds of stores. Two out of three bulldozers taken in were landed in good condition and the field was rapidly repaired. So much so that on the night of the 6/7 of March 62 C 47s flew into Broadway “with split second timing” and all casualties there were evacuated.

Also on March 6, another field, named Chowringee (named after the main street of Calcutta), was brought into operation 20 miles southeast of Katha. . A Twelve Glider serial lead by glider pilot Jackie Coogan (the child movie



**Mules transported in a CG-4A glider
1st Air Commandos
NARA**

star) was towed from Lalaghat to Chowringee and the following day an additional 5 gliders were towed to that landing zone. All were single tows

and had two glider pilots. Eleven gliders crash landed with no serious injuries.

The twelfth glider flew into a tree killing all aboard. This mission delivered in 183 personnel and 2,400 pounds of stores and another successful air field was made usable until it served its purpose and was abandoned on 10 March. The Japanese bombed and strafed the Chouwinghee air field on 12 March destroying all the abandoned gliders.

On 10 March General Stratemeyer reported the results up to D plus 4 made the comment, "*... Up to this hour a total of 439 Glider and Dakota sorties have arrived at Broadway and Shangri and that ain't hey*"

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Roll of Honor for those Glider Pilots who died in the Burma Campaign.

Edmond B LOPEZ 1944-05-04 LasCruces NM

Charles Bourck LISTON 1944-04-02 Long Beach / CA
[Walls of the Missing Manila American Cemetery; Taguig City, Philippines]

Martin J MCTIGUE 1944-03-08, Leechburg, PA

Robert P SHARROCK 1944-03-05, Louisville, KY

Hadley Dwinell BALDWIN 1944-05-08, Lisbon, ND

Robert L DOWE 1944-03-06, Waukegan, IL

Donald A LE FEVRE 1944-05-09, Troy, NY

George C POLOVICH 1944-03-06, Goodelle, MI

William C RITZINGER 1944-03-06, Chippewa Falls, W

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David Lee WELLS, 1944-03-01, Shelton, WA

Jack Dempsey YATES 1944-03-06, Kingsport, TN

LeRoy Carl SHIMULUNAS, 1944-03-06, Two Rivers / WI

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