



Normandy: A Glider Pilot's Story

by

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On the third of June, at Aldermaston, home of the 434th Troop Carrier Group, and my squadron, the 74th, a high level of nervous excitement and tension was in the air. Airborne troops were moving onto the field in great numbers with much more equipment than could be used for a training flight. Military Police were stationed at all the gates, and no one could go on or off the base.

In the afternoon of June 4th, all C-47 crews and glider pilots reported to the operations room for a briefing by the group intelligence officer. We all took our seats facing a small stage, and when we had all settled down he unveiled a map of France which showed our objective, Landing Zone-E (LZ-E), at Heisville, France, on the Normandy Peninsula. A low gasp and murmur went up from most of us, as we all realized that the time had finally come when we were to put our skills as glider pilots and tow pilots to the real test. He next told us, much to our dismay, that the Germans, within the last 24 hours, had been studding the fields in the LZ area with poles and were digging large ditches across other fields to prevent glider landings. That's when the eager gung-ho looks on the faces of some of the glider pilots and tow plane crews in the audience started to change to looks of worry and anxiety, and the murmuring in the background ceased. Evidently the Germans knew we were coming and were preparing a lively reception for us.

His next announcement took us all by surprise: we, the 434th Group, because of our excellent flying record, and our expertise shown in glider training exercises, were going to lead the glider phase of the D-Day invasion with fifty-two CG-4A gliders carrying men and equipment of the 101st Airborne Division. The code name for this serial would be "CHICAGO," and we would land on LZ-E at Heisville.

Apparently five minutes behind us, taking off from Ramsbury, would be the 437th Group towing fifty-two CG-4As, carrying men of the 82nd Airborne Division. They would land five miles NW of us in the St. Mere Eglise LZ area. The code name for this serial would be "DETROIT."

We were quite proud of the fact we were to be the leaders of the glider phase, but some of us I'm sure, secretly wished that we hadn't been so good on our training operations. Then the crap really hit the fan: we learned that we were going in at night because the paratroopers who had preceded us could not wait until dawn to get the anti-tank guns, ammunition, medics, jeeps, and medical supplies which we would be carrying. This was a tough nut to swallow. Most of our training in the States and in England had been for early dawn or full daylight landings, with very little night landing practice. The thought of a night landing in enemy territory, in strange fields with a heavily loaded glider, sounded like a recipe for disaster. The only good news was the fact that Mike Murphy, the Senior Glider Officer in the ET, had convinced the top brass that the "Horsa" gliders we were supposed to fly that night could prove fatal to most of us, and that CG-4As were the best bet for a night landing and should keep casualties to a minimum. It was changed from the English Horsa glider to the American CG-4A at the very last minute due to his persistence at the very highest level of command. Thank God they went along with his suggestion.



U.S. troops being transported via CG-4A glider to Normandy (Photo: USAF Museum)



Cargo being unloaded from a successfully landed CG-4A. (Photo: USAF Museum)

That afternoon (June 5) I went down to the flight line with Flight Officer (F/O) Bill Bruner, my co-pilot, to check out the CG-4A and went to meet our 101st passengers: Pfc. Paul Nagelbush, Pfc. Stanley Milewiski, and Pfc. Russell Kamp. They were members of the 81st AAA Bn, 101st A/B Division. We would also be carrying supplies, ammunition, their 57mm anti-tank gun, entrenching tools, a camouflage net, and three boxes of rations. The total glider load was 3,750 lbs. Our C-47 tow plane flight crew was Pilot 1st Lt. David Whitmore, one of the best pilots in the squadron; co-pilot Lt. G. Goulding; radio operator and crew chief were T/Sgt. F. Raymond, and S/Sgt. E. Harmon.

Take-off was scheduled for approximately 12:10am, on the morning of the 6th, with touchdown in enemy territory at 4:00am near Heisville. Our glider was No. 49 at the tail end of the 52 ship formation. Bill and I then went to the mess hall for the proverbial last meal, and those of us who felt the need, went to see the chaplain. A lot of us there hadn't been to church for quite some time. His tent was jammed.

At this point, thirty minutes before take-off, the engines of the tow ships began to start up. The muffled noise and throbbing from their engines spread around the field like a distant thunderstorm, and contributed to our uneasiness as we all climbed aboard the glider, trying not to show our true feelings. My own perception at that very moment was that in roughly three and one-half hours I might be dead. It was a very sobering thought, and I wondered why I had been so foolish as to volunteer for this job. When I first went into the glider program early in 1942 from Dow Field, Bangor, Maine, the powers that be never explained to me exactly what gliders were going to be used for. At that time in the glider program I don't think they knew themselves.

At approximately 12:10am, our tow ship gunned its engines and started down the runway through a light rain shower, into the black of night. As the wheels of our glider left the ground, someone in the back yelled "Lookout Hitler, Here we come." That helped to break the ice for the moment. After that no one said a word, as I trimmed the glider for the long flight ahead. For the next three and one-half hours we would be alone with our thoughts and fears. It wasn't too bad for me because I was occupied flying the glider, but the airborne men in back and Bill Bruner, with nothing to do, must have been going through hell with their thoughts.

We settled down on tow, holding our position behind the C-47 by keeping the faint blue formation lights on top of the plane centered up in line between the faint glow of the tow plane's engine flame dampeners. This is not the easiest job in the world at night: the longer you stare, the more your eyes start to play tricks on you. I turned the controls over to Bruner occasionally so I could look away and get my eyes to refocus again. The added problem we faced was the extreme turbulence caused by all the planes ahead of us.

Shortly after we crossed the coast of France, small arms fire and heavier flak started coming up at the planes at the front of the formation, and intensified the closer we got to our LZ. It looked like fluid streams of tracers zigzagging and hosing across the sky, mixed in with the heavier explosions of flak. One wondered how anything could fly through that and come out in one piece. After the front of the formation had passed over the German positions and woke them all up, we at the tail end of the line began to get hit by a heavier volume of small arms fire which sounded like corn popping, or typewriter keys banging on loose paper as it went through our glider. I tried to pull my head down into my chest to make myself as small as possible; I tucked my elbows in close to my body, pulled my knees together to protect the vital parts of my manhood and was even tempted to take my feet off the rudder pedals so they wouldn't stick out so far. At that point I really started to sweat.

A few minutes after we had crossed the coast, and before we reached our glider release point near Heisville, the group ran into some low lying clouds and fog banks. All the planes in the formation started to spread out to avoid collisions, and this caused many of us to land wide, short, and beyond our objective when we reached the cutoff point. In a very short time - too soon for me - the moment I was dreading arrived: the green light came on in the astrodome of the tow plane, indicating that we were over the LZ, and that it was time to cutoff.

At that moment I had a very strong urge not to cut loose. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who felt that way on that night. It was dark. Everything but the kitchen sink was coming up at us from the Germans below, and that tow rope, as long as it was

hooked up, was my umbilical cord. The steady pull from the tow plane signified safety, and a nice ride back to England out of this mess if I hung on. I quickly put this thought out of my mind and waited about ten seconds before I released the tow rope. It was a good thing I did, because I still landed about one half mile short of the LZ. If I had cut loose at the first signal from the tow plane, I would have landed in an area that had been flooded by the Germans. Many paratroopers drowned in this swampy area that night.



The CG-4A glider in tow (USAFM)



U.S. troops examine a crashed glider.
(Photo: USAF Museum)

As soon as the rope disconnected from our glider, I started a 360 degree turn to the left, feeling my way down into the darkness, holding the glider as close to stalling speed as I could. It was almost impossible to describe one's feelings in a situation like this. You know the ground is down there, but you can't see it. You don't know if you're going to hit trees, ditches, barns, houses, or what, and all this time the flak and tracers are still coming up all around you. The only thing you know for sure is that Germans are shooting up at you, and they are going to be right there waiting for you when you climb out of your glider. You hope you will wake up and discover you're having a bad dream. They say fear has no bounds, and at this point I was in full agreement. We still could not see a thing, and I knew that we were about to run out of altitude. Finally, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a faint light patch that looked like an open field outlined by trees. It was. By this time we were so low that we had no choice in the matter. There would be no chance for ago around. With a prayer on my lips - and a very tight pucker string - I straightened out my glide path and headed in, with Bruner holding on full spoilers. We flared out for a landing just above the stalling speed and touched down as smooth as glass. I couldn't believe it. How lucky can you get? But just when we thought we had it made, there was a tremendous bone jarring crash. We had hit one of those damn ditches that the Germans had dug across the fields. Their main purpose was to prevent gliders from landing in one piece, and it sure worked with us. We plunged down into the ditch, and when the nose slammed into the other side, the glider's back broke as it slid up over the opposite bank. The floor split open, and we skidded to a halt in the field on the other side. That ditch was ten to twelve feet across by five to six feet deep, with water in the bottom. For a split second we sat in stunned silence, and I breathed a sigh of relief because none of us seemed to be injured. We then bailed out fast because there was rifle and machine gun fire going off in the fields around us. Fortunately none seemed to be aimed at our field at the moment. It took us almost thirty minutes to dig the nose of the glider out of the dirt so we could open it up and roll out the anti-tank gun. Midway through this task the Germans set off a flare right over our heads, and lo and behold, we saw glider No. 50 piloted by Flight Officers Calvani and Ryan sitting on the other side of the ditch without a scratch on it. They were carrying the Jeep to tow our anti-tank gun. Calvani must have stuck right on my tail in the dark to have landed so close. I don't know how he managed to do it.

We now had the job of digging a ramp down into and out of the ditch to get the jeep over to us. While this was going on, the naval bombardment started on the invasion beaches, and even though it was five miles away, the ground shook under our feet and the noise was unbelievable. I think we all said a few prayers for the kids who would be storming ashore and hoped they would be successful. Our own lives were at stake if they failed. We finally got the jeep across the ditch and the gun hooked up. I left the group and started off on foot to find the 101st Division CP (Command Post) at Heisville, and the gun crew took off towing the gun to find their unit, the 81st AAA Bn.

On my way through the hedgerows I stopped a jeep driven by a paratrooper who was headed in what we hoped was the right direction to the CP. I hopped on the hood, and we started up a narrow path between the hedgerows. About five minutes later, some Germans opened up on us with machine pistol and rifle fire. I fell off the hood, and the jeep almost ran over me. That was enough. I got up and started off on my own again. A short time later, while walking up this same narrow lane, I glanced to my left and saw a rectangular opening at about waist height. A rifle barrel was sticking out pointed right at me. I froze in mid step, waiting for the bullet I thought had my name on it. Nothing happened; the gun didn't move. By now I was curious. I crawled over the hedge and looked in. It was a complete German bunker - large enough for five or six soldiers. Its sole occupant was a dead German, his rifle was poking through the slot. Thank God for the paratroopers who had taken care of him earlier and probably left him in this position to scare some of their buddies. They succeeded. It scared the hell out of me. It also make me much more cautious, and I started to walk in a crouch, and kept my head on a swivel. The next German I saw was lying at a road junction in a pool of blood. He had just been hit by a mortar or shell fragment and was still alive. I felt horrible while I stood there watching him die knowing there was nothing I could do for him. I still had not developed the hate for the enemy.

That came to me as the day progressed, and I saw and heard of what they had done to some of our airborne men. This German, lying in front of me, was a young kid, and sure didn't look like a Nazi Superman.

Something happened shortly after that which brought roars of laughter from my fellow glider pilots when I told them about it. As I passed an opening in a hedge-row and looked through it, I saw a paratrooper out in the center of a large meadow standing alone. Being a little on the lonesome side by now, and a little curious as to why he was out there by himself, I walked out to see what the scoop was. As I approached him, I noticed that he was wearing an air force flak vest. I introduced myself to him and he thanked me for coming out to help him, but suggested I go find a flak vest to wear. Being a little naive, or just plain stupid, I asked him why, and he told me that there were German snipers in the woods on the edge of the field, and he was trying to draw their fire so his buddies could nail them. At this moment something went buzzing by my head, and I dropped to the ground. He remarked, while still standing straight up, "there's the son of a bitch now." Needless to say I wished him luck, picked myself up and beat a hasty retreat in search of a flak vest. I had no luck finding one from the wreckage of the gliders in the area. The paratroopers had grabbed them all for their own protection. I began to realize now that by walking around alone, I was just asking to be knocked off by a sniper. At this point I still had not found the CP, or seen any other glider pilots.

By late afternoon after a few more encounters from sniper fire along the way, I arrived at the Division CP (101st) in Heisville and was assigned with other glider pilots to guard the perimeter in case the Germans tried to infiltrate back into what we thought was a secure area. We did not know it at the time, but they were all through the area playing possum. Some of the snipers were still in trees around the area.

While resting in a courtyard in Heisville center, I heard and then saw a wagon coming down the lane being pulled by two paratroopers of the 101st. In the wagon, lying on top of a load of German mines and ammo was what looked like the body of another trooper. He wasn't dead or wounded - just zonked out from exhaustion. He had picked a hell of a bed to take a nap on. One mortar shell or rifle round in that wagon would have blown all three of them to hell and back. By this time we had all been awake 36 hours or more, and the pep pills we had been taking to keep us awake started to turn some of us into walking zombies. A few of the guys were out on their feet, and nothing could wake them up.

At 8:30 that evening, still the 6th, some of us were asked to go back out into the fields to meet and cover the landing of the second series of gliders. A large group of Horsa gliders were expected to arrive at 9:00pm, towed again by my group, the 434th, from Aldermaston. They arrived right on time, and all hell broke loose. The Germans in the fields around us who had been playing possum, opened up on them with everything they had. Their heavy AA guns outside the perimeters were firing air bursts over and into the fields while the gliders were landing. The fields in this area around Heisville were much too small for the large British Horsa gliders, and those that were not shot down, crashed head on into the hedgerows. Some were fortunate and made it down in one piece; others came under heavy enemy small arms fire after they had landed, and many of the glidermen and pilots were killed or captured while climbing out of their gliders. For an hour or so it was an awful mess, and the casualties in men and equipment were heavy before the situation stabilized.

After the gliders were unloaded and the casualties from the wrecks were taken care of, things settled down, and I went back to the CP to dig in for the night in an apple orchard behind a stable. While curled up in my foxhole trying to get some sleep, I suddenly recalled my boyhood days when I would get together with other kids in the neighborhood to play war. It was always the Yanks and the Huns, and here I was in 1944, in person, doing it for real.

Shortly after dark, rumors started to spread between fox holes that there was a possibility that Germans were going to drop their own paratroopers in on us. This did nothing for our morale, and for the rest of the night we were spooked at the slightest sound, especially when we heard some planes go over quite low. Anyone who got out of his fox hole that night was taking his life in his own hands.

We got through the night and, in mid-morning of June 7, a call went out for volunteers to take over five hundred German prisoners down to the beach for transport back to England. The airborne men had captured so many of them that they were getting under foot and required too many people to guard them. Smart ass that I was, I asked the question "is the road to the beach open?" No one answered, so I volunteered anyway. With some of the glider pilots, many from my squadron, we lined the PWs up on the road and waited for the "ok" to take off. The Germans were more anxious to get out than we were. The war was over for them, and they wanted to get as far away from it as possible.

At this stage of the game most of us had just about reached the limits of endurance, so we gave the PWs most of our equipment to carry. One glider pilot was tempted to give them his Thompson sub-machine gun to carry, but on second thought decided it wouldn't look so good to the soldiers we would pass coming up from the Utah Beach. On the march out, we kept going slower, and slower, and the PWs kept getting further ahead of us. Only by our making threats to shoot them did they slow down. The road to the beach was open, and by the time we got there, our butts were really dragging. It felt like we had walked twenty-five miles rather than five.

The sight on Utah Beach was beyond belief. As far as the eye could see, to the left and the right, were men, trucks, tanks, vehicles of all types, and piles of equipment as high as houses. From the shore and out across the Channel was an endless line

of merchant and warships of all sizes. The Navy ships were shelling targets inland around the clock. The saddest part was the long rows of wounded and dead laid out in rows on the sand waiting to be loaded on ships.

The Navy Beach Master told us we would be going aboard LST 400 shortly and would be going back to England the following day. I immediately laid down in the sand and went sound asleep in spite of all the noise. That night German planes came in at low altitude and dropped mines around ships just offshore. The next morning we boarded the LST but, before any of the ships dared to pull up anchor, British mine sweepers came in close sweep of the area. One of them hit a mine less than forty feet away from our LST and sank within two minutes. The force from the explosion close alongside our ship scared the hell out of us and made us think that we had been torpedoed. The only survivor from the mine sweeper was one of the stokers who was on deck getting some fresh air. He was blown overboard and picked up by the crew of our LST.

One thing that overwhelmed us on this Navy ship was the chow. They brought out fresh eggs, milk, ice cream, and steaks, and we gorged ourselves. One of the glider pilots went up to the time skipper and told him there and then he wanted to transfer to the Navy, but it didn't work. Our good food back at the base was always powdered eggs, powdered milk, and SOS for breakfast.

The ship finally got us back to England, and eventually we arrived back at our home base at Aldermaston where they rolled out the red carpet for us. I guess they didn't think many of us would survive, and they couldn't do enough for us. After interrogation by the base intelligence officer, and after we had pinpointed on aerial photos our landing spots, we were all given three day passes. After that, the daily training routine began again and most of us went to a commando ground school at Ogburne St. George for further training in weapons and ground tactics. Many of us got in co-pilot time in C-47s on the resupply runs, so the time power boys who had been flying around the clock could get badly needed bouts of rest.

I remember almost everything about this "Normandy Mission" in great detail: from the takeoff, to boarding the LST for the return trip to England, and everything in between. After that, from the moment the anchor was pulled up on that LST and we started back to England, my mind is an absolute blank. For the life of me I cannot remember crossing the English Channel, where we landed, or how I got from the channel port back to the 434th Group at my home base at Aldermaston. The physical and mental stress, fear, and anxiety, from the last three days must have shorted out my brain circuits for this period of time.

Addendum:

Recapping what happened to some of the first gliders into Normandy on the first night of the invasion:

Glider No. 1, piloted by Lt. Col. Mike Murphy, flying with the 72nd TCS, crashed into a line of trees on the edge of a field, killing the co-pilot, Lt. Robert Butler, and Brig. Gen. Pratt, the Assistant Division Commander of the 101st Airborne Division. The Pathfinder pilot on board the tow plane, Major Alvin E. Robinson (from the 74th TCS), warned Murphy, just before they reached the LZ, that the wind had shifted. He replied, "that it was too late to change plans." Murphy's glider was overloaded and probably nose-heavy because of the steel plate that had been placed under the pilot and co-pilot seats for protection from flak.



Crew and passengers of the first glider to land on D-Day. Second from left is General Pratt who was killed in the crash of the glider. (Photo: George E. Buckley)

Glider No. 5, carrying one of the division radios, flown by F/O Ketchmun and Baldwin, aborted over England shortly after take-off. Both pilots could not get back to the field in time to get another glider and catch up with the formation. Later in the day, June 6, they flew in the second series of Horsa, also No. 5, from Aldermaston, carrying troopers of the 327th Glider Infantry. They landed at 9:00pm in daylight, ripped a wing off in a rough landing, and all, after exiting the glider, were captured by the enemy.

Glider No. 6, carrying the second radio, flown by F/O James Malloy and F/O Gordon Mohr, managed to land safely with no damage. If this radio had been lost it would have been a severe setback for the airborne troops.

Glider No. 51, flown by F/Os Kile and DelaGarza, was flying slightly behind and off my right wing. The tow plane piloted by Lt. Raymond Howard, and Lt. Eston Kuhn, from the 71st squadron, received a fatal hit from flack and crashed in flames in a swamp five miles southwest of the landing zone. Lt. Howard, the pilot, was killed by the Germans as he crawled from the burning wreckage. The crew chief, Sgt. John W. Beckley, the radio operator, Sgt. Marvin Boetcher, and Lt. Kuhn, the copilot, were captured by the Germans. Lt. Kuhn was killed later in the day in a strafing attack on the German trucks they were riding in by one of our own planes near St. Lo.

The glider (No. 51) cut loose before the C-47 crashed and landed nearby. Kile was lost in September 1944, when his glider ditched in the channel during the Holland "Market" operation.

Glider No. 40, piloted by F/Os Lee Stull of the 74th squadron, and Clinton Griffin, on loan from the 436th TCG, crashed into a hedgerow. Griffin was killed when his head smashed through the front of the glider. Stull was injured and captured later by the Germans. He was liberated from a German POW camp in May 1945.

Glider No. 45, flown by F/Os Tim Hohmann and Robert Butler, slipped in over the tops of 60 to 70 foot trees, wiped out the gear and skids, and stopped with no casualties, right on target.

Glider No. 46, flown by F/Os Lenard Hewson and Gordon Sweeney landed one mile from the LZ in a small field going downhill. The glider hit a large tree on the left side which sheared off the wing and stripped the fabric off the left side of the fuselage. Sweeney was knocked out for a short time, but no other injuries were sustained.

Glider No. 42, in front of me off to my right, flown by F/O Irwin Morales and Lt. Thomas Ahmad, both of the 74th squadron, missed the LZ and landed in a swamp seven miles south of Carentan deep in enemy territory. They were twelve miles from the LZ at Heisville. Morales, with a small group of American paratroopers and glider infantrymen from the 101st and the 82nd Airborne who had missed their drop zone, held the town of Montmartin en Graignes for five days. Patrols were sent out each day to blow bridges, cut wires, commit other acts of sabotage in the area, and ambush any German patrols that were retreating back from the LZ areas north of their position. On June 10th, the Germans discovered their presence in town after Morales and the paratroopers had ambushed a motorcycle patrol killing four of the enemy. A large German force backed up by mortars and artillery, attacked the town and drove them out after a two-day pitched battle which killed nine of the troopers. Morales was able to get back to friendly lines. Lt. Ahmad was last seen by Morales during the attack, with other airborne men, guarding the left flank of their position near a church close to town. Ahmad was not seen again and was listed as missing in action and later killed in action. Morales, after his return to Aldermaston, received the Croix de Guerre with Palm from the French Government for his actions.

After the war in Europe ended in May, Morales borrowed a jeep and returned to Normandy. In the town where he, and the troopers had fought their pitched battle, the townspeople told him that after they were driven out by the Germans, they had counted the bodies of close to 500 of the enemy that they had killed. In retaliation, the Germans executed two priests and two nurses who had been caring for the wounded Americans. Twenty-five of the airborne men who had been captured, including the wounded in the church, were taken to a small farm just outside the town where they were lined up and shot in their heads. Their bodies were thrown in a ditch near a pig sty. The Germans, in a further act of revenge, burnt down most of the houses in town and shot over thirty citizens. Morales is quite sure his co-pilot, Ahmad, was one of the victims of this cold-blooded massacre. This was later proved to be correct. Morales located Ahmad's grave in a temporary military cemetery between St. Lo and Carentan.

Addendum to Glider No. 40. Lee Stull arrived injured at the farmhouse of Henri Levesque and family. He was taken to a doctor to get treatment. He was transported by horse and wagon to a German aid station where he received care, and became a POW. Stull was transported deep into Germany to Stalag Luft III. His last prison camp was Stammlager VII at Moosburg, Germany, near the infamous Dachau concentration camp. He was liberated in May of 1945.

The glider pilots of Troop Carrier Command had tasted their first combat. I'm sure that all of us who participated in this operation, came away with the knowledge that war is definitely not the glamorous, exciting game depicted in the movies or in the way we played it when we were kids.

Those of us who have gone to war, and watched our friends die before our eyes, will have these haunting memories forever with us. We will treasure life as never before and grieve silently for our young friends and buddies who did not return home.

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