

Glider Operations in the European Theater in World War II

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The innovation of the glider, an engineless tubular steel and wooden flying frame, was heavily relied upon during World War

II. Over the course of the War, a total of 14,612 gliders were built to support the U.S. Army and U.S. Army Air Corps with a whopping 6,000+ pilots trained and needed to fly them. Becoming very popular very quickly, the glider was used in several famous campaigns throughout the European Theater, most notably: The Battle of the Bulge, the D-Day Invasion, and Operation Varsity to name a few.

Before diving into some of these famous campaigns and the impact gliders had on them, what were gliders used for in general during a war which was racing towards a more technological form of warfare?

World War II marked the beginning of “The Atomic Phase” of warfare, and with the new release of the cinematic film *Oppenheimer*, it is very common for one to relate the creation of a nuclear bomb to World War II. However, in addition to the atomic bomb, there were several other technological advancements made throughout the War including the first modern jet. Looking at this fact, one would

think a faster plane would be preferred over a plane without an engine at all. However, the planes of that era were extremely loud which made it very hard for the Allied and the Axis Powers to conduct a surprise attack or to get past enemy lines for any reason. Ergo, the innovation of the fighting glider. Combat gliders made their first debut as a German offensive tactic at 0425 on May 10th, 1940, at the “impenetrable” Belgium Fort Eben-Emael. Considered to be one of Europe’s strongest forts, Eben-Emael fell in just twenty short minutes to German glider paratroopers. The fort itself was an entire network of underground tunnels which connected a series of bunkers. The tunnel system made this fort ideal for long sieges and with the concrete bunkers on the surface built in tune with the surrounding landscape the fort was considered to be one of the strongest in all of Europe at the time. With only 71 men flying on nine gliders, the Germans were able to silently land atop the hill which housed the solid 185-acre fort. Since the glider gave the German forces the ability to land within feet of the fort there were few casualties suffered with only six Germans losing their lives. Meanwhile, the 780 Belgium soldiers that were stationed at the fort were taken as Prisoners of War under German supervision. This was the first time in the history of warfare that gliders had been used in an offensive