

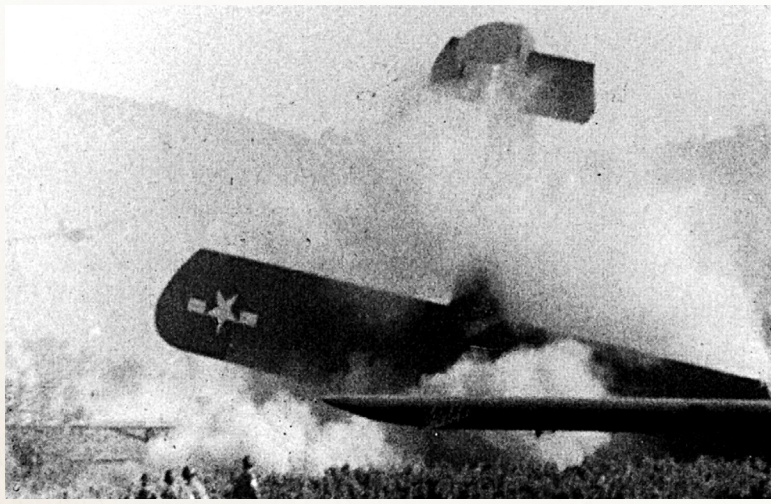
The CG-4A Waco Glider

by Troy J. Sacquety

EARLY in World War II, the successful use of airborne forces by Germany shocked the world. The Germans used their glider-borne forces in the assault of the “impregnable” Belgian fortress Eben-Emael on 10–11 May 1940, and they combined parachutists with gliders when they invaded Crete in May 1941. These events prompted greater American military interest in airborne forces and the use of combat gliders. By 1942, the U.S. Army Air Corps had a prototype that would later become the American workhorse of World War II. The CG-4A Waco had a wingspan of eighty-four feet, a length of forty-nine feet, and could carry 3,750 pounds.¹ It was constructed of plywood and canvas stretched over a tubular steel frame. A C-46 or a C-47 cargo aircraft could tow it. The CG-4A had a crew of two. The standard combat troop load was thirteen glidermen. If heavier equipment was transported, the interior of the CG-4A could be modified to carry

a combination of glidermen, a jeep, a loaded jeep trailer, light truck, miniature bulldozer, 75mm pack howitzer, or a light anti-tank gun. The cargo was loaded through the CG-4A's nose section which could be flipped up to allow access. Nearly 14,000 CG-4As were built at an average cost of \$18,800. In a combat environment, the often heavy damage they suffered and the air assets required for retrieval caused them to be regarded as disposable.²





Casualties among glider pilots and riders were often high in combat. This glider is shown flipping on its nose while "landing" during Operation DRAGOON, the invasion of German-occupied southern France.

Flying in them was a unique experience. Ned Roberts, a writer for the *United Press*, described his experience during a demonstration glider flight: "Under tow . . . we found gliding to be much like riding in a transport. The wind's roar, as the transport pulled us through the air at close to 150 miles an hour, made fully as much noise as the plane's engines. At 2,000 feet, they cut us loose, and the *Dallas Kid* [the name of his glider] promptly bounced straight up for 400 feet. That's when I lost my stomach. . . . Through the transparent nose of the *Dallas Kid*, we could see the air base and surrounding cotton patches [below] spinning around like a huge pinwheel."³ The evasive maneuvers associated with a combat flight would have made the ride that much more harrowing, especially when the pilots were "fighting" for open spaces to land.

Corporal Charles Fairlamb, 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion, described gliders landing in Operation DRAGOON, the invasion of southern France: "I've never seen a more awful sight in my life, some gliders landed upside down, some came down on one wing only, while others crashed into trees. I saw one jeep being tossed out of a glider while it was still in the air, and another vehicle crashed through the nose . . . all in all, it was a very sickening sight."⁴ Sergeant Douglas Dillard, a fellow 551st paratrooper, watched another glider hit a tree line. "We



A restored CG-4A Waco Glider is on display at the Airborne and Special Operations Museum, Fayetteville, North Carolina.

ran over to see if we could help, but they were all mangled and there was no sign of life."⁵ Private Sam Povich of the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team remembered the glider "smacking in" and that the casualties were tremendous. He watched as one glider crashed so horribly that it appeared as if no one could be alive "in that coffin, but they all made it out."⁶ Private David E. Grange, also of the 517th, recalled his reaction to the gliders landing. "We thought it was incoming artillery when they began crashing in, and we began looking for cover."⁷ Even the gliders that landed safely risked being hit by other incoming gliders. However, gliders did perform their combat mission of quickly—if not crudely—bringing in heavier equipment and more personnel than could be delivered by airdrop.

In Europe, gliders were used in airborne operations in Sicily, France, the Netherlands, and Germany, and in the Far East in Burma and the Philippines. However, once the war ended, they quickly became obsolete. By 1953, the U.S. Army no longer trained glidermen. Yet, evidence of the large U.S. Army glider program can still be found in and

CG-4A Waco gliders were used in several operational theaters during WWII. Here, a glider flown by the 1st Air Commando, is being used by OSS Detachment 101 in Burma in 1944.





The photo on the left illustrates the pilot's compartment of the CG-4A Waco glider. On the right is the skeleton of another nose compartment which was pulled from a Camp Mackall swamp in the summer of 2006.

around Fort Bragg. The Airborne and Special Operations Museum (ASOM) in downtown Fayetteville, North Carolina, has one of the few remaining CG-4A Waco gliders on permanent display. In the summer of 2006, the nose section of a CG-4A was rescued from a Camp Mackall swamp. Plans are underway to transform this artifact into a memorial to the U.S. Army glider troops and the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion paratroopers who jumped from it at Camp Mackall during WWII. ♣

1 E. M. Flanagan Jr., *Airborne: A Combat History of American Airborne Forces* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 23.

- 2 National WWII Glider Pilot's Association, Inc, "Some Interesting Facts About the Glider Program and the CG4A," <http://www.ww2gp.org/CG4A.htm> [16 January 2007]; Flanagan, *Airborne: A Combat History*, 24.
- 3 Quoted in Tom MacCallum and Lowell Stevens, *Camp Mackall and its Times in the Sandhills of North Carolina*, unpublished manuscript, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 4 Michel DeTrez, *First Airborne Task Force: Pictorial History of the Allied Paratroopers in the Invasion of Southern France* (Wezembeek-Oppem, Belgium: D-Day Publishing, 1998), 345.
- 5 Daniel Morgan, *The Left Corner of My Heart: The Saga of the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion* (Wauconda, Washington: Alder Enterprises, 1984), 189.
- 6 Sam Povich, interview by Dr. Charles Briscoe, Fort Bragg, NC, 6 March 2007, notes, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 7 Lieutenant General (Retired) David E. Grange, telephone interview with Dr. Charles Briscoe, 14 March 2007, notes, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

