

The 151st

Airborne Tank

Company at Camp Mackall, NC

by Troy J. Sacquety

CAMP Mackall, North Carolina, now a training center for Army Special Operations Forces, was the headquarters of the U.S. Army Airborne Command during World War II. Several airborne divisions trained there, notably the 11th, 13th, and 17th Airborne. Airborne forces were still in their infancy in World War II, and the United States did all that it could to increase their potency. The Army established the Airborne Test Board at Camp Mackall to evaluate airborne tactics, techniques, and equipment. Sometimes these experiments were unusual. The acquisition of a veteran's photographs revealed a nearly forgotten experiment at Camp Mackall: the 151st Airborne Tank Company.

Formed at Fort Knox, Kentucky, in May 1943, the 151st Airborne Tank Company was to provide airborne forces with an organic armor capability.³ The unit was not meant to engage enemy tanks, but instead was an attempt to give airborne units at least a semblance of being able to fight off enemy probes with something other than light anti-tank weapons. The M22 tanks of the 151st were to be delivered to the field via gliders or belly-slung under a C-54 cargo aircraft.⁴ Neither method proved practical. The largest glider in U.S. Army service,

the CG-13, was not large enough to accommodate the M22. The tank was eventually abandoned for consideration in combat operations by the U.S. Army.

The 151st was commanded by Captain Felix Hege; four other officers and fifty enlisted men were assigned as cadre.² Early members of the 151st joined from various armor units in training around the United States. Private Roger Justesen joined because of the extra incentive pay that the "airborne" tankers received.³ Another 120 enlisted recruits, many from Iowa, served to fill the remaining slots.⁴ The company was organized into three platoons of five tanks each, a reconnaissance platoon with jeeps and M3 halftracks, and a headquarters platoon of three tanks—a total of eighteen tanks.⁵ Their M22s arrived about six weeks after the company was formed, and the group trained on ground tactics though the cold Kentucky winter of 1943/1944.⁶ In the spring of 1944, the unit was transferred to Camp Mackall.

By their nature, airborne

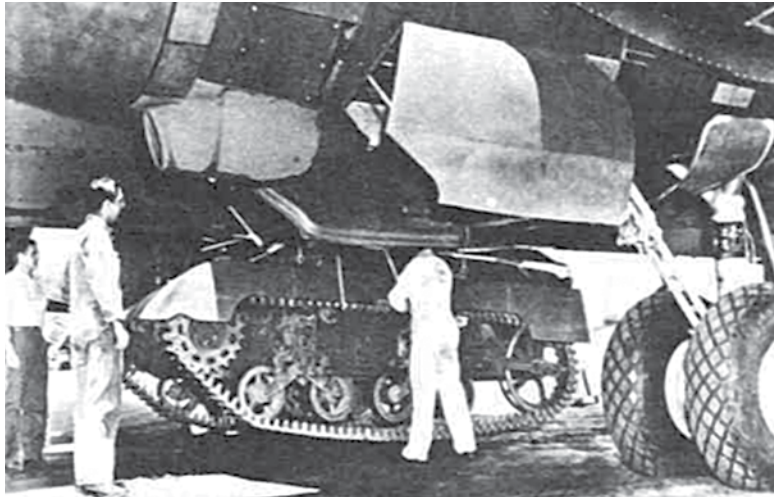




The C-54 Skymaster could be used to deliver M22 tanks to the field.



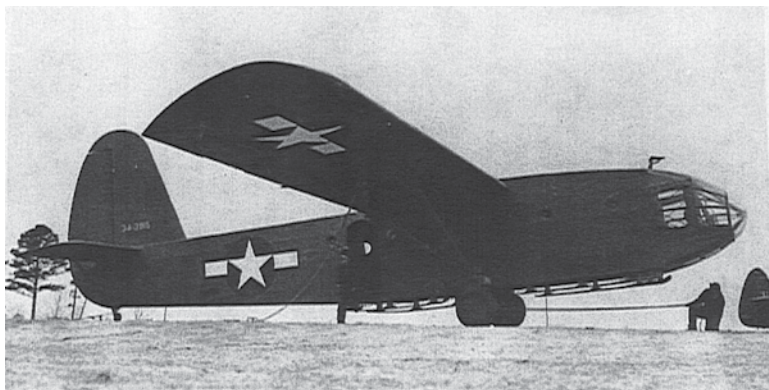
A soldier firing the M1A1 "Bazooka". "The rockets simply bounced off the sides of the German tank vehicle or exploded to no effect unless it hit an opening or perhaps just the right angle of a track to disable it" recalled SGT Douglas Dillard of the 551st PIB (Parachute Infantry Battalion).



An M22 belly-slung under a C-54 cargo aircraft. This method of transport required that the turret be removed and placed inside the aircraft while in transit.

Germans had large and well-trained armor units. Their tank development was years ahead of the Allies.

For much of the war, U.S. airborne forces only had limited means at their disposal to protect against armor attack. Hand-held weapons included various grenades and the Rocket Launcher, M1A1, commonly known as the "Bazooka." Introduced in 1942, the M1A1 fired an eight-pound M6 2.36-inch rocket that had an effective range of 300 yards. The rocket had a hollow shaped-charge that—under ideal circumstances—could penetrate up to four inches of vertical armor plate. But late in the war, the M1A1 proved relatively ineffective against the thick, angled armor of German heavy tanks.



The CG-13 glider was the largest used by the U.S. Army. Its use in combat was very limited. Despite its size, it could not carry the M22 tank.

This was not a failing of the airborne, because the Army had largely ignored anti-tank warfare. Although tanks had been used in WWI, the interwar French, British, and U.S. militaries employed them as infantry support. It wasn't until 1939, after the German *Blitzkrieg* in Poland, that the U.S. Army took a 37mm German anti-tank (AT) gun design and reengineered it as the M3. It was fielded in 1940. Still, by doctrine, these AT guns were to support infantry divisions. The fall of France and the Low Countries in 1940 forced the Allies to take notice that tanks employed en masse could punch holes through enemy defenses that were then exploited by following

units—especially in WWII—were lightly armed. Their mission was to seize and hold an objective until more heavily armed and supported regular Army units arrived. Before this link-up, the greatest threat that an isolated airborne unit could face was an enemy armor force. This possibility was greatly feared in WWII. Although the Japanese were not great proponents of tank warfare and, as such, did not have very capable tanks, the



11th Airborne SSI



17th Airborne SSI



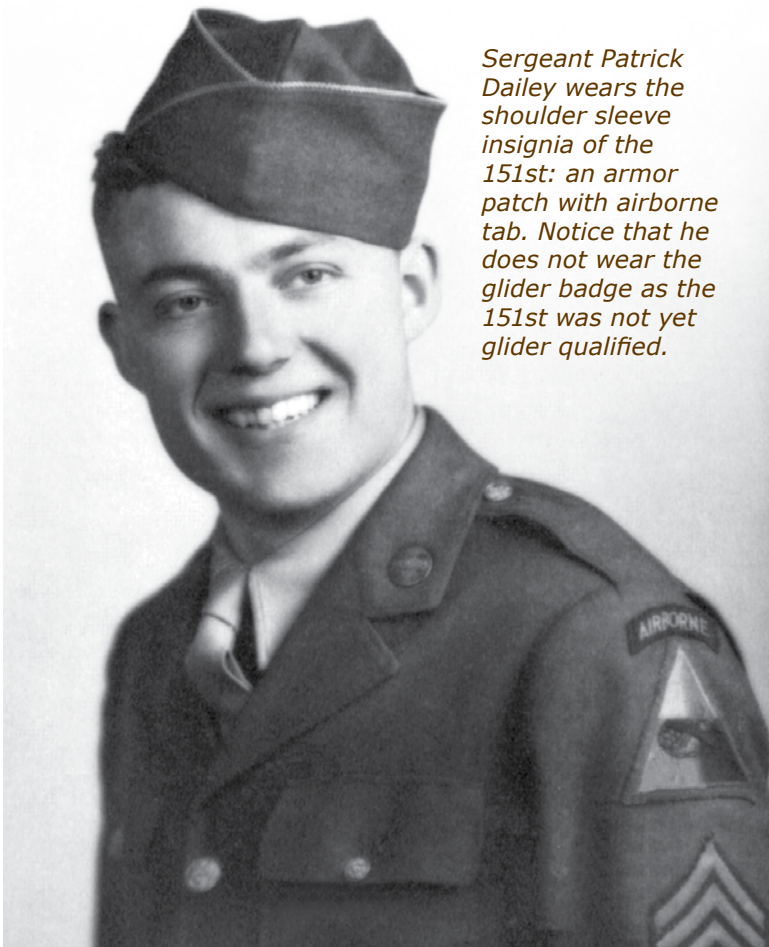
13th Airborne SSI



The CG-4A Waco glider was the basic U.S. Army glider of WWII. This example, being loaded by OSS Detachment 101 in Burma, has the nose flipped open to allow easier access.



M3 37mm Anti-Tank gun. This was the basic U.S. Army airborne anti-tank weapon for the early war period.



Sergeant Patrick Dailey wears the shoulder sleeve insignia of the 151st: an armor patch with airborne tab. Notice that he does not wear the glider badge as the 151st was not yet glider qualified.

infantry. However, the U.S. stop-gap solution to counter this was to rapidly equip their formations with anti-tank guns. The German armor improved throughout the war whereas U.S. counter-measures, improved AT guns, tank destroyers, and better tanks, came slowly. Unfortunately, pre-war thinking and capabilities dominated what was supplied to the Army's airborne forces.

Airborne units were also equipped with towed anti-tank guns. These, along with a jeep to tow them, were to be delivered to the drop zone via CG-4A Waco gliders (see Troy J. Sacquety's "The CG-4A Waco Glider" in *Veritas* 3:2). The standard anti-tank gun in U.S. service at the beginning of the war was the 37mm M3. Its small size meant that it was already obsolete when it entered service and the gun could not effectively engage anything but softskinned vehicles or the smallest of tanks. Although it remained in use in the Pacific throughout the war, its utility in Europe was severely limited by the larger German armor. By 1944, attempts were being made to replace it with the larger British-made 57mm M1 anti-tank gun, although this too was only a stop-gap measure to use a weapons system that had already been developed. The airborne forces needed a new capability.

In 1941, to complement these weapons, several manufacturers were asked by the Army to develop an air-transportable tank. The design submitted by the



The headquarters sign for the 151st Airborne Tank Company at Fort Knox, Kentucky.



The M22 had three crewmen: a driver in the hull, and a commander/loader and gunner in the turret.



M22s in the motor pool at Camp Mackall, NC.

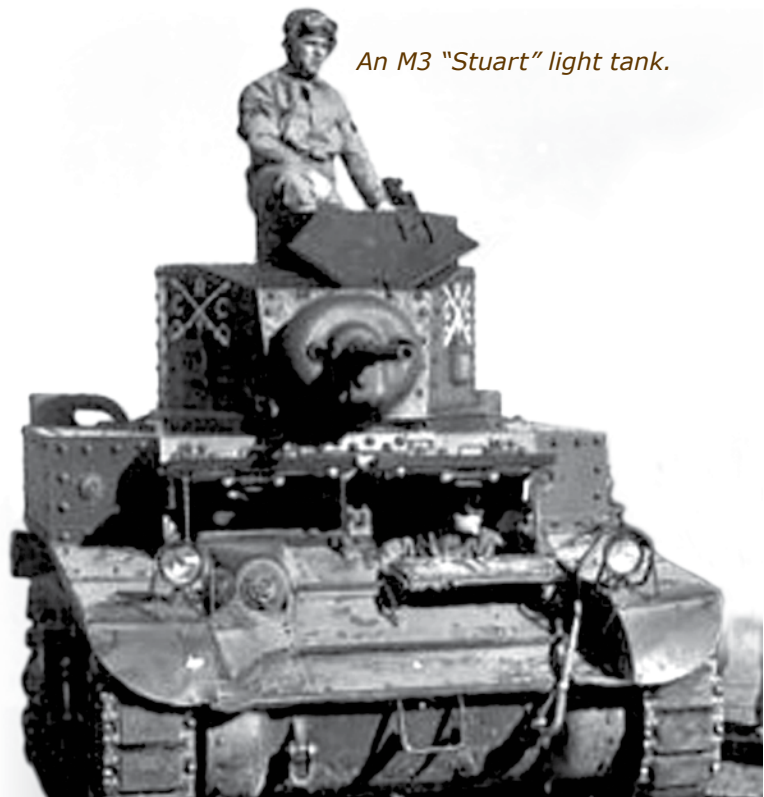


The M22's 37mm main gun fired the small shell held in the crewman's hand. Such shells would have had little effect on German armor.

Marmon-Herrington Corporation of Indianapolis, Indiana, was chosen and designated the T9E1. In U.S. Army nomenclature, it was named the M22, and was known in British parlance as the "Locust." More than 800 of these tanks were built from April 1943 to February 1944. The M22, crewed by three, was less than thirteen feet long and weighed just under eight tons. In comparison, an M4 Sherman medium tank, crewed by five, was nineteen feet long and weighed thirty-three tons. The M22 was lightly armed with a 37mm M3 as the main gun (a variant of the M3 anti-tank gun) and a .30 caliber machinegun. It carried fifty rounds of 37mm and 2,500 rounds of machinegun ammunition. The strengths of the M22 were speed (35 mph), a low profile that made it a difficult target, and an operational range of over one hundred miles. In reality, the tank was not capable of engaging anything but the lightest of enemy vehicles. Yet it could serve as an effective mobile pill box for infantry protection or assault.⁷

The problem with the M1A1, M3, and M22 was that, like U.S. anti-tank warfare, they had not kept pace with German armor development. At the time of their design, the main tanks in German service were the *Panzerkampfwagen I* and *Panzerkampfwagen II*. Only limited numbers of *Panzerkampfwagen III*s and *Panzerkampfwagen IV*s were then in use. This rapidly changed. By 1943, an up-gunned and up-armored *Panzerkampfwagen IV* was the main German battle-tank, and large numbers of *Panther* and *Tiger* tanks were entering service. By 1944, the Germans were fielding even heavier tanks and tank destroyers. American anti-tank weapons simply could not compete against these new armor vehicles.

American tanks could do little better. Among the main types of tanks in U.S. service, the M3 "Stuart," was armed with only a 37mm main gun developed from



An M3 "Stuart" light tank.



The Panzerkampfwagen II was used in large numbers for the invasions of Poland in 1939 and France in 1940. It was to counter tanks like the Panzerkampfwagen I and Panzerkampfwagen II that the U.S. M3 anti-tank gun was developed.



The Panzerkampfwagen IV had the added protection of armor sideskirts. Measures like these greatly increased the tanks' protection against anti-tank weapons.



The Panther tank was intended to replace the Panzerkampfwagen IV. It was heavily armored, had sloped armor that decreased its vulnerability, and had a high-velocity 75mm main gun with tremendous penetrating power.



The M4, more popularly known as the Sherman, was the standard U.S. Army medium-tank of the war. It was produced in large numbers and was easy to maintain, but was out-classed both in armor and armament by many German tanks.

Tanks of WWII

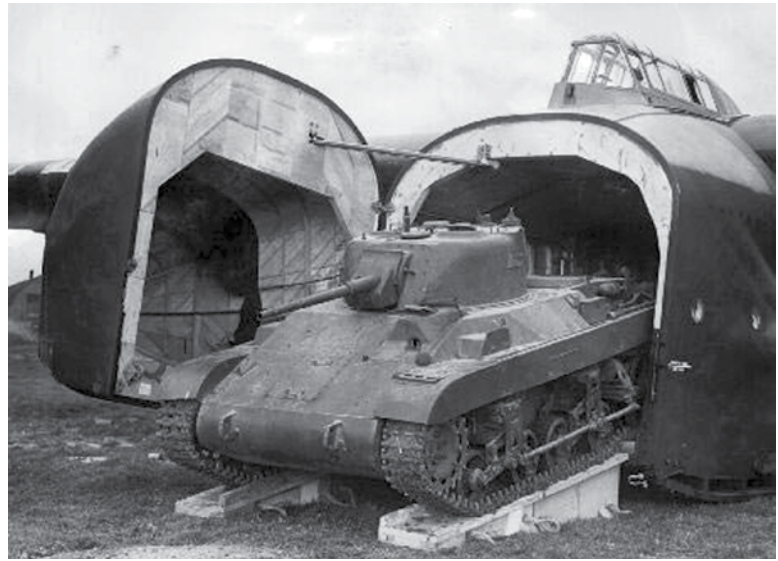


The Tiger tank, armed with an 88mm main gun, was the most feared German tank of WWII, although several later designs were more heavily armored. The Tiger armament and armor completely outclassed American and British tanks, but they were difficult to mass produce, consumed large quantities of scarce gasoline, and were maintenance intensive.





Front view of the M22 showing the 37mm main gun and .30 cal. machinegun in the turret. The driver's viewing port is raised.



An M22 coming out of a Hamilcar glider. The British used limited numbers of Hamilcar-delivered M22s in Operation VARSITY.



A "company street" at Camp Mackall, North Carolina with tarpaper-covered barracks buildings.



Pvt. William Rasbold sits in a jeep of the 151st Reconnaissance Platoon at Camp Mackall, 1944. Of interest is the unit designation on the front bumper, Airborne Command 151st Airborne Tank (ABC-151ABΔ).

the M3 anti-tank weapon. It was completely inadequate against any German tank it might meet. The United States needed heavier tanks. Even later in the war, after being fitted with a larger gun, the main American battle tank, the M4 Sherman with a 76mm gun, was no match for the German tanks coming into service.⁸ Despite being horribly outclassed while it was on the drawing board, operational tests with the M22 continued.

When they arrived at Mackall, the non-glider qualified tankers wore their pants bloused airborne style. This caused quite a stir among the airborne troopers already training at Mackall. "Many an altercation took place."⁹ S/SGT Gabriele Sciabarasi, a 151st veteran, later mused, "The airborne didn't like us and they resented us due to the fact that we weren't jumpers but bloused our boots and wore the airborne [tab] in town. We got into fights and had bloody noses . . . nobody got killed . . . they just had fun, it was a rivalry."¹⁰ Rasbold remembers that Camp Mackall was rustic, had lots of sand, and that "police call" and "pine needles" occupied their time. He remembered that the tar paper barracks were heated with a single pot-belly iron stove, and were so cold that when someone went on leave, the remaining soldiers would inch their bunks that much closer to the stove to savor its heat.¹¹

Most of the unit's time at Camp Mackall was spent on field exercises. Sciabarasi recalled that other than in town, there was "no intermingling with other troops at Mackall. We were more or less like a secret organization—there was not a lot of publicity on us." Referring to the British use of airborne tanks in the Normandy Invasion on 6 June 1944, he added, "We were supposed to have been a surprise unit but the English spoiled it."¹² The group mainly exercised apart from the airborne and glider units at Camp Mackall. Occasionally, they would split the company in two and maneuver against one another.¹³

In September 1944, the 151st members received their glider wings for training in the CG-4A Waco. They did not test their methods by using the much larger CG-13 glider, but several members did take orientation flights

in the craft.¹⁴ In late October 1944—at the same time that the British 1st Airborne Division and the Polish 1st Independent Parachute Brigade of the 1st Allied Airborne Army was being shattered by the Germans in Operation MARKET-GARDEN—twelve 151st members, along with representatives of other airborne units, were sent to Washington DC to demonstrate their potential capabilities.¹⁵ Despite the demonstration, the 151st was disbanded around Christmas 1944.¹⁶ By this time, it had become self-evident that the M22 was not combat-capable, and the 151st Airborne Tank Company became an unheralded “casualty” of the Germans last-ditch offensive in the Ardennes, Operation *Wacht am Rhein* (Watch on the Rhine)—popularly known as the Battle of the Bulge. This left the U.S. Army short of combat replacements.

When the 151st broke up, all but two members (who stayed behind to work on the Airborne Test Board) were sent overseas. One of the members who stayed was Sciabarasi, while Justesen and Rasbold were sent to Europe with the 13th Armored Division and XVIII Airborne Corps, respectively. The U.S. Army’s WWII experiments with airborne armor were over.

The remaining tanks were used for training purposes or given to the British, who had a longer history of using airborne tanks.¹⁷ The British had the Hamilcar glider, which was capable of carrying a vehicle as heavy as a light tank. Several Tetrarch tanks had even been brought in by Hamilcar glider in the Normandy Invasion, and the British were interested in further combat experiments with airborne tanks. The British landed several Tetrarchs and M22s via Hamilcar gliders in Operation VARSITY, the Allied airborne invasion over the Rhine River on 24 March 1945, but only a few got into action.¹⁹ Since Operation VARSITY was the last airborne operation in the European theater, it was the first and only time the M22 saw action in WWII. Remaining examples in the U.S. inventory were given to Allied nations. Several M22s were used, unsuccessfully, by the Egyptians against Israel during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. ▲

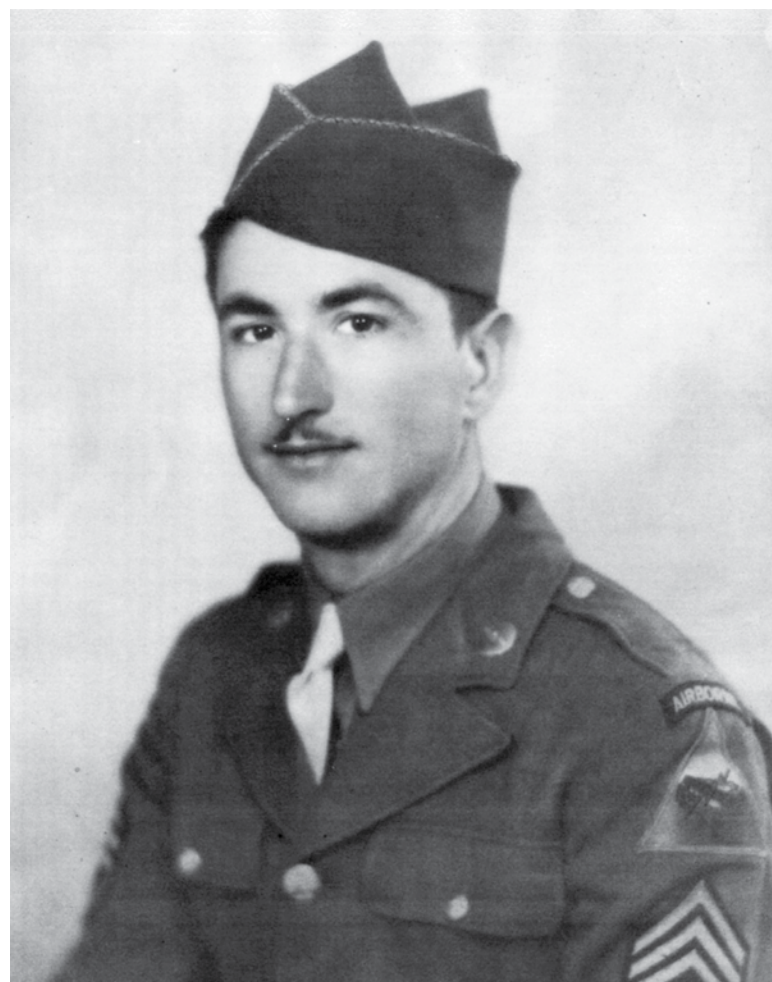
I would like to thank Gary E. Banas for the use of his photographs, Les Hughes, and 151st veterans Gabriele Sciabarasi, Roger Justesen, and William Rasbold for their help with the article, and the staff of the Don F. Pratt Museum.

Endnotes

- 1 Les Hughes, “The 151st Airborne Tank Company,” *Trading Post*, 1987.
- 2 The tank had four “lifting lugs” built into the side of the hull to attach the tank to the belly of the C-54. This was accomplished with the turret removed and stored in the plane. While the method ensured that the tank would arrive in the field, it was in no sense combat ready as crews had to attach the turret. For more information on the M22, see <http://www.robertsarmory.com/m22.htm>.
- 3 Hughes, “The 151st Airborne Tank Company.”
- 4 Roger Justesen, telephone interview by Troy J. Sacquety, 19 June 2007, notes, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 5 Captain Felix D. Hege, “Company Roster,” USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Hughes, “The 151st Airborne Tank Company;” William Rasbold, telephone interview by Troy J. Sacquety, 19 June 2007, notes, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.



Tetrarch air delivered tank easing out of a British Hamilcar glider.



S/SGT Gabrielle Sciabarasi was a platoon sergeant with the 151st. When the 151st was broken up, he remained at Camp Mackall to serve on the Airborne Test Board.

- 6 Hughes, "The 151st Airborne Tank Company;" Sciabarasi interview, 5 May 2007; Gabriele Sciabarasi, telephone interview by Troy J. Sacquety, 8 June 2007, notes, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 7 Gabriele Sciabarasi, telephone interview by Troy J. Sacquety, 5 May 2007, notes, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. **Sciabarasi had been a T/SGT in the 9th Armor Regiment, Camp Campbell, Kentucky, but took a voluntary demotion so that he could join the 151st as cadre. He was also present on 7 December 1941 at Schofield Barracks on Oahu when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.**
- 8 **In general, the United States favored ease of production and maintenance with its tanks. This allowed them to be mass produced. The Germans preferred "quality over quantity," with technologically better tanks, but they were hard to produce, heavy, and required much maintenance. While German tanks saw limited post-war use in other nations' service, American WWII tanks stayed in the service of several nations until quite recently.**
- 9 Sciabarasi interview, 8 June 2007.
- 10 Gabriele Sciabarasi as quoted in Hughes, "The 151st Airborne Tank Company.
- 11 Sciabarasi interview, 8 June 2007.
- 12 Rasbold interview, 19 June 2007.
- 13 Sciabarasi interview, 8 June 2007. **He is referring to the British use of airborne tanks in the Normandy invasion of 6 June 1944.**
- 14 Sciabarasi interview, 8 June 2007.
- 15 Sciabarasi interview, 5 May 2007; Sciabarasi interview, 8 June 2007; "Headquarters Airborne Center Army Ground Forces Camp Mackall, North Carolina," 1 September 1944, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Sciabarasi glider certificate, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 16 Major H.J. Diethofer, Headquarters Airborne Center, "Travel Orders," 25 October 1944, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 17 Justesen interview, 19 June 2007.
- 18 **The British experimented with airborne tanks more than the United States. They had three other types, the Tetrarch, the Alecto, and the Harry Hopkins.**
- 19 The after action report can be read online at <http://www.thelocustpage.tk/#> [7 June 2007]. **Some eight to twelve of these tanks were landed.**



This 151st member is hitch-hiking from Camp Mackall to Southern Pines, North Carolina. Notice that the 151st has now received its glider qualification badges.

A platoon of M22s on maneuvers at Camp Mackall, Summer 1944.

