Troop carrier airmen entered enemy airspace unarmed to deliver men and supplies.

Troop Carriers of World War II

By C.V. Glines

C-47s tow gliders across D-Day beaches to landing zones in France.
The exploits of World War II fighter pilots and bomber crew members inspired huge numbers of books, articles, and movies over the past half century, so much so that one might conclude that they were the only US airmen to face enemy fire in that epic conflict. It is a view that does not do justice to the troop carriers who faced combat danger on a regular basis.

Many transport crews flew their slow, unarmed, and highly vulnerable aircraft in formation, at low altitudes, and often at night beyond the front lines to deliver troops and supplies by parachute. In the same vein, glider pilots in fragile, motorless aircraft were towed over a battle area and cut loose to land infantrymen behind enemy lines.

The transport crew member flew through fire and flak and then returned to base through the same fire and flak. The glider pilot faced an inevitable landing that often ended in a crash. If he survived, he would then have to fight alongside the same troops he had just carried into battle.

USAAF Lt. Gen. Lewis H. Brereton, commander of the 1st Allied Airborne Army, offered highest praise. In a postwar statement, he noted that on many occasions transport crews doggedly flew their damaged or burning aircraft on to their assigned areas “in spite of the fact that they well understood that continuing on course destroyed any ... chance of survival for themselves.”

Of the glider pilots, Brereton said: “Not only did they deliver a magnificent and well-coordinated landing—which in many cases was in the midst of hostile positions—but were immediately engaged with their airborne associates in the hottest kind of hand-to-hand fighting.”

Brereton’s view is echoed by retired Col. Charles H. Young, a 1936 graduate of the Army Air Corps flying school who was recalled to active duty in 1942 to help organize and train troop carrier forces. Young later was named commanding officer of the 439th Troop Carrier Group that took part in the Normandy invasion and airborne invasions of southern France, Holland, and Germany. In Young’s view, the troop carrier airmen who dared to enter enemy airspace unarmed to deliver troops and equipment showed virtually unparalleled courage under fire.

The First Drops

Young’s book—Into the Valley—reports that the story of air troop carrier operations dates from 1918 in World War I. French two-man demolition teams were dropped behind German lines to destroy enemy communications. Some resupply of Allied forces by aircraft was carried out during the St. Mihiel and Meuse–Argonne campaigns of late 1918.

Development of this concept continued during the interwar years. In 1929–30 Italian paratroopers made several mass drops in North Africa, for instance. Soviet forces also experimented with airborne operations in the 1930s.

American interest in the transport of ground troops by aircraft began in 1931 when a field artillery battery was flown to Panama for maneuvers, followed by delivery, two years later, of a full division of troops for “hemispheric defense.” Later, an infantry detachment was landed behind “enemy” lines as a surprise test during maneuvers at Ft. DuPont, Del. It was led by Army Air Corps Capt. [later Gen.] George C. Kenney. In May 1937, the 10th Transport Group was
the 5-foot-thick walls and killed explosive charges that penetrated the massive fortress and planted board. They landed on the roof of with 78 “parachute engineers” on board. They landed on the roof of the massive fortress and planted explosive charges that penetrated the 5-foot-thick walls and killed the protecting gun crews. The surviving garrison gave up the next day.

On the day of the Eben Emael attack, approximately 500 Ju-52s delivered five parachute regiments and one infantry division to objectives in Holland. The next month, Soviet TB-3 bombers dropped two airborne brigades into Romanian targets.

The Allies attributed the success of the Eben Emael action not to the men of the German glider force but to the blitzkrieg of tanks and Stuka dive bombing attacks that followed. Thus, the potential value of a glider-borne force was lost in a fog of misinformation and little notice was taken by American and British headquarters.

Churchill’s Instinct

Britain’s newly elected prime minister, Winston Churchill, was impressed, however. He encouraged the War Office to analyze the German airborne attack in depth. As a result, the British military selected 500 men to form a glider unit and then ordered 400 Hotspur training gliders, each of which could carry 10 troops and be towed by heavy bombers.

The British Army had no enthusiasm for the idea and it stalled. However, Churchill was not to be denied. A glider pilot regiment was eventually formed. One of its initial missions was the November 1942 attack on the Vemork heavy-water plant in southern Norway, carried out by engineers who rode into the operation in British Horsa gliders. When one of the gliders crash-landed, German troops rounded up 14 airborne troopers and executed them by firing squad. The other Horsa crashed into a mountain. Eight troops died in the crash, another four died as a result of poisoning by the German captors, and five others died in a Nazi concentration camp.

On the Continent, Hitler was jubilant about the Eben Emael success and planned to make an airborne landing on British soil with paratroop and glider infantry. As a result, he changed his mind when German glider forces as soon as possible. Assault by air would add another dimension to the task of winning ground areas. This view was put into operation in the Mediterranean. Hitler approved a plan to capture British-held Crete with paratroopers and glider infantry. Beginning on May 20, 1941, a force of 22,000 men was deployed onto the island by 75 DFS-230 gliders towed by Ju-52 aircraft. They arrived in phases over the island. Hundreds of paratroopers dropped onto heavily defended airfields. After a week of bitter fighting, British forces were defeated and survivors had evacuated to Egypt.

This German “success story” had a strange ending twist, however. As it turned out, Germany paid a severe price for its Crete invasion, suffering about 5,000 casualties, many from the crack 7th Airborne Division. Hitler, furious at the losses, decided then and there to abandon any further use of gliders.

In the United States military, just the opposite was happening. Col. Bonner Fellers, the US military attaché in Egypt, studied the Crete operation in detail and wrote a colorful 258-page report in September 1941.

“The drama of Crete marks an epic in warfare,” he wrote. “The concept of the operation was highly imaginative, daringly new. Combat elements drawn from Central Europe moved with precision into funnel-shaped Greece. Here they reformed, took shape as a balanced force, were given wings. The operation had the movement, rhythm, harmony of a master’s organ composition. For the first time in history, airborne troops, supplied and supported by air, landed in the face of an enemy, defeated him.”

In Washington, the Fellers report received a respectful hearing and was studied intently. Within months, in July 1942, the US Army Air Forces had established the First Troop Carrier Command. Its mission was the “transport of parachute troops, airborne infantry, and glider troops.” It was to coordinate its activities with the air training commands from which it drew its crews, with the four con-

The C-47 Skytrain was the primary troop carrier aircraft. Here, C-47s line an English flightline, with an array of gliders on the inner rows, in preparation for an airborne invasion in Europe.
The principal troop carrier aircraft was the Douglas C-47 or its C-53 variant, although Curtiss C-46s were also used later in the war. The 13-passenger, two-pilot Waco CG-4A glider made by more than a dozen companies was the most satisfactory of several competing models that were tried, and 12,700 were procured.

The USAAF troop carrier concept received its first major test in North Africa in November 1942. Thirty-nine C-47s carrying a battalion of the 503d Parachute Infantry Regiment flew nonstop 1,100 miles mostly at night and in poor weather from England over Spain to points near the Algerian city of Oran. Their mission: Release paratroops at designated drop zones to prepare airfields for an Allied invasion force.

However, intentions of the local French forces were not clear, communications were disorganized, and the units were poorly trained. Three C-47s were shot down or forced down by French fighters while others eventually assembled on a dry lake bed. Two troop carrier pilots and three airborne troopers were killed and 18 were wounded. According to Young, it was a misuse of airborne forces. Still, the US learned valuable lessons.

The next significant Allied airborne operation occurred in July 1943 when British and American troop carrier and glider pilots delivered troops during the invasion of Sicily. It was not a success. Young, after studying the operation, concluded it was undermined by “poor coordination of unit headquarters, imprudent planning, especially on the glider tow to the British sector on D-Day, inexperienced aircrews without proper training in night navigation and formation flying, and trigger-happy Allied naval and army gunners who shot down more than two dozen American troop carrier aircraft on the missions.”

These problems, he said, “combined to place the entire airborne–troop carrier program in jeopardy.”

MacArthur’s Joy

Still, the program moved forward. The first American airborne operation in the Pacific took place on New Guinea in September 1943. Eighty-four C-47s of the 54th Troop Carrier Wing dropped 1,700 paratroopers from the 503d Parachute Infantry Regiment to secure the airfield. Their landing was supplemented by C-47s and B-17s carrying supplies and some artillery. Gen. Douglas A. MacArthur witnessed the show from a B-17, “jumping up and down like a kid,” according to then–Southwest Pacific Allied Air Forces head Kenney, who also witnessed the operation from the air and called it “a magnificent spectacle.”

Between March and May 1944, another major US operation took place. Eighty CG-4A gliders and C-47s of Col. Philip G. Cochran’s 1st Air Commando Group were used to land a force of 9,000 men, 1,300 animals, and 250 tons of equipment and supplies at bases in northern Burma. Most of the operation took place at night.

By the time of the Normandy invasion in June 1944, troop carrier planners had learned many lessons, and they were put to their sternest test yet. In just two days, 27,000 troopers were dropped behind German lines by powered aircraft or put down there by one of more than 600 American and British gliders. There, they were used to help prevent German counterattacks and to open up breakout routes for following forces.

More airborne experience was gained in Operation Dragoon, the August 1944 invasion of southern France from Allied–occupied Italy. There, 9,100 American and British troops, 200 vehicles and artillery pieces, and 500 tons of supplies were air-dropped or glider-landed in CG-4As and Horsas. There were so few casualties that the American airborne soldiers dubbed it the “Champagne Campaign.”

In the Low Countries, history’s largest airborne assault, part of Operation Market Garden, began Sept. 17, 1944, and unfolded over two weeks. US and British troop carrier units mounted more than 5,000 powered and 2,200 glider sorties. Starting from various points, they delivered 24,000 troopers, 1,500 vehicles, 260 artillery pieces, and 3,000 tons of other equipment to back up the Allied invasion of German–occupied Holland. Combined losses were heavy: 1,400 men died and 6,000 were taken prisoner; 142 aircraft were lost and 1,200 were damaged.

The last German airborne assault—Germany’s only night para-
chute operation—took place in mid-December 1944 southeast of Liege in eastern Belgium. Ninety Ju-52s were dispatched with inexperienced crews to drop troopers near the Baraque Michel area south of Eupen, Belgium. Allied gunners shot down 10 with great loss of life. Most of the others got lost and never delivered their troops to the battle area.

At the Bulge

Young said the Allied operation at the French village of Bastogne in the final days of December 1944 “will live on in the minds of troop carrier personnel as one of the most critical, albeit one of the most tragic, of the war.” By Dec. 22, 1944, elements of the US 101st Airborne Division had dug themselves into fields and forests near Bastogne but found themselves surrounded by advancing German solders. Believing they held the advantage, German officers, under a white flag, entered the 101st camp demanding a surrender. Brig. Gen. Anthony C. McAuliffe issued a one-word, morale-boosting response: “Nuts!”

Without troop carrier resupply—ammunition in particular—the Battle of the Bulge would undoubtedly have turned out much differently, and McAuliffe may not have been as confident as he appeared. When the first airborne resupply missions arrived, each US artillery position was down to about 10 rounds. McAuliffe later admitted, “Had it not been for air resupply, the situation would have become worse than desperate; it would have been untenable.”

The US lost 26 percent of the troops in a 50-ship glider tow to Bastogne on Dec. 27, 1944—the highest proportion for any troop carrier mission of the war. To help iron out communication and coordination problems, USAAF trained combat control teams and pathfinder groups to mark drop and landing zones ahead of oncoming troop carrier “serials” and have pathfinder equipment and trained personnel in place on the ground when the troop carrier forces arrived. They operated on special VHF radio frequencies to assure discrete ground-air communications. In addition, intership communications were established between troop carrier forces and protecting fighters over the target areas.

The largest one-day airborne assault in history took place March 24, 1945, when troop carrier aircraft and gliders carried British and American divisions to assist the Allied crossing of the Rhine River near Wesel, Germany.

The massive formation included 1,800 C-47 and C-46 transports, 1,300 troopers, most in double tows, and 240 B-24s used for resupply drops. According to Young, it took three hours and 12 minutes for the entire formation to pass a given point. More than 17,000 troopers, 1,200 vehicles, 130 artillery pieces, and seven million pounds of equipment and supplies were air-dropped or air-landed within a 25-square-mile area.

It was the last use of great armadas of winged craft in mass formations to invade enemy airspace and speed up the capture of enemy territory. The key to the operation’s success was the improved communications and interunit coordination through the use of the combat control and pathfinder units.

As Allied troops pressed on into the German heartland between January and May 1945, the troop carrier units and gliders hauled gasoline, ammunition, and other supplies to the advancing armored columns. Statistics from this period are impressive: The units hauled 242 million pounds of freight (including gasoline, ammunition, and vehicles), 200,600 airborne and glider-borne troops on missions and training flights, 128,000 patients, 132,000 passengers, and 165,000 freed American POWs.

One testament to the troop carrier crews came from then—Lt. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, XVIII Airborne Corps commander, who, after the debacle in Sicily, had been critical of the AAF crews for not placing parachute units within effective attack distance of a chosen drop zone at night. After the Rhine crossing, however, Ridgway changed his opinion. “In the run to the drop zone, they flew formations tighter and more precise than any of the bombers ever flew, and they did it at night,” said Ridgway. “They wouldn’t take evasive action either, no matter how hot the fire from the ground might be.”

In short, Ridgway concluded, the troop carriers were “as skilled as any aviators I ever knew, and God knows they were brave men.”

C.V. Glines is a writer living in Dallas, Texas. His most recent story for Air Force Magazine, “Blood Chit,” appeared in the October 1998 issue. In the preparation of this article, the author was greatly assisted by retired Col. Charles H. Young, who provided source material from his book Into the Valley: The Untold Story of USAAF Troop Carrier in World War II From North Africa Through Europe, co-authored by Charles D. Young and published by PrintComm Inc. of Dallas.