

Silent Wings Over the Rhine

Christopher Warner details his great-uncle's harrowing experience as a glider pilot in World War Two

LEFT Flight Officer Tom Warner saw combat during both Operation Market Garden and Operation Varsity.

Seventy-five years ago this March, Flight Officer Tom Warner unhitched his Waco glider from a C-47 Skytrain tug aircraft over Wesel in Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia. Thick smoke and a steady stream of anti-aircraft fire greeted his arrival over Landing Zone 'N', a crowded area that resembled an aircraft junkyard strewn with broken tails and wings.

The zone served as a buffer between the American and British sectors and housed a medical station for the expected flood of casualties.

Adding to the chaos, enemy snipers waited below, next to fields laced with rows of ditches, barbed wire and the so-called 'Rommel's asparagus' – poles dug into the ground to disrupt landing aircraft. In all previous combat missions, allied glider crews had suffered some of the highest casualty rates of the war. Winging across the Rhine would be no different.

The Goal

Operation Varsity would become the largest single-lift airborne

operation in history. As part of Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's ground assault, Operation Plunder, the mission involved an armada of more than 4,000 aircraft that stretched 200 miles (322km). Glider pilots faced an especially challenging task: delivering heavy equipment, troops and medical supplies behind well-fortified enemy lines in slow-moving plywood aircraft dubbed 'flying coffins'.

Like the aircraft itself, glider pilots were considered expendable. In



RIGHT The coveted silver winged pin worn by glider pilots. While officially the 'G' stood for glider, many stated it signified 'guts'. ALL CHRISTOPHER WARNER UNLESS STATED



fact, the men weren't even given parachutes because they flew too low for them to be usable. After the war, Gen William C Westmoreland had this to say about the dangers these men endured: "Every landing was a genuine do-or-die situation, often in total darkness. They were the only aviators during World War Two who had no motors, no parachutes and no second chances."

Germany had been the first to utilise gliders (the DFS 230) in combat during the capture of Belgium's Fort Eben-Emael in May 1940. As the brainchild of Adolf Hitler himself, the audacious plan showcased the stealthy aircraft's landing precision and hauling capacity. The rest of the world took notice. However, the Germans would soon deem glider-led assaults too dangerous after suffering heavy casualties in a hard-fought victory at the Battle of Crete. Nonetheless, the Allies charged ahead to develop their engine-less arsenal.

Most leading American aircraft manufacturers at the time were already producing powered machines under restrictive government contracts. Eventually, the Waco Aircraft Company (WACO) of Troy, Indiana, won the bid to design and help build the country's first combat glider, the CG-4A. They joined 15 other firms and subcontractors, including the Ford Motor Company, to fill the urgent demand. The 'Waco' (the RAF later renamed it Hadrian) featured a wingspan of 84ft (25.5m) with a fuselage constructed from honeycombed plywood, steel tubing and canvas. Cargo typically



RIGHT Tow ropes made of durable nylon stretched 350ft and measured 1.7cm in diameter.

BELOW A row of C-47s line up on the morning of March 24, 1945 at an airfield in Chartres, southwest of Paris, France.

comprised two pilots and up to 13 troops or a combination of heavy equipment such as a Jeep or 75mm howitzer. The acrylic-glass nose opened upwards on a hinge to facilitate loading and unloading, but frequent rough landings meant that cargo sometimes had to be cut out of the damaged aircraft with an axe.

Off to War

Like many young men living in America during the Great Depression, Tom Warner struggled to find gainful employment while yearning for something purposeful in life. The attack on Pearl Harbor would change everything. He

enlisted in the US Army and entered the newly formed Glider Pilot Program under the command of Gen Henry H 'Hap' Arnold. Warner shipped out on September 6, 1944, as part of a large influx of replacement pilots. The attrition following D-Day had taken its toll, and aviators of all stripes were needed to continue the push towards Berlin.

After disembarking in Liverpool, UK, he joined the 441st Troop Carrier Group, 99th Squadron and reported to its home base at RAF Langar near Nottingham. He could barely contain his excitement at stepping on foreign soil for the first time – and in the supposed land of



Robin Hood no less. But the stark reality of war quickly took hold. Just four days after arriving in the European theatre of operations, the fledgling pilot experienced his first taste of combat with the 82nd Airborne during Operation Market Garden. With the Germans on the run, Montgomery's ambitious plan hinged on capturing a series of bridges in northern Holland. The Nazis, however, weren't done. The mission was supposed to have ended the war in Europe by Christmas. It didn't. Instead, the fiasco resulted in bitter disappointment and it was later immortalised in print and film with the aptly named *A Bridge Too Far*. The top brass was counting on Operation Varsity to finish the job.

Prelude to Battle

Plans for the Rhine crossing began shortly before the German Ardennes offensive (otherwise known among the Allies as the 'Battle of the Bulge') started in November 1944. The formidable river, with its swift currents and high banks, served as the last major natural obstacle preventing an advance into Germany. Dwight D Eisenhower, allied forces leader,

"... allied glider pilots suffered some of the highest casualty rates of the war"

vowed to avoid the same problems that plagued Market Garden (but reluctantly agreed to another complex joint ground and airborne assault) while punching a hole directly into the Ruhr.

Spearheaded by Montgomery's 21st Army Group, Operation Plunder/Varsity fielded more than a million soldiers, consisting of 30 infantry divisions from the British Second Army, Canadian First Army and American Ninth Army. Air support included two divisions: Maj Gen Eric Bols' British 6th 'Red Devils' and Maj Gen William 'Bud' Miley's 17th Airborne 'Thunder from Heaven'.

Despite some effort by the Allies to create a diversion, the Germans anticipated their movements and dug in. Even the German

propaganda figure 'Axis Sally' (in fact two women – Rita Zucca and Mildred Gillars) joined the fight, taunting the invaders in her radio broadcast in the days leading up to the assault: "We know you are coming 17th Airborne Division. You will not need parachutes. You can walk down on the flak."

The truth, however, painted a much different picture. The Germans' failure during the



LEFT A view from the cockpit while approaching the Rhine; an armada of more than 4,000 aircraft took part in the operation.

BELOW LEFT Douglas Aircraft converted its civilian DC-3 into the C-47 Skytrain (Dakota in RAF nomenclature) to act as glider 'tugs' as well as basic transports. Here, Lt Zimmerman peers through the cockpit side window of C-47 'Shack Room'.

'Bulge' operation had left Hitler with few options; he insisted on defending the Rhine at all costs. The Wehrmacht positioned ten divisions along the river and these were later bolstered by the arrival of XLVII (47th) Panzer Corps, which included the 15th Panzergrenadier Division and 116th Panzer Windhund (greyhound) Division. Undaunted, the glider men merely accepted the risks as part of the war effort. They also wore a hard-earned silver wings pin stamped with a capital G. The letter technically stood for 'glider' but would become synonymous with 'guts'.

The Last Drop

Eisenhower remained determined to avoid the mistakes at Arnhem, but employing different tactics would also present new challenges. For the first time in the war, gliders flew into landing zones not already secured by paratroopers. Additionally, a few days before the operation, British engineers began laying an extensive smokescreen outside the town of Emmerich. The action not only alerted the Germans to an imminent attack but caused significant visibility problems.



The lift, involving 17,000 airborne soldiers, called for the two divisions to converge at a designated rendezvous point over Brussels. Escort fighters from the RAF and USAAF provided defensive firepower, with seasoned squadrons of Spitfires, Hawker Typhoons, P-51s, and P-47s. The enormous formation created substantial nausea-inducing 'prop wash' turbulence and the build-up of air traffic created a stair-step effect, forcing several gliders to a precariously high release altitude of 2,500ft. The oversight afforded German artillery crews ample time



RIGHT Crash landings were sadly common in the CG-4A Waco.



ABOVE Although not a real hotel, the British bivouac provided rations and a place to sleep for pilots before they returned to France.

RIGHT The Waco's cargo capacity included 13 soldiers or a jeep that easily rolled down a small planked ramp.

to shoot at the plodding targets. As a result, the men learned an invaluable survival lesson inside their flimsy wooden aircraft: sitting on an extra slab of metal or flak jacket to avoid injury to their 'family jewels'.

Welcome to Hell

Like the CG-4A, the British Horsa and Hamilcar gliders provided easy targets for German anti-aircraft crews used to pinpointing fast, well-armed fighters and bombers. By comparison, the lumbering gliders resembled a carnival shooting gallery. Following the glider-borne landings at Normandy and Arnhem in 1944, the Germans had also discovered tracer rounds could effectively set aflame the bulky craft long before they reached the ground. The well-entrenched gunners eagerly awaited them.

The 6th Airlanding Brigade carried the first gliders into battle

Hamilcar containing an M22 tank, scattering its equipment and killing all on board. Maj John 'Jack' Watson of the 13th (Lancashire) Parachute Battalion, witnessed another particularly gruesome incident in his sector: "The saddest thing I saw was when we were moving towards our objective. There were these glider pilots, sitting in their cockpits, having been roasted alive after their gliders had caught fire. A lot of people were lost like that."

Having spent more than three hours with his glider tethered to a long nylon umbilical towing cord, Warner severed the connection around 1230hrs and prepared for his 'aviator-to-grunt' transition. He began kicking out the acrylic-glass

side panel before touching down; the act allowed him to rapidly exit the glider, providing he survived the controlled crash landing or wasn't killed by ground fire.

Bursts of flak continued darkening the sky as Warner and his co-pilot Louis Canaiy descended towards the haze and chaos below in search of a clearing. After releasing from their tow, glider pilots typically had just a few minutes at best to land or risk stalling. The men could now see the ground at 300ft – but the enemy could also see them. Finally, he executed a fast, rough landing on a field littered with mangled wreckage, deceased livestock and dead or wounded soldiers from both sides.



shortly before 1000hrs and these were immediately blasted by flak guns positioned around the dense Diersfordter forest. The Americans followed closely behind and encountered much of the same. In nearby farmhouses, snipers in machine gun nests picked off paratroopers seemingly at will. Amid the confusion, several pilots became lost and landed in the wrong zones or crashed into trees and other gliders. Over the Rhine, a German 88mm shell tore apart a

"The enormous formation created substantial nausea-inducing 'prop wash' turbulence"

Terra Firma

The two pilots and personnel on board from the 224th Airborne Medical Company quickly unloaded the cargo. Warner then grabbed his M3 rifle and looked for a place to take cover. He had been a champion hurdler in his youth – skills now more useful than ever 5,000 miles (8,046km) from home. Relying on his sprinter's legs, he bolted through the field with bullets pinging overhead from all directions. He eventually found refuge in a small ditch next to a tree-lined road and waited for the clamour to subside.

Afterward, his compulsory field report reflected the action: "After cutting over [landing zone] it was hard to see the field due to smoke. Was a good landing but rather tough. Hit two fences but helped to slow us to a good stop. Was shot at plenty on my way down by [machine guns] and glider had quite a few holes. Got the load out in good shape. Then made for the nearest hole as it was hot on the ground."

Combined Effort

At 1458hrs, just five hours after the first airborne troops landed, patrols

from the British 1st Commando Brigade reached elements of the 17th Airborne. The joined forces established the fastest link-up of ground and airborne troops in the war, securing the towns of Wesel and Hamminkeln, and several bridges over the strategically vital Issel river.

A trickle of German prisoners soon turned into a deluge, resulting in more than 3,500 prisoners captured by airborne troops. Elsewhere, lifeless paratroopers dangled from tall oak trees in the forest where burial squads with pruning saws and ladders needed two days to cut down the dead.

Fortunately for the Allies, valuable lessons had been learned from the mistakes of previous combined operations. Montgomery's swift crossing of the Rhine had been an overwhelming success and dropping both airborne divisions simultaneously had swamped the enemy, sending them into full retreat. By late March, a total of 12 accessible bridges spanned the Rhine, opening the northern route into the country's industrial heart. Germany surrendered less than two months later.

LEFT The Germans planted poles, known as 'Rommel's asparagus', in fields to disrupt allied landings. The tactic proved disastrous for many glider pilots.

BELOW An example of why gliders were branded 'Flying Coffins'. Other nicknames included 'Flak Bait' and 'Tow Targets'.





ABOVE Before the war, Tom Warner had been a champion schoolboy sprinter and hurdler. A fast pair of legs proved useful after a 'hot' landing behind enemy lines.

ABOVE CENTRE Landing zones often resembled salvage yards full of damaged aircraft.

ABOVE RIGHT Hitching a well-deserved ride on a DUKW amphibious vehicle. Warner stands to the right smoking a cigarette.



Eisenhower called Operation Varsity "the most successful airborne operation carried out to date". However, while tactically successful the cost proved drastically high. A total of 1,111 men had been killed, becoming the single worst day of the war for allied airborne troops. American glider pilots were hit the hardest with 79 killed, 240 wounded and 31 missing. British losses were also devastating. According to the Ministry of Information, nearly a quarter of British glider pilots suffered casualties and a staggering 79% of its gliders were damaged by the intense enemy fire.

Aftermath

When the war ended Warner eventually settled in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he married a local girl, my great-aunt Alice, whom he had met while stationed at a glider training facility (now Kirtland Air Force Base). For his war efforts, he received a Distinguished Unit Citation, Silver Air Medal with One Leaf Cluster, four Bronze Service Stars and a Bronze Service Arrowhead, and the Military Order of William. Like most men of his generation, he rarely discussed his service and didn't consider himself a hero – but rather just another soldier

who was lucky to be alive. The former flight officer also never set foot in another aircraft again. Ever. Long before the term post-traumatic stress disorder was introduced, returning soldiers simply coped the best they could. Tom G Warner passed away in 1999 at the age of 88.

By the time the next war rolled around, combat gliders had become obsolete and were replaced by the helicopter. Like Hannibal's battle elephants, flintlock muskets and gas-filled zeppelins, the CG-4A quietly joined the dusty pile of other relegated weapons of war. **FP**



ABOVE The Allies quickly rounded up more than 3,500 German prisoners of war as a result of Varsity/Plunder.

