

Military Snatch Pickup Summary by Keith H. Thoms, NWWIIGPA Deputy Wing Commander 03 North

(1st Published SWM Newsletter Winter 2011)

<http://www.ww2gp.org/OurTowShips/snatches.php>

One hundred years ago last April, Harper's Magazine imagined, "The aviator in need of supplies may someday signal his wants, lower a trailing line, and pick up gasoline by some such a device as we now employ to catch mail-sacks on express trains." Perhaps this inspired Godfrey L. Cabot in 1918 to trail a line to pick up a package in Boston Harbor, and later a gas can. Lytle S. Adams similarly exchanged ship-to-shore mail with the *Leviathan* sixty miles offshore in 1929. But in 1927 U.S. Marines in Nicaragua first snatched a rope looped between two vertical poles to pick up a message bag.



*USMC Aerial Pickup in 1927
(National Museum of the Marine Corps)*

Adding an airborne winch in 1939, All American Aviation likewise snatched mail for ten years in the Alleghenies. The company's owner and fortune heir, Richard C. du Pont, was a U.S. champion sailplane pilot. He looked beyond the German gliderborne infantry assaults of 1940 and 1941. Starting September 24, 1941, he was snatched up in progressively heavier aircraft. He headed the USAAF cargo glider program in 1943.

As a businessman, du Pont's winches, nylon towlines, and tow pilots Majors Norman Rintoul and Lloyd Santmyer participated in the conceptual development of the USAAF

cargo glider system. This acquisition program suffered enough unrealistic constraints, fatal setbacks, and poor decisions to become, as historian Gerald Devlin wrote, "...the most controversial training and procurement programmes ever to be undertaken by any of the American armed services, before or after World War II..." Despite this, it produced 13,903 Waco CG-4A gliders and 7,263 glider pilots. In sum they admirably performed at least the 4,123 sorties listed in the table, and at least 518 snatch pickups, in all theaters and most missions.

So on average 1-in-8 glider sorties used snatch pickup. But there was notable variation by theater. "...in Europe the army advanced *under* the wings of the air force, but in Burma the army advanced *on* the wings of the air force." The China Burma India (CBI) Theater snatched close to half of sorties, while Europe drove the average down with large sortie counts, unused factory production, and initially adopting the one-way German assault concept: Maj. Santmyer's services were declined for Sicily; no gliders were snatched in Southern France or Bastogne, and just 4% in Normandy.

Normandy's First Snatch Pickup



(photo by Yves Tariel of Paris, France)

This reversed when two-thirds of all sorties to date flew in the Market Garden operation with another to follow. So a 5½-month salvage effort ensued at one, and part of another, of four Holland landing zones (LZ). The above photo's tow pilot, 1st Lt Gerald "Bud" Berry, also flew in one of

these waves of glider recoveries. This turned the 79% of gliders arriving in-LZ and unscathed into 15% recovered. Half were runway tows, becoming snatch pickups as runways muddied, flooded, and froze. By now factory production and in-

theater assembly were peaking, yet 1st Lt “Tip” Randolph still had to reassemble otherwise unfit gliders that flew in Operation Varsity. After this Rhine crossing, an all-snatch pickup salvage effort flew back 16%.

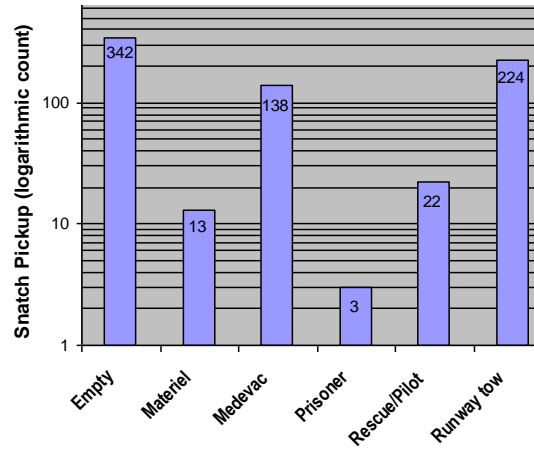
Glider Theater and Mission	Date	Gliders Sorted	Snatch Pickups
<i>China-Burma-India Theater Operations</i>			
Exercise recoveries, India	9-10 Jan 1944	20	16
Exercise, Lalitpur, India	18 Feb 1944	24	17
Two covert actions to Chindwin, Burma	28, 29 Feb 1944	3	1
Operation Thursday, Burma	5-11 Mar 1944	79	7
Prisoner capture, Inywa, Burma	11 Mar 1944	4	3
Six delivery sites, Burma	18 Mar-May 1944	55	3
Sappers to Tigyaing, Burma	19 Mar 1944	7	unknown
Medevac, LZ Aberdeen, Burma	21-22 Mar 1944	6	1
Operation Stamina airlift, Imphal, India	Apr-Jun 1944	unknown	unknown
Family evacuation, Burma	Sep 1944	1	1
Operation Capital medevacs, Burma	9-30 Oct 1944	25	25
Chindits ambushed, Mandalay, Burma	1944	5	5
Medevacs, Kabaw valley, Burma	Late Fall 1944	est. 109	est. 109
Bulldozers to troop columns, Burma	Early Feb 1945	2	unknown
Radar shipment, Mawlaik, Burma	12 Feb 1945	5	5
Radar crew evacuation, Burma	Feb or Mar 1945	1	1
Reporters, Thabutkon, Burma	25-26 Feb 1945	5	0
Supplies & Equipment, Meiktila, Burma	10 Apr 1945	55	0
Airstrips, Lewe & Tennant, Burma	21, 23 Apr 1945	14	0
<i>European Theater Operations</i>			
Operation Husky, Sicily, Italy	9 Jul 1943	136	0
Operation Neptune recoveries, Normandy, France	23-25 Jun 1944	292	13
Operation Dragoon, Southern France	15 Aug 1944	372	0
Operation Market Garden recoveries, Holland	Oct 1944 - Mar 1945	1,900	146
Operation Repulse, Bastogne, Belgium	26-27 Dec 1944	61	0
Medevac, Remagen, Germany	22 Mar 1945	2	2
Two Patton refuelings	unknown	8	2
Secure airstrip, Hildesheim, Germany	Apr 1945	2	0
Operation Varsity recoveries, Germany	Apr 1945	908	148
<i>Pacific Theater Operations</i>			
Weather station, New Guinea	17 Oct 1944	4	0
Operation Gypsy Task Force, Philippines	23 Jun 1945	7	3
“Shangri La” valley rescue, New Guinea	28 Jun - 2 Jul 1945	3	3
<i>Arctic</i>			
Exercise Musk Ox, Canada	Mar - Apr 1946	5	3
Rescue, Alaska	14 Dec 1948	1	1
Rescue attempts, Greenland	17, 25 Dec 1948	2	3
Total		4,123	518

Snatch pickups were in other missions beside empty salvage. Holland saw eleven unexpected rescues of repaired gliders and a nearby towline break of a larger, CG-13A. At the Remagen bridgehead two medevacs of stretcher-converted gliders saved wounded of both sides. Flight Officer (F/O) Jim Helinger twice flew in a four-glider sortie to refuel Patton's tanks. The pilots would return by one snatch pickup. (He brought donkeys on the second mission to carry the gas cans but they did not ride out.) Research is ongoing, such as conversion of twenty-five gliders in England into fighter-specific airborne mobile workshops. It is not known if any repaired a downed fighter and then was snatched. And there are uncounted snatches from fields like during 1st Lt Clyde Martin Litton's transfer to a base in France.



*Remagen Air Medevac
(Courtesy National Museum of the USAF)*

The bar graph categorizes missions with glider count. Its logarithmic scale is due to Europe's empty recoveries and the sum of (all known) runway tows out.



Snatch Pickup Mission Categories

The CBI innovated in all mission categories. An exercise demonstration snatched mules going in, and then showcased snatch pickup when the LZ flooded. Operation Thursday flew a replacement bulldozer by overweight snatches in from LZ Broadway to build LZ Chowringhee, and then out. The waiting Lt Col Clinton Gaty risked daylight discovery to keep the Chowringhee gliders rather than bury them in pieces.



*LZ Chowringhee
(Courtesy Silent Wings Museum)*

Other materiel pickups included a radar shipment off a Chindwin river bank for a fair-weather airfield. Covert missions and cargo deliveries retrieved pilots, grabbed prisoners, and saved countless injured. Wounds and illnesses in the jungle often became fatal so evacuation was a boost to soldier morale. F/O George Hess evacuated

walking casualties and stretchers; 2d Lt Harlie Johnson flew two medevacs; while 2d Lt Charles Turner helped fly many hundreds out of Kabaw valley. Rescue missions included ambushed soldiers under fire, and a Burmese officer's family by 2d Lt Tim Bailey. F/O George Boyle rescued a radar crew, dog, and chickens in a tail-heavy launch until ammo was pushed forward.

In the 1945 Pacific theater, Operation Gypsy Task Force inexplicably snatched half its CG-4As but abandoned an intact CG-13A. The New Guinea rescue of C-47 crash survivors is still garnering press with a new book. *“Lost in Shangri-La”* is in the Smithsonian gift shop and its author appeared on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. A 1946 Canadian Arctic expedition appreciated glider resupply, vehicle delivery, evacuation, and a workshop. December 1948 saw an uneventful rescue in Alaska. Meanwhile repeated and unexplained towline failures on the Greenland icecap prevented a final rescue by glider there. So a ski-equipped C-47 fired JATO rockets to finish the mission.

Stateside pickup experiments in July 1942 double snatched a 3-seat glider while still towing the first. Human pickups started in 1943; there is web video of Maj. Rintoul later using a PBY Catalina. His and Santmyer's student, Lt. Col Lee Jett (USAF Ret.) snatched some 2,500 gliders, from mud landings (next photo) to factory delivery of a CG-13A (2nd photo). In a war bond tour, Jett double snatched CG-4A's (3rd photo). Other's double snatches peaked to twice-daily for the US-bound half of Ford's production line. Demonstrations in 1946 saw a 200-mph airmail pickup, and a routine – to Jett anyway – snatch pickup of a 25,000-lb CG-10A (4th photo).



(Courtesy Lee Jett)

From 1959 to 1963, telemetry tapes of rocket shots in the Pacific were snatched off downrange radar ships via “ship trailing line pickup.” A sea anchor tensions the loop to a capsule on the ship stern (where the photographer took the following photo). It

worked in a storm as Col Harlan "Bud" Gurney (USAF Ret.) and Chuck Dorigan can attest, yet balloons still replaced the sea anchor for mid-air intercept in the STARS and Fulton systems. Helicopter and wireless telemetry also matured. Today only advertizing banners are snatched. I imagine future cargoes autonomously snatched from ships at sea for inland delivery.



*Ship Trailing Line Snatch Pickup
(Courtesy Chuck Dorigan)*

Undoubtedly many a wartime commander wanted more snatch pickups, and I'm still collecting. I thank the NWWIIGPA, the historians and museums, and particularly every pilot whose invaluable contribution in every way made this story possible.

Keith H. Thoms is a Computer Engineer with twenty-two years of civilian service in the Department of the Navy. Maybe serendipity had him being born in the "Birthplace of Aviation," and a licensed sailplane pilot before driving at the "Nylon Capital of the World." And with no family connection to wartime service, analysis research at work turned into a hobby and he is proud to be an Deputy Wing Commander. He enjoys learning from these veterans whose selfless contributions continue to make very real this poorly understood military capability.

Return to:
<http://www.ww2gp.org/OurTowShips/snatches.php>

Reference

Kaempffert, Waldemar, *Why Flying-Machines Fly*, Harper's Magazine, 1911.

Lewis, W. David, and Trimble, William, *The Airway to Everywhere A History of All American Aviation 1937-1953*, 1989.

Devlin, Gerard M., *Silent Wings*, 1985.

Day, Charles L., *Silent Ones: WWII Invasion Glider Test and Experiment*, 2001.

Van Wagner, R. D., *Any place, Any Time, Any Where*, 1998.

Wissolik, Richard David, et al, *A Place in the Sky*, 2005.

Spencer, Leon B., Maj. USAFR Ret., *The Wizards of Crookham Common*
<http://www.silentwingsmuseum.com/pdf/CrookhamCommon.pdf>

Turner, and NWWIIGPA, *Glider Pilots of WWII*, Sep 1991.

Grim, J. Norman, *To Fly the Gentle Giants*, 2009.

All American Aviation, "PICK-UP" Volume 5 Number 7, Jul 1945.

Silent Wings Newsletter, Mar 2001, and Summer 2010.

Larson, George A. Lt. Col USAF (Ret.), *Glider Invasion 'Operation Thursday,' Friends Journal*, Fall 2001, and *Aerial Assault into Burma*, 2008.

Wood, Alan, *History of the World's Glider Forces*, 1990.

Zuckoff, Mitchell, *Lost in Shangri-La*, 2011.

Thrasher, Kevin M., *Exercise Musk Ox: Lost Opportunities*, Mar 1998.

Airmail Pick-Up Past & Present
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJyyEkRsNck> [22:08]

Thoms, Keith H., Berry, Gerald C., and Jett, Lee, *Austere Recovery of Cargo Gliders*, Joint Force Quarterly, Q1 2008.

Veazey, G. Robert, 1st Lt USAF Ret., *Surface to Air Recovery System, STARS*, Friends Journal, Summer 1996.

Thoms, Keith H., *Snatch Pickup of Gliders from Naval Vessels*, Naval Engineers Journal 121 No 2, Jun 2009.