

William c. hart

The Victim of an Ill-Fated Military Aircraft Crash

Compiled by Major Leon B. Spencer, USAFR (Ret'd)

On 15 December 2013, retired Major Leon B. Spencer, a former World War II glider pilot, received an e-mail from Jim Hart, 48, of Mountain View, California, seeking information about his late grandfather, Staff Sergeant William C. Hart. The younger Hart indicated that his grandfather had been killed in an aircraft accident in December 1942. At the time of his demise the elder Hart was a student in advanced glider training at South Plains Army Air Field, Lubbock, Texas. Spencer, a military glider historian, responded and offered to look into the matter.

Following a telephone call to Charles Day, the secretary of the National World War II Glider Pilots Association, Spencer discovered that William C. Hart was not in the association's data base, therefore there was no information on file about him. Since his grandfather had not completed glider training he had not received the glider pilot rating, MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) 1026. According to Jim Hart his grandfather needed one more night flight before graduating and becoming a Waco CG-4A glider flight instructor. An article in the Lubbock Evening Journal indicated that William C. Hart was in the first group of students to undergo training with the 1st Army Air Force Glider Training Detachment at Lubbock.

After several e-mails and phone calls it was learned that Jim Hart had acquired a copy of the official USAAF Aircraft Accident Report and other pertinent data. Spencer requested a copy of the report and subsequently began to develop a scenario of the circumstances that led up to Hart's grandfather's death. Outlined below is a detailed account of the events leading up to the tragic and needless death.

During the afternoon of 16 December 1942, a Douglas C-53 transport, s/n: 42-47379, known as the Sky Trooper, took off from South Plains Army Air Field towing a 15-place CG-4A glider being ferried to Victorville Army Flying School at Victorville Air Force Station, California. The flight plan included an overnight stop at Tucson, Arizona. The pilot of the C-53, Staff Sergeant Leroy J. Hopkins, s/n: 7071067, had logged only 46 hours and 40 minutes in this type aircraft, and only 4 hours and 15 minutes in this model. Of greater impact was the fact that only 5

hours and 10 minutes of this flight time had been logged at night in the last six months. Seated beside Hopkins in the copilot's seat was Staff Sergeant Nathan J. Toretsky, s/n: 12019684. Staff Sergeant Gordon J. Jardina, s/n 18025233, the flight engineer, and Sergeant Edward H. Nance, s/n: 18025469, the radio operator, made up the rest of the C-53's crew. The crew members were assigned to the 60th Troop Carrier Squadron, 63rd Troop Carrier Group at Victorville.

In addition to the C-53 flight crew the aircraft also carried four passengers; 2nd Lt. J. H. Alabaster, s/n: O-456011, S/Sgt. William C. Hart, s/n: 19093356 (erroneously listed as a Private on the accident report. He had been promoted to Staff Sergeant on 8 August 1942), Private Donald R. Hinshaw, s/n: 16007854, and Private James I. Smith, s/n: 38131798.

Seated at the controls of the CG-4A glider, s/n: 42-61197, was Flight Officer Noel D. Addy, s/n: T-258. His copilot was Technical Sergeant Lowell O. Nutting, s/n: 6579795, not rated. They were both members of Training Squadron 1 at Victorville. F/O Addy had logged 17 hours and 50 minutes in the CG-4A, and according to the aircraft accident report he had received his glider pilot rating on 7 December 1942, only nine days before the fatal crash.

S/Sgt. Hart was on his way to Orange, California, to attend the funeral of his father, William Ord Hart. The 57 year-old W. O. Hart was killed on 14 December 1942 when the Western Air Lines Douglas DC-3 airliner on which he was passenger crashed in Cedar Valley between two ridges of the Oquirrh range, 5 miles east of Fairfield, Utah, and 25 miles southeast of Salt Lake City, Utah. The DC-3 departed Salt Lake City at 1:05 p.m. in clear flying weather. The airliner carried 12 civilian passengers, 3 military passengers, and four crew members. There were only two survivors. The ill-fated airliner was bound for Los Angeles, California. The eminent W.O. Hart was co-publisher/editor of the Orange Daily News and a former state assemblyman.

In an email, Jim Hart stated that his grandfather was born on 6 August 1915 in Orange County, California, the son of William O. Hart, age 30, and Elsie M. (Clough) Hart, age 26. After graduation from high school W. O. Hart attended the University of California at Davis, graduating in 1937. His son, William C. Hart enlisted in the Army Air Force at Santa Ana Army Air Base, California, on 18 June 1942, shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. After completing basic training he joined the fledgling USAAF Glider Program as an aviation student and was sent to Fort Morgan, Colorado, for pre-glider training in light powered aircraft. He would have completed the training course there o/a 1 August 1942. Then he was ordered to Twenty-nine Palms, California, and assigned to the 6th AAF Glider Training Detachment for

basic glider training. There, at Condor Field, located 5 miles north of town, he would log about thirty hours of flight time in the high-performance Schweizer TG-2 sailplane. On 8 August 1942, while at Twenty-nine Palms he was promoted to Staff Sergeant. This is confirmed on page 7 of Special Orders No. 50 issued by that unit, dated 10 August 1942.

After completing his training at Twenty-nine Palms he was sent to the student holding pool at Albuquerque, New Mexico, to await the opening of an advanced glider training school. He languished at Albuquerque until the latter part of November before being ordered to South Plains Army Air Field at Lubbock, Texas. At Lubbock he would receive about fifteen hours of flight time in the big Waco CG-4A combat glider before being awarded his sterling silver "G" wings. Obviously he did a fine job of piloting the CG-4A since he had been tapped to be an instructor. He probably would have been promoted to second lieutenant rather than flight officer based on his flying skill.

It was almost dark when the tow plane/glider combination arrived over Blythe Army Air Field, California, 150 miles south of Victorville. Suddenly, glider pilot F/O Addy saw a light blinking in the astrodome of the C-53, the normal night signal for the pilot to release the glider. Believing they were over Tucson, their planned overnight stop, Addy released his glider and landed. Once on the ground he began staking down the glider and adding chocks to the ailerons, elevators and rudder. Just as he completed preparing the glider for an overnight stay the tower notified him that the C-53 pilot had radioed that the glider had landed at the wrong base. The tower operator added that the C-53 was landing to retrieve the glider. Once on the ground, Hopkins told Addy that his copilot had erroneously given the cutoff signal. S/Sgt. Toretsky, not knowing the signal for a night cutoff had carelessly started operating the blinker light in the astrodome. This lapse in judgment was the beginning of a needless air tragedy, one that could have been prevented with better training.

After the tow plane landed it took some time for base personnel to locate the tow rope in the fading light. The glider pilot tried to convince the tow pilot to remain overnight but he refused, even after Addy told him that the Glider Operations Officer at Lubbock, Captain Shade, had told him that gliders should not be ferried at night. The tow pilot insisted that they depart poste-haste explaining that he had a TWX (teletype message) from his commander to leave immediately. He said to the glider pilot that they should make it alright.

Even though F/O Addy outranked S/Sgt. Hopkins, the tow pilot overruled him. Eye-witnesses indicated that the tow pilot appeared to be anxious to get underway. He taxied the C-53 to a point adjacent to

the east end of the east-west runway and stopped. He had to wait for two B-17s sitting at the end of the active runway to take off. Once the B-17s had departed T/Sgt. Nutting, the glider copilot, took a flashlight and motioned the tow plane into position on the runway. Then the glider was towed onto position behind the tow plane. Sgt. Robert G. Schmidt and Private Raymond Koeser, members of the 358th Base Headquarters and Air Base Squadron at Blythe AAB, helped Addy muscle the glider into position. When that was accomplished he hooked the tow rope to the C-53 while Addy hooked it to the CG-4A, one of many mistakes. The tow rope was not to be hooked to the glider until both pilots were in their seats with their safety belts fastened. Addy turned on the glider navigation lights as a safety measure as other aircraft on the base were on the move.

Addy then instructed Private Koeser to get the flashlight from Sgt., Nutting and stand by the left wingtip of the tow plane so he could signal the tow pilot to take up the slack in the tow rope. Private Koeser, was not comfortable with the task, so he asked Sgt. Schmidt, a aircraft mechanic, to take over, which he did. Just before entering the glider Addy noticed that the chocks had not been removed from the ailerons, elevators and rudder. He instructed his copilot to remove the chocks from the right aileron while he removed them from the elevators and rudder. He started for the left aileron when suddenly the glider began moving forward.

The tow pilot had interpreted the half-moon signal given by Sgt. Schmidt to take up the tow rope slack as the signal to take off. As the glider moved forward Addy ran for the door of the glider but never made it. The glider was moving too fast. Before he and Sgt. Nutting could get out of the way the rear elevator struck them and knocked them down. When Addy got up he yelled to Nutting to run to the control tower and tell the tower operator to radio the C-53 pilot that there was no one in the glider and to release it. Nutting had just reached the tower when the tow plane crashed and burst into flame, followed by the glider. Everyone in the C-53 perished. Addy told the accident review board that he never saw the signal for the tow plane to take off.

Second Lieutenant L. D. Wiley, who witnessed the crashes, said that the glider was still attached to the tow plane when he saw it. He said that he thought it was two planes flying in formation. He watched as the tow pilot released the glider at about 400 feet which was at that point was behind and slightly to the left of the tow plane. His recollection was that the glider turned to the right and began descending nose down. Another witness, Sgt. Alexander Naggy, testified that the tow plane turned to the right and the glider to the left, a contradiction. He

went on to say that the tow plane and glider appeared to be close together, the glider underneath the tow plane.

A third witness, Lt. Julius M. Kay, s/n: 0-904049, said that he saw the two planes when they were close together, but did not recognize that one was a glider. He stated in the accident report that the glider was to the rear and definitely on the left side and level with the tow plane. He testified that the C-53 went up and then down before crashing. Obviously, the tow plane stalled and was too low to the ground to recover. He said that the plane struck an embankment and burst into flame. The time he noted was 7:45 p.m.

Sgt. Merle Beaman, a fourth eyewitness, said that when he saw the tow plane and glider they appeared to be in trouble and realized that they were going to crash. He testified that the C-53 veered off to the right, stopped in mid-air and then nosed down sharply. As indicated previously the tow plane stalled before crashing. He said that the glider looked like it was right on the tail of the tow plane. Lieutenants Wiley and Kay were members of the 358th Base Headquarters and Air Base Squadron at Blythe AAB, while Sergeants Beaman and Naggy were members of the 842nd Guard Squadron, Blythe AAB.

The needless accident and resulting fatalities were the result of inexperience and a series of errors. Significant among the errors was the lack of detailed instructions given to Sgt. Schmidt who was told to stand in front of the C-53 with the flashlight and give the pilot the signal to take up the slack in the tow rope and hold it. He said that he was given no signal to tell the pilot to take off. He further stated that he gave the pilot the half-moon signal to move ahead and take up the slack in the rope but apparently the pilot interpreted it as a takeoff signal. Private Koeser testified after the crashes that he saw Sgt. Schmidt give the "go" and also the "stop" signal, but the tow plane never stopped. The control tower operator at Blythe AAB, Don R. Baylis, 1st Communications Squadron, said that the tow plane and glider left the runway at the same time. He also related that the glider appeared to be weaving a little.

Captain John DePaolo stated in his after accident report that the tow plane took off and made a 270 degree turn to the right, flew south a short distance, turned left and then made a 360 degree turn to the right. At this point the tow plane was over the south edge of the field at approximately 400 feet when S/Sgt. Hopkins released the glider. The aircraft accident report indicated that the pilotless glider collided with the tow plane damaging the left horizontal stabilizer causing the pilot to lose control of the aircraft. The C-53 stalled and crashed almost immediately followed by the glider a short distance away. Capt. DePaolo placed responsibility for the crash as follows: 15% on the crew chief, 15

% on the mechanic and 70% on the tow pilot. He recommended that a standard set of more positive signals be established for the tow plane and glider and the designation of an officer-in-charge for all future ferry flights.

The Accident Review Board consisting of Captain James D. Catington, President, Captain Collin H. Ferris, Member, and 2nd Lt. Samuel L. Allen, Member, made the following recommendations:

“This board believes that the primary cause of this accident was the incomplete and insufficient training of both crews; tow plane and glider. Results of the investigation clearly show an inadequate system for signaling between the glider and tow plane. It is believed that the crew members of both glider and tow plane be better instructed in their duties and responsibilities which was lacking in this case; also; that a uniform and definite take-off procedure for both day and night operations be established and made a subject of basic training. Results also show inadequate designation of authority, command, and responsibility in this particular flight between tow pilots and glider pilots.”

Sadly, the C-53 crash had cost Jim Hart the loss of his grandfather, at 27 year of age, far too young to die. In less than 40 hours he had lost both his grandfather and his 57 year-old great-grandfather.

Note 1: William Ord Hart was born on 1 May 1885 on the family farm in Clay County, Iowa, near the town of Spencer.

Data Sources:

1. Report of Aircraft Accident, dated 30 January 1943.
2. Noel Addy – World War II Veterans History Project by Jean Reynolds, 4 August 2009.
3. E-mails received from Jim Hart, dated December 15th, 18th, 20th and 21st, 2013 and 5 January 2014.
4. AAF Promotion Certificate, dated 12 August 1942.
5. An article, “Condor Field: World War II Glider Training Base near 29 Palms, California”, source unknown.
6. An article, “Condor Log Reveals GP Activity at Twentynine Palms”, source unknown.
7. Several newspaper clippings.