

DOWN and GONE ! !

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By Doug Smith, 82/436

'Twas the night before the night before Christmas, but it wasn't Santa Claus and his elves that silently glided out of the low overcasted sky at Knoxville, Tennessee, ending a wild ride.

It was only a bunch of glider pilots from Dalhart, Texas, in their trusty CG4As – and everybody knows that they always tried to land as far away from Dalhart as they could.

Actually, they were headed for Laurenburg-Maxton AAFB, North Carolina, or that's what their orders said.

On December 23, 1943 four GP instructors with one student apiece picked up four CG4As at Boeing Aircraft Corp., Wichita, Kansas, to be ferried to L-M AAFB.

Arthur C. Furchgott, Jr., of Miami, Florida (then 2nd Lt.) said his student was S/Sgt Martin T. Laffey. The other instructors were 1st Lt. Joseph A. Houle, Jr., 2st Lt. Paul D. Hoover, and 2nd Lt. George G. Parker. The other students were 2nd Lt. Byron J. Sharp, S/Sgt Wayne H. Bryant and S/Sgt Bradford K. Root (later killed at Dalhart).

When they took off at Wichita the weather was overcast in East Tennessee, so they planned to RON there and go on the next day, Art said. About two hours out, a windshield blew out of one glider and it cut loose and landed on a farm which was the home of a GP at Dalhart. The C-47 tow pilots landed at a bomber field at Smyrna, Tennessee, to refuel but couldn't get the right juice so they decided they could make Knoxville before nightfall.

Off they went at about 6,000 feet for about an hour before running into a solid overcast. Knoxville had a 300-foot ceiling by then, and the moon was rising. As they circled in a holding pattern near the field Art said two civilian airliners joined them.

Due to a shortage of fuel, the towpilots decided to try an instrument approach with the gliders in tow.

Now that's something every GP ought to do at least once, i. e. try the angle-dangle meter approach.

Art watched the first towship and glider disappear into the overcast. About 15 minutes later his towship lined up on the beam and started down.

"From that point on it was one wild ride," Art said. "We were in the overcast immediately and it was necessary to judge the CG4A's attitude by looking at about four to five feet of towrope."

Then, he said the airspeed began to go up to 130—140—150—160—MPH. And the rate-of-descent went from 200 to over 1,000 feet-per-minute.

"By this time," Art said, "The tow rope was vertically flat across the windshield and actually under the glider.

"We must have been directly over the towship at that point. The CG4A was shuddering and shaking like it was about to disintergrate."

"I shouted to Martin Laffey to get ready to bail out as I thought the wings were going to come off," Furchgott said.

He reached for the tow-release lever and glanced at the airspeed. It was close to 170 MPH.

Art said that at the same time he cut loose, they broke out under the overcast right over the airport which had boundary lights but no floodlights. They circled to lose speed, landed, and pulled off by the first glider. The third glider also landed safely.

As the weather was bad on Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day, our glider guiders remained there.

"The people in Knoxville had never seen a CG4A," Furchgott said, "So we made the newspapers and we were celebrities for a couple of days."