

Mel Brockman Recalls Christmas — 1944

By Mel Brockman

As you all know, another Christmas is just around the corner. -Christmas, 1977 . . . a far cry from that Christmas so many years ago . . . 33 years in fact, which has become such an important date in Glider Pilot history.

On the night of December 20, 1944, German Panzer units had closed the ring on Bastogne and had overrun the 101st's Field Hospital. All of the medical personnel was captured. The wounded were sent to the civilian hospital in town, but it soon became hopelessly overcrowded and ran low on supplies.

The airborne boys were running low on ammunition and the only way to get it in to them was by air drop. On the 22nd and 23rd, some planes managed to get through the heavy weather, but on Christmas day, the weather was so foul that a 116 plane mission had to be cancelled. Meanwhile German tanks hit the 101st in a desperate effort to penetrate its defenses. The division fought back, but by now artillery and anti-tank ammunition was perilously low, (a checkup showed less than ten rounds per gun). Worst of all, the hospital could not handle the growing number of wounded, (now at 400), many of them in need of surgery.

Weather reports predicted bad flying weather over England for the next day, but it was expected to clear enough over France for planes to take-off. The problem now was that there weren't enough parachute containers in France. At this point, someone at Eisenhower's headquarters remembered that the Air Corps had retrieved gliders from the Holland operation and had hundreds of them sitting on French airfields. Gliders didn't need parachute containers.

On the 26th of December, at 1430, several gliders took off with surgeons and aid men, jeeps fitted with litters, surgical kits, ether and other medical supplies. These gliders landed before the Germans realized that gliders were coming in. Ten minutes behind them, eleven more gliders loaded with "ammo" found the enemy fully alert and they came under heavy automatic weapons fire. Although many were hit, all did manage to land their cargos, bringing in a total of 32,900 pounds.

The next day, 27th December, a fifty glider mission started for Bastogne. The flight proved uneventful until they neared the release point. Then all hell broke loose. The flak from the German 88s was everywhere. Most of the gliders were hit, but thirty-five managed to get their loads through. Official reports are silent about the other fifteen gliders. It is entirely possible that all fifteen were shot down. The tow planes were also hit hard and seventeen of the fifty hit as they turned for home and crashed before reaching their base.

When you go to church this Christmas, let's all say a prayer for our gallant buddies who didn't make it back on that Christmas 33 years ago.