

A Glider Christmas Story . . .

"A SLEIGH ON SILENT WINGS"

By JOHN P. GANNON

Our CG4A, a combat glider, towed by a 4,000 horsepower C46 "Commando" was one aircraft in an Army Air Corps "Airmada" consisting of nine aircraft. Our mission was to "show off" the B-17 Flying Fortress, a P-38 Lightning, our AT-6 Advanced Trainer, the first Tokyo raider, a B-25 Marauder, the famed Jug or Thunderbolt P-47 and its counterpart, the equally famed P-51 Mustang, all of which contributed to the air superiority that allowed successful airborne assaults on D Day in Normandy. The airborne paved the way with paratroopers and gliders towed by C-47s better known as the workhorse of aviation or the DC-3. Normally it towed two fully loaded CG4As carrying troops, ammo, jeeps, medical supplies, artillery and anything else that could be loaded. Although a C-47 was part of our armada a C-46 was chosen to tow the glider because of its ability to tow at a faster airspeed. Our schedule, a tight one, called for visits to cities located in Southern and North Central states. Meeting with visitors and the media we encouraged the purchase of Savings Bonds which would help our country maintain its military strength but, perhaps, fate selected me, this day, to play Santa Claus. A peaceful role in a time of peace.

Shortly before takeoff the C-46 mechanic asked if he could ride in the glider. His aircraft had towed many gliders but he had never ridden in one. "Sure, Sergeant. Maybe you can be my co-pilot," I replied. My assigned co-pilot, Warrant Officer Ken Strothers, consented to give up his seat. He would ride in the tow plane since flying time between Okmulgee, Oklahoma and Texarkana, Texas would be short—hardly more than one hour. The flight promised to be routine except for marginal weather along the route. After pre-flying our glider we were towed, on a short length of tope, by a truck to our hook-up position at the end of the runway. Our tow, the Commando, taxied into position about one hundred and eighty feet ahead of the glider. Then uncoiling two hundred feet of nylon tow rope we attached one end to the nose hook of the glider and the other end to the tail end hook of the Commando. Cockpit checks completed I signaled to an assistant in front of the Commando "Ready for takeoff." Our tow eased forward taking the slack out of the tow rope. Full takeoff power followed. Our roll was short and the glider lifted easily into position slightly above the tail of the Commando as it accelerated quickly for its on takeoff. We climbed north, finally turning east toward the Talaheena mountains. Leveling at an altitude that would clear the mountains and keep us clear of the cloud bases we settled into normal tow position—just above propeller wash and directly behind the Commando. Flying above flat land we begin to encounter mild chop and occasionally a gust. As we neared the mountains the air became turbulent. It indicated that my Sergeant co-pilot would experience a ride to remember and it didn't occur to me that it would be one to write about. As we flew over the first ridge turbulence rearranged our tow position. The clouds became darker with an occasional glimpse of sunlight breaking thru openings in the shallow but threatening cloud cover. We watched the Commando flutter slightly while we bounced and twisted behind. Knowing that the Sergeant had some experience flying "stick time" in the Commando I decided to offer him the controls so he could better appreciate his ride as co-pilot. At that moment the air became moderately turbulent. Keeping the glider in position suddenly became work instead of play.

I began to sweat as the physical effort required to maintain a safe tow position was amplified by the extreme control pressures needed to deflect rudder, elevator and ailerons. The Commando began to toss about—lifting, descending and swaying. Our comparatively light glider reacted to the air turbulence as a raft does on rough water. My co-pilot remained silent—probably sensing that conversation would be useless. He was saddled to a bucking glider attached by a tether to 4,000 galloping horses, as he watched me going thru the motions of a fly in a spider's web. Suddenly the Commando dropped as if it had lost its wings. The tow line went taut and inclined downward, attached firmly to the tail of our tow ship. Easing elevator pressure forward I began to descend to regain position. Then, as suddenly as it dropped, the Commando began to rise like a balloon—it seemed. At the same time the glider's bottom "fell out." Loose items in the cockpit and cargo compartment floated about and the tow rope tightened, then stretched, with the Commando now high above us. In amazement I realized that one of three unwelcome events was now about to happen. The tow rope would break; the glider would pull the tail of the tow ship down. If that happened the tow pilot would have no recourse except to release the tow rope, which when stretched, would fling several pounds of metal and two hundred feet of nylon rope at the glider. The latter experience is frightening, especially if the metal D ring flies into the cockpit carrying lacerating rope with it. Sometimes the rope becomes entangled in the landing gear. Then it is impossible to drop it free of the glider. It dangles below the glider waiting for a tree, overhead wires or anything else above ground to snare the glider on a landing approach. Luckily—in the past—I had escaped unharmed from all three of those mentioned and more. Reflex action followed. I reached up and pulled the release handle just a moment before our glider hit "bottom"—hard—and we began to rise, now free of the Commando which quickly left us behind. Its pilot could hardly know that we had released until he encountered smoother air when his airspeed would increase. Ahead we saw only forested ridges. While turning we held altitude while slowing to 70 miles per hour airspeed. At that speed a CG4A just whispers. Keep it whispering and it never stalled. Anything above a whisper indicated excessive airspeed and when silence occurred the only safe altitude was lots of it or just inches above the ground for "she," like a mistreated lady, was all thru flying and her wings were truly silent. I had encountered rough air on tow along and while flying double tow on the tail end of glider formations many times. It is then that one must keep clear of another glider being towed by the same tow ship while encountering air turbulence caused by weather and many propellers and wings ahead of you. What happened this day is now a term well known by anyone who reads a newspaper or listens to news commentators. We had encountered a "wind shear" while in a most awkward situation — two aircraft linked together by a strong tow rope.

As we rolled thru a 180 degree turn my co-pilot broke the silence. "Where are we going?" he asked, in a calm voice. "Don't know — just look for smoke or blowing dust or anything that indicates the wind direction," I replied, even though I knew we had turned downwind. As we slowly descended toward a ridge to the west I saw a field just beyond a narrow valley on the lee side of the ridge. The field was rectangular, surrounded by tall pines and at the west end two small buildings nestled close to the woods. A faint whisper of smoke arose from the chimney of one building indicating a light quartering downwind yet our altitude left us no choice — downwind it would be.

Our approach would be straight in. The altimeter confirmed that we were running short of "money in the bank" altitude. We were slightly high for the straight in approach but not high enough to maneuver for a side approach normally used by glider pilots. Tall pines appeared to grow taller as we lined up with the field which now showed to be sloping uphill and studded with cornstalks. We glided toward an opening in the trees but as we neared it — the space between two pines — I was forced to roll into a steep forward slip in order to clear the trees and lose excess altitude. We dropped thru, rolled out of the slip and settled to the ground. A loud clikkety-clak, clak, clak of cornstalks whipping thru the landing gear died to a nerve-calming swish as our wheels began to roll and the stalks caressed the fabric covering on the belly of the glider. Using momentum and then braking slightly we turned, literally in a bank provided by the sloping hill. We stopped about ten yards from a small 16 x 24 foot cabin with our right wing about the same distance from the trees. Luckily in a sheltered spot in which to tie down the glider. Although our landing had been made downwind the upslope of the hill had helped to kill off the excess ground speed. A quick inspection of the underside of the glider showed no damage to the fabric — just a good old corn cob polishing. It was then that I looked the field over by walking back along our wheel marks. Near touchdown and just to the right of our tracks I found a large boulder. If we had hit it the chances of our survival would have been nil. Hidden by the corn we did not see it. At that moment I recalled several flights I had made out of and into a small field in New Jersey, near Pitman, while flying OX5 powered aircraft and of several flights into the "pea patch" at Laurinburg-Maxton in other CG4As. Those landings required a lot of "know how" usually referred to as skill but I realized that the one just completed involved an extreme amount of luck — or the hand of fate.

Looking toward the cabin we saw a mother holding the hand of a small child on either side of her. All appeared to be more curious than surprised. As we neared the cabin one small child asked, "Mommie, is that Santa Claus?" I did not hear her reply for at that moment the faint but distinctive drone of aircraft engines reached my ears. The sound was amplified between the clouds and the mountains and borne on the wind from the east. Looking skyward in that direction my eyes searched for the Commando. I knew the crew was now scanning their flight path looking for the glider they discovered to be off tow minutes after my release. Silhouetted by a sunlit opening in the clouds we sighted it just as it turned north above a distant ridge. Without a radio to contact the Commando I feared it would soon leave the area it was not searching for us. A burst of sunlight inspired just the thing we needed. Breaking into a conversation between the sergeant and the child-

ren's mother, I begged, "Ma'm, do you have a small mirror I can borrow for a few minutes?" She, apparently anticipating its use, quickly left the doorway and returned with a small mirror — the kind usually hung on a kitchen wall. I thanked her then moved close to the second building — an outhouse — which was to serve as an aiming point. All that was needed now was sunlight. I waited patiently and was doubly rewarded. Just as the Commando began to turn from north to south, sunlight flooded thru a break in the clouds. Holding the mirror with both hands, and tilting it so that reflected sunlight was striking the door of the outhouse, I waited until the Commando was in line and above it. Tilting the mirror up and down sent our message in the form of bright flashes seen by the co-pilot of the Commando. Response was immediately evident. The Commando turned directly toward us.

I sent another series of flashes and received a reassuring wing wag. While occupied with mirror communications about twenty people — men, women, and children, — came out of the woods and were now crowding about us. A man wearing a Snuffy Smith hat dismounted from a short-legged donkey. He glanced at the field, looking the glider over and with a grin said, "Friend, that was a pretty good landing. Just like we did it in Normandy." I thanked him for the compliment then asked him to assist me in forming an "OK" by having everyone available hold hands. He took the "O" and I the "K". In seconds we had formed the willing spectators into an unmistakable "OK" by having each person hold hands with outstretched arms. Several minutes later we followed the Commando with our eyes as it passed overhead wagging its wings in acknowledgment of our reassuring "OK." It climbed eastward through the overcast on course for Texarkana.

A light drizzle began to fall from the darkening sky. The man with the donkey had remounted and he too was about to leave. Approaching him I offered my thanks for his help. Our conversation was short but I will never forget him. He had flown a CG4A into Normandy on D Day and other glider assault missions against Hitler's forces in Europe. Although I have checked the roster of the World War II Glider Pilots Association I cannot recall his name if it is there. If he should read this story I hope he will write to me. We shook hands that day and I watched as he and the donkey entered the woods. I experienced a strange feeling when he was no longer in view. I turned and walked thru the drizzle — toward the cabin. As I was about to knock the door opened. First a waft of warm air carrying a mouth-watering aroma hit me — fried pork chops and sauerkraut — followed by, "Please come in. We haven't much to offer but dinner is ready and I know both of you must be famished." We joined the children at the kitchen table and enjoyed one of the best meals ever prepared. The pork chops were fried to a golden brown, lean and tender. The sauerkraut had been precooked and aged to make it soft, moist, but not wet. Mashed potatoes covered with pork gravy plus home made biscuits with butter left nothing to be desired. Home brewed coffee and conversation followed. I asked, "Ma'm what does your husband do?" "He is a missionary spreading the gospel among the folks hereabouts. He also does a little farming as you can see. The cornfield you landed in is ours. He has organized a Boy Scout troop but the boys have no uniforms or equipment. People in this area cannot afford things like that. We are praying that somehow we can earn enough money to outfit the boys. My husband will be home soon. Please make yourselves comfortable."

"One more thing, Ma'm. Do you have a telephone nearby?" I inquired. "No, and don't be too concerned. When my husband gets home he will see that you get to a phone and he will make some arrangements for a place that you can stay until your friends come for you." We then excused ourselves to conduct a final check of the CG4A glider before darkness set in. My co-pilot inquired, "Lieutenant, after we leave who is going to take care of the glider?" "Sarge, that's a good question but I think we can kill two birds with one stone. We will use an Army Regulation and ask some Boy Scouts to help us comply with it," I replied. It will cost Uncle Sam but I'm sure the money will be well spent," I added.

About an hour later, as we sat once more at the kitchen table with the missionary, he informed us that he had already made arrangements for us to stay at the Talaheena Indian hospital until we could be picked up by Army liason aircraft.

I asked, "Reverend, can you provide twenty-four a day security until the Army recovers the glider? You may use your Boy Scouts as guards."

"Yes, we can and the Boy Scouts will be thrilled to do it," he replied, with apparent enthusiasm for the task.

I then asked for a sheet of paper and having composed a request I printed, in effect, "Dear Reverend Doe: It is hereby requested that your Boy Scouts provide a guard to maintain security over U. S. Army Glider No. 44000 until it is retrieved by the United States Army. Guards will be paid by the hour. This is your authorization for pay." I then signed my name above 2nd Lieutenant, U. S. Army Air Corps, followed by the date. My co-pilot grinned, shook his head from side to side, as I read and explained the regulation that authorized any officer to hire guards to maintain security over aircraft in an emergency landing off military property. Taking into consideration the remoteness of the field and the fact that trees would have to be cut in order to provide a takeoff path for the glider I felt just a little apprehensive about signing the request. Either the glider would have to be dismantled and trucked out or it would be snatched out by a specially equipped Snatch Pickup C-47 aircraft. The total cost to Uncle Sam would be substantial. Yet, the thought of what it would do for a Boy Scout troop at a later date, and the fact that a Second Lieutenant can be forgiven for "goofing up" occasionally, led me to sign the request with a smile and a flourish. To my surprise I was never questioned about making the unscheduled landing and was issued another glider to complete the remaining stops on our mission. Later that evening the Sergeant and I were taken to the Indian hospital near Talaheena by our missionary friend. The hospital was primarily engaged with the treatment of tuberculosis. We were greeted by the Catholic Mother. She briefed us in a firm but friendly manner as to what would be expected of us during our stay. Included was our behavior in relationship to the Indian nurses who we remember as being friendly, business-like, and beautiful in every way that a nurse should be. One of them escorted us to a large bedroom with an adjoining bath. The tub was almost large enough to swim in. Breakfast would be served early. Sharing the same bed we slept soundly and were awakened in time to join the sisters at a king-sized table. Our breakfast was delicious, the conversation delightful, and we were informed that we were welcome to stay until the Air Corps "rescued us" — the farthest thing from our minds at the time. Later that day, two liason aircraft, L-5s, landed in a nearby field. They then flew us to Texarkana after sundown — to rejoin the Airmada. Eager ears listened as we related our brief, but memorable, adventure.

About a year later while assigned to duty in the Philippine Islands I received a letter from the Reverend Boy Scout leader. His troop had taken good care of the glider. It was snatched out of the field by a C-47 pickup in the spring of 1946. The Air Corps had paid for the security provided by the Boy Scouts and now they had uniforms and some equipment. I recalled the little boy asking, "Mommie, is that Santa Claus?" She may have answered, "We'll see."

I like to think that their Daddy explained it, perhaps, in this way: "Children, Santa Claus arrives in many ways. It just happened that he arrived this day on silent wings. Some times he arrives in other ways, as you know. You may have noticed Santa arrived early and he hadn't grown a beard nor did he have his Santa suit on. He was not dressed for Christmas deliveries because this was something special. It was a special delivery in answer to our prayers."

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