

WWII GLIDER PILOT'S BRIEFING

NATIONAL WWII GLIDER PILOTS COMMITTEE OFFICIAL COMMUNIQUE
SILENT WINGS MUSEUM FOUNDATION

Legacy of the World War II Glider Pilots Association



“GLIDER DOWN!”

By: Captain Trevor Shimulunas, USMC

Going down in the Jungle is one thing, going down in the night without reaching the LZ surrounded by the Japanese leaves you two choices...

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Glider Down!
The Story of Flight Officer Leroy Shimulunas
By: Captain Trevor Shimulunas, USMC



F/O Leroy Shimulunas

*"The only things that are in my dreams,
are basketballs and Lorraine it seems"*
-Leroy's graduation quote from 1941 yearbook

Two Rivers, Wisconsin is a small, quiet town on the shore of Lake Michigan, just east of Green Bay. The community is one of close-knit neighborhoods, small local shops, parks and riverways, and a booming fishing industry. Today the city maintains the charm it would have had 80 years ago. There is tranquility there along the waterfront, where Lake Michigan whispers softly and gulls call overhead. Much of this allure would have been lost upon Anton and Amanda Shimulunas in March of 1944. Five of their seven children were at war. Four of them would return.

In the summer of 1941, amidst the rumblings of conflict in Europe and the Pacific, Leroy Shimulunas graduated from high school. A local basketball star who had helped lead the Two Rivers Raiders to victory in the state championship that same year, he was described by teachers and classmates as a “fine, clean cut boy.” A band member, student leader, and athlete, Leroy volunteered to enlist in the Army ten days after he graduated high school. This set him on a journey to Burma that would take more than two and a half years.

Shortly after his initial training he was identified as a promising candidate for the Glider Pilot Program. Though he put on an Army Air Forces uniform, he did not entirely hang up his championship basketball jersey. Leroy continued to play recreationally for the South Plains Army Flying School team and helped them beat their rivals at Lubbock Army Flying School. In February, 1943 Leroy was commissioned as a Flight Officer. This would have been another cause for celebration in his hometown, which kept close track of all their military youth.



1941 State Basketball Champs. Leroy Front Left
Wisconsin State Journal, 1941

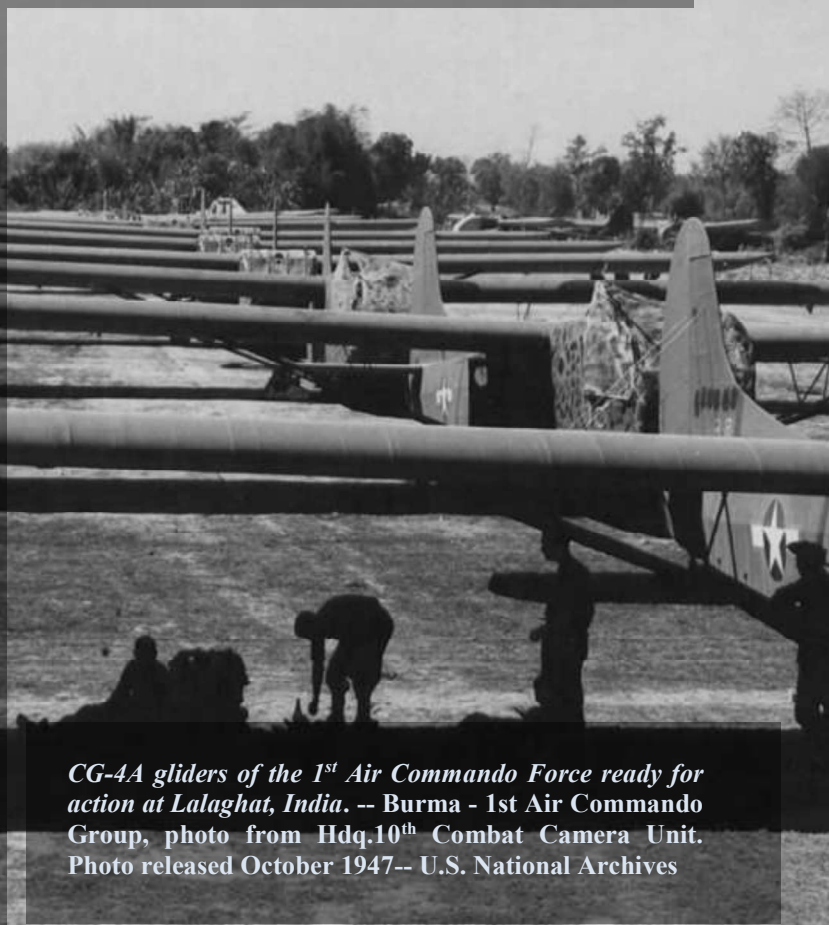
“When I hear how Leroy Shimulunas has earned his wings and is flying down in Greenville, Mississippi, I think ‘*how deadly will be the aim of a state tournament basketball champ once he gets into action.*’” (A.M. Klaus, “The Sojourner,” Vol 1.3 June 1942).

After graduation the young FO received new orders, along with many other young glider crewmembers, to the 5318th Provisional Air Unit, later renamed the 1st Air Commando Group. This new unit flowed into the China-Burma-India Theater.

The nature of their mission in Burma was of vital significance. With the occupation of Burma, and the success of the Japanese military there, access to the Burma Road was cut off. The Burma Road was a critical route used to provide supplies and weaponry to the beleaguered Chinese. Without the ability to support China, it was likely that the Japanese troops there would be victorious and subsequently able to be redeployed in other areas across the Pacific. The Allies' response: Operation Thursday.

This highly classified mission was a daring follow-up to previous Allied attempts to break through Burma to supply the Chinese. Seeing limited success with extreme casualties during ground movements through the dense jungle, General H. Arnold, Commanding General US Army Air Forces turned to Lieutenant Colonel Phillip Cochran to devise a solution.

Operation Thursday was the culmination of that work. A specialized force of fighters, gliders, transports, bombers, engineers, and Chindit commandos was planned to be inserted into various landing zones in the Burmese jungle. Their goal: establish forward airstrips from which to fly resupply missions, set conditions in Burma for follow on forces, and to sow confusion and distress amongst their Japanese enemy. This they accomplished thanks to the bravery and expertise of the operation's glider pilots.



CG-4A gliders of the 1st Air Commando Force ready for action at Lalaghat, India. -- Burma - 1st Air Commando Group, photo from Hdq.10th Combat Camera Unit. Photo released October 1947-- U.S. National Archives

Pilots like FO Shimulunas were expected to be towed by C-47s over an expanse of the Chin Hills, the mountains that separate Burma from India, at an altitude of 8000 feet. They would release from their tow planes and glide into their objective, LZ Broadway. From there they would clear the area and secure the LZ for additional forces. Being towed was dangerous for any glider, but for Operation Thursday the CG-4A Troop Gliders were overloaded due to mission requirements. With such a heavy load, inserting at night, with the blustering cross winds above the mountain ranges, tragedy soon struck. A number of gliders had their tow ropes snap, and others had their tow mechanism ripped out entirely before word could be passed to adjust their tow position behind the C-47s.

On March 5th 1944, after initial difficulty with the tow ropes and congestion at LZ Broadway, the number of casualties was low. Gliders which broke off from their tow planes were left to the mercy of the winds and the pilot's skill to continue towards the objective. Some gliders broke up in the thick tree canopy, others managed a successful rough landing far off course in the Burmese jungle.

It's in that dark glider cockpit, blindly following along on an air current, that I often picture Leroy. I imagine the reassuring drone of the Skytrain towing him, and the excited nervous chatter of the British troops he was transporting. I wonder where he ran into difficulty – was he in one of the gliders that had broken away unexpectedly? Or did his craft encounter a different issue closer to LZ Broadway?

At some point during the mission, Leroy's glider suffered an in-flight emergency. Battling the elements that night, the treetops, and his own glider, Leroy managed to successfully land his craft and passengers in Northern Burma. Insects would have droned on around them as the commandos picked themselves up out of the glider to take stock of their surroundings. I imagine the darkness pressing in around them, isolated, under the trees.

Off course but well-oriented, the British commandos, accompanied by FO Shimulunas and his copilot Cpl Fred Pugh, began their march towards Indaw, Burma.



Glider pilots of the 1st Air Commando Force pose in front of a glider at the Lalaghat (India) base.

Burma - 1st Air Commando Group, photo from Hdq. 10th Combat Camera Unit. Photo released October 1947-- U.S. National Archives [POSSIBLY F/O SHIMULUNAS FRONT ROW, LAST ON RIGHT]

COCHRANS AIR COMMANDOES MOVE BRITISH FOOT TROOPS BEHIND JAPS IN BURMA. Gliders of the First Air Commando Force, having made a night landing at "Broadway" name for the rendezvous, prepare for the forward air movement under command of Maj. Gen. Orde Charles Wingate. Daylight after the night landing. Not all of the gliders landed without a crack-up. Logs and other natural obstacles were the causes of some crashes. The men awaited daylight to begin work on the airstrip. Burma Press Release 4 April 1944 - 1st Air Commando Group --U.S. National Archives



After covering some distance in the humid jungle, the patrol stopped next to a body of water to rest, tired from their ordeal and from fighting against the jungle undergrowth. As the Allies recovered, they were surprised by a group of Japanese soldiers. Leroy, like all glider pilots, was charged with the safe delivery of his passengers. Upon being discovered by the Japanese the 21-year-old immediately reached for his rifle and was shot. The party was captured and then interred in a POW camp. Enduring immeasurable hardships they would be beaten and starved, and would not taste liberation until April 1945. One of the men liberated was Leroy's copilot, Cpl Pugh. He had been held in Rangoon Jail, Burma. The Japanese attempted to flee from the advancing British 14th Army, and abandoned their prisoners along the Old Burma Road.



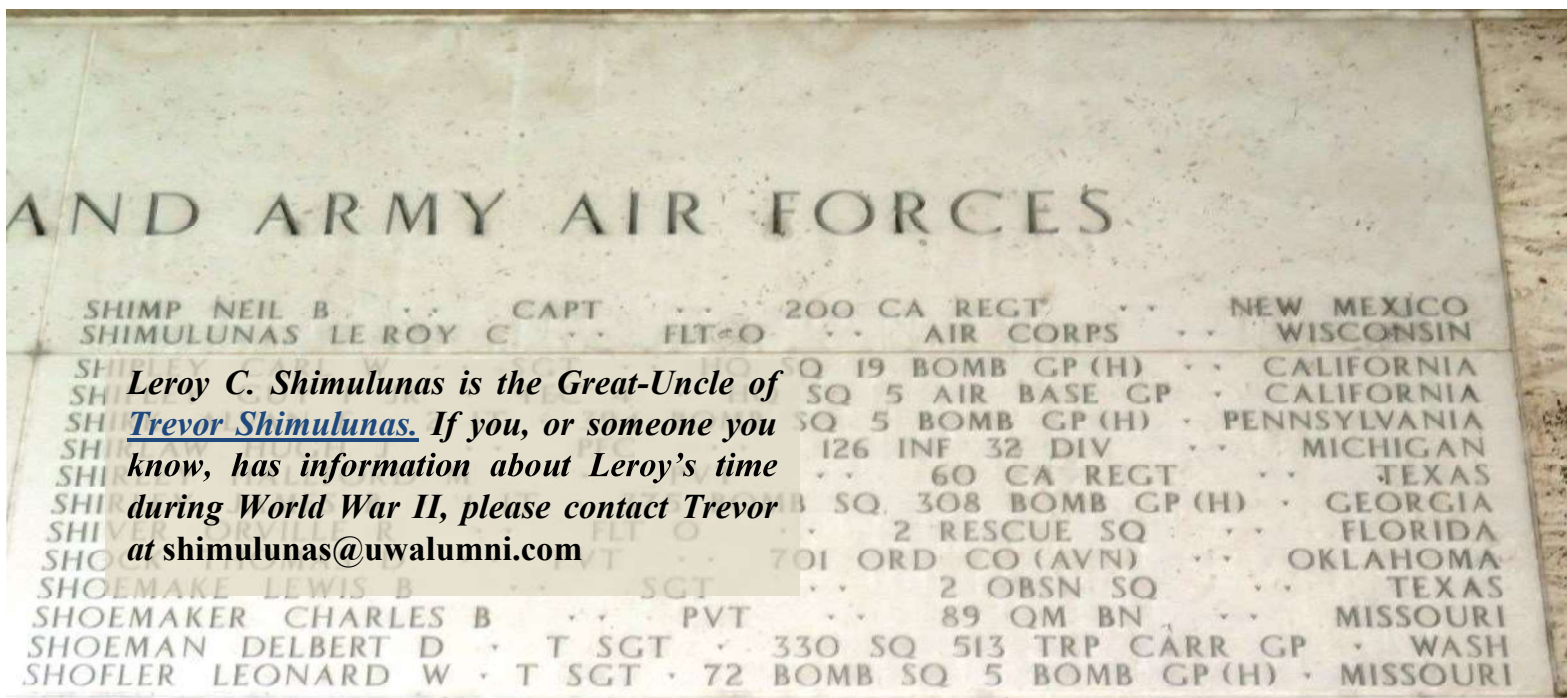
Liberated Prisoners of Pegu, photo provided by Jim Miller. Cpl Pugh, front-center. F/O Robert Hall rear-center. S/Sgt Robert Bicknell, also with 1ACG, rear-left Red Miller Photo

Pugh's story on the day they were rescued revealed that he was captured on March 27th, 1944 after proceeding to the upper regions of the Chindwin. This reveals the possibility that Leroy's patrol operated independently for close to 2 weeks in the Burmese Jungle after the night of Operation Thursday, rather than being ambushed and captured that first night.

It was after their liberation that some member of the Allied party made contact with Leroy's parents, detailing the story of their son's final mission in a letter to Anton and Amanda. It confirmed what the War Department had previously speculated. Leroy was dead. The unknown comrade wrote that as he was being led away, he could see Leroy lying face down in the watery glade where they were ambushed. For the family this was a long-awaited, tearful conclusion to a bright chapter in a small city's history.

For Operation Thursday however, aggressive cool-headed glider pilots such as Leroy were the purveyors of success. Despite extremely difficult conditions and the unprecedented nature in which they were being employed, the gliders and their passengers primarily landed successfully. It has been suggested that a key contributing factor to the success of the subsequent landings was due to those gliders who went off course. These malfunctions during landing served to confuse the Japanese commanders on where the landing zones had been established. Roving patrols of British Chindits attacked the enemy from seemingly every direction as forces continued to flow into the Burmese jungle.

Leroy has not yet been recovered, but he is memorialized on the Tablet of the Missing in the Philippines, as well as in the family plot in Two Rivers, Wisconsin. He left behind a fiancé, Miss Lorraine Shedivy. His other siblings all survived the war, serving in both the European and Pacific theaters.



FURTHER READING: <https://www.ww2gp.org/bio-file/extendedfile.php?getextendedfile=6638>