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## GLIDER PILOT TRAINING AT LAURINBURG-MAXTON ENDED IN 1945 IN A BIG BANG !!!

By Walt Raby

After graduation from the advanced flight school at Turner Field in Albany, Georgia, I instructed in B-25s for a few months. Then my number for a transfer to the Overseas Replacement Depot in Kerns, Utah came up, and I was gone. Flying gliders certainly was not on my wish list of planes to fly. In fact, I had never heard of a CG4A. The P-38, P-47 and P-51s were very high on my list, but that wish never came about. I was forever destined for great big airplanes. The old saying was "If you could think but couldn't fly, you went to bombers, and if you could fly but couldn't think you went to fighters." Flying gliders was so low on the joke list that there weren't any that I know of.

The day President Roosevelt died in April 1945, I arrived at Laurinburg-Maxton AAB in North Carolina. The base was loaded with CG4As and C-47s. Also setting on the flight line were a few CG-13s, CG-15s, L-5s and PG-2As. A British Horsa was just off the ramp in the grass where we could climb in and out of it to satisfy our curiosity. Of course there were other types in transit, but the majority of planes assigned to the base were the ones listed above.

After I was assigned to my quarters, which was a long tar paper shack, I wandered out to the flight line so I could watch the gliders being towed off. They took off to the East then circled left and flew right over the Officer's Club. There they would release, circle left again and then land on the grass parallel to the main runway. Those flights lasted about seven to ten minutes, or just long enough to make a close circuit of the field. I watched for awhile and since no one ran me off the ramp, I meandered over to a CG4A that was about ready to take off. The kind-hearted pilot saw me standing there with my tongue hanging out and motioned for me to sit in the right seat. I did and I just sat there during takeoff. I heard a lot of little stones slammed against the nose of the glider caused by the tow plane's prop wash. Very quickly, we were airborne. It was just a lot of fun and it was something to learn. I watched the position we were flying in and noted the airspeeds during climb, cruise, and the famous 60 MPH and the side slip on

final. We landed pretty normal, but the pilot surprised me a little when he pushed forward on the yoke enough to get the skids digging into the sod. We really stopped then.

I went through the airborne ground training and flight training like everyone else at the base. Sometimes we were hauled off in blacked out canvas covered trucks about 20 miles from the base. In those very dark nights, we had to find out where we were and how to walk back to the base with only a high altitude 8 x 10 photograph of the area we were supposed to be maneuvering in. Actually, it was good training. I remember enjoying the challenges of the problems and solutions. I guess we thought we were really accomplishing something important. Having just turned 20 years of age, everything seemed new and exciting.

After all the flight training, landing in raw fields, snatch pick-ups and whatever else they had to offer, the big graduation exercise was to land in a rather small field at "night time." The instructors told us about the three kerosene light pods. Land at the first two pods and stop at the third one, and "I'll be standing there with my foot just high enough for you to run the left wheel under." Sounded good in the classroom, but I saw a hell of a lot of instructors running for their lives that night.

Soon it was my turn to make a night landing. We took off from LMAAB while it was pitch black and flew around a little while. Then the tow pilot told me we were coming up to the LZ dead ahead. I told him I saw the kerosene pods and released on the downwind, abeam of those very little lights. The landing was pretty uneventful, and I did okay. I rolled up to my instructor and sure enough he put his foot on my left wheel. So far, so good. Now we had to let the other pilot make his "Night Landing." Boy-oh-boy, was I in for a surprise. We took off in the pitch black and flew the little course. Then the tow pilot said we were coming up on the LZ. I was in the right seat, and we released. Just as we were turning into the base leg, the student pilot panicked and couldn't do it. I had to grab the controls and make a night landing

from the right seat. Slipping to the left, trying to slow down and look for the light pods through the steel structure at the nose of the glider really caught me by surprise and totally unprepared. I made it okay, but needless to say, I didn't give a damn about that instructor who was going to put his foot on my left wheel when I stopped. Perhaps I made that guy run for his life. I really don't remember and didn't care at that time, because we were safely on the ground.

Now that the formal part of my training was over, I flew whenever I could just to build up flying time. It seemed there was nothing better to do. I flew the PG-2 up to Pope Field and back almost daily. I flew the L-5 and instructed the guys coming back from the war in Europe. Flying the L-5s helped to get their four hours in for flight pay also. It was about this time when almost 1,500 pilots were given the opportunity to get out of the service. It seemed that everyone did. I was one of the few that stayed at LMAAB. The day after most of the pilots had departed for civilian life, I went to the Base Operations Office and asked for a job. I was given the duty of "weight and balance" officer. I'd work the slip stick and sign the flight forms and off the weekend warriors would go for a few days of fun. There were plenty of planes for anyone who wanted to fly on those "Official Flights."

For some experiment, I volunteered to make a flight in a CG4A that had high explosive "C-2" and primer cord throughout the fuselage and wings. Everywhere that was a major steel or wood joint there was a big bunch of C-2 piled in that area. It just looked like putty with

the primer cord running through the pile. It started back in the tail and the primer cord linked to all the joints where the C-2 was concentrated. Looking back at the tail, the primer cord looked like a big corkscrew. It went out to the joints in the wings and all around the cabin area joining the big clumps of C-2. The timer, much like one in a hand grenade, was just above the right exit door. We were told "Not to smoke," but that was it.

I made the flight and landed at LMAAB up in the combat area that was surrounded by pine trees. After landing, every crew member was supposed to run like hell. The last guy out was supposed to pull the timing fuse lever. No one had to tell that guy to run and I was that last guy. Anyway, I pulled the fuse lever and ran as fast as I could. At about three or four hundred feet, the glider exploded. I was just diving to the ground. I looked back and saw a spark or explosion as big as the glider itself. Chunks of wood and steel were blown straight up and all around the area. Little fires were started but they were extinguished easily. We then ran back, and the three of us carried the big pieces aside. This was done so the next glider could land in the same spot and do the same thing. I remember, very well, that the nose section with the pilot seats was the heaviest part for us to drag away. The whole exercise was to solve the problem of landing a lot of gliders in a very, very small field that had only room enough for one. The project was probably an experiment to see if we could all land into a Japanese rice paddy. However, I was never told that.

I transferred out of LMAAB in February 1946 to Bergstrom AAB in Austin, Texas. I started to fly the C-46 for Operations Cross Roads. That was the operation to accumulate material for the atomic tests in the Pacific. I got in a lot of C-46 time. After five months at Bergstrom, I departed for Japan to help set up the first glider program at Ishnomaki near Sendai in Northern Japan. We assembled 13 gliders and trained the 82nd Airborne. Our mission was to give five flights in the CG4A and five or six parachute jumps from the C-46. Mrs. Douglas McArthur and General White came for an inspection tour of our facilities. We put on a great show with the gliders and parachutists for them. In late 1946, a huge storm wrecked all the gliders, and that was the end of the glider program in Japan, as they were not replaced. Soon after, I was discharged from active duty.

*Editor's Note: Walt Raby was recalled to active duty in 1951 and served one year in Korea with the 4th Fighter Wing "Mig Killers." Returning to the ZI in 1952, he was stationed at Kelly AFB in San Antonio, Texas for 10 years. He flew the C-124 logging over 10,000 hours. He also flew the XC-99, which was "one of a*

*kind," and the biggest operational airplane in the world. (The XC-99 was the transport version of the B-36 bomber). He retired from active service in April 1967. One day after retiring from the USAF, the Boeing Company employed him as an Instructor Pilot. He flew the Boeing 707, 727, 737, 747, 757, and 767. After 18 years and logging over 18,500 hours of flight time, he retired in 1986. Walt is now a stock broker in Seattle, WA.*

*ADDENDUM: Walt Raby early love affair with flying comes through in his articles. He never missed an opportunity to log time. A fighter pilot at heart, he wound up flying some of the biggest airplanes in the world and loved every minute. We appreciate his taking time to give us his impressions of his past glider experiences. The huge XC-99 still exists, sitting in lonely splendor at Kelly Field, Texas where it slowly deteriorates into oblivion. Too big to move, too huge to ever fly again, it has found its final landing field. Another of our members, Bill Smith, of San Antonio, was also a lead pilot of the XC-99 and may have more information for us in a future issue. He took part through the demolition derby.*

