

# WWII GLIDER PILOT'S BRIEFING

NATIONAL WWII GLIDER PILOTS ASSOCIATION OFFICIAL COMMUNIQUE

Legacy of the World War II Glider Pilots Association



## DISCOVERED TREASURE

“I can remember after I cut loose, while searching for a landing spot, off to my left and down a bit on the ground, I see a glider with one wing down and his wing caught and he cartwheeled.”

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# A DISCOVERED TREASURE

## ROGER WILLIAM SMITH

BY: ZACH CROMLEY



I've never considered myself much of a lucky person, but in January of 2012, my luck changed. At the time, I was working as a civilian contractor flying twin turboprop airplanes around Afghanistan. A few years before that I began my professional pilot career as a flight instructor, and then as a regional airline pilot. The recession caused turbulent times in my industry. In 2010, I found myself in a war zone flying whatever and whoever to wherever the Army decided they wanted. It was a grueling and dangerous job but I was proud to support the US Military in a small sort of way. The most rewarding part of the job was undoubtedly the opportunity to glimpse into the lives of the brave men and women on the front lines. To say it gave me a newfound respect for them is an understatement.

Contracting put an end to my mountain of student loan debt and in January of 2012 I closed on a house in a modest neighborhood in Loveland, Colorado. It was a bank owned, foreclosed home with lots of work to be done. Within hours of moving in, and while enjoying a celebratory Grain Belt on the cracked and crumbling patio, my only adjacent neighbor popped his 88-year-old head over the fence. He was standing on a stump that he had rolled over because he wanted to get a good look at the person who had taken on such a daunting task of cleaning up the place. That was the day that I met Roger William Smith.

The yard was a mess, and Roger was satisfied with my willingness to make cleaning it and fixing up the fence a priority. While on leave, I spent many days working in the yard. Roger checked in on my projects daily. With both of our backgrounds, it didn't take long for us to connect on a personal level. We chatted nearly every day when I was stateside. Sometimes

about nothing, but most of the time about airplanes. I learned very early on in our friendship that Roger was an MOS 1026 Glider Pilot. I just didn't realize at the time how big of a deal that was. Roger is proud of his military career and never hesitates to tell people what his license plate means.



It didn't take long for me to take up an interest in Roger's WWII experiences. My own grandfather was a flight engineer on B-29's. I'm even named after him but, unfortunately, I never got to meet him. This has always fueled my desire to read and learn as much as I can about the greatest war and the greatest generation. Perhaps this propelled an even stronger interest in Roger, or maybe it was my newfound respect for the men and women in uniform. Whatever it was, I knew that I could not miss the opportunity while Roger was still young, to get his story. At first, I was eager to learn about the gliders and their mission. Upon Roger's recommendation I took along "Silent Wings" (Devlin 1985) on a deployment. Like

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most, I never realized the impact gliders had on the war. I was dumbfounded. I dove into the world of gliders and am still borderline obsessed. I read what I could about the history and operations. I wanted to have a foundation of knowledge before I got serious about engaging Roger in more than those front yard conversations. He was forthcoming anytime I grazed the subject of his military career but I knew all too well that sometimes we can ask too much.

After a couple of years of friendship with Roger and on a beautiful summer day, I had an unusual opportunity. A very good friend and mentor of mine from the Afghan job was volunteering for the Collings Foundation. He had the rare opportunity to fly their beautiful consolidated B-24J named Witchcraft. As luck would have it, they were doing a Wings of Freedom Tour stop at the airport just minutes away from where Roger and I live. On the day before the event when all of the planes were staged for the show, I took Roger along to meet the crews and check out the airplanes. He loved it, and they loved him. As we were preparing to leave Roger was approached by a historian from the Collings Foundation. He invited Roger to participate in a video documentary of Roger's war experience. I was ecstatic at the idea. Roger seemed to hate it, and refused.

We didn't talk much on the short ride home from the airport that day. I think Roger appreciated the trip, but all I could think about was how I could catalogue his glider mission if he wasn't interested in telling his story. I had all too much experience with knowing not to ask those questions if they could bring back some demons. However, I couldn't stand the thought of allowing Roger's story to go

untold. I decided to work on improving Roger's trust and respect for me. To do this, I worked hard at our friendship and performed neighborly tasks. As I busied myself around the Smith house, I thought about what it must have been like for him. What it was like in that ship for weeks on the way to Europe, not knowing if or when he would return. What it was like sitting in that pre-mission briefing looking at the pictures of the landing zone while being told "reconnaissance has detected significant amounts of anti-glider pole emplacements." What it was like watching another glider cartwheel through a vineyard moments before touchdown. And what it was like the moment his glider came to rest in that field in Southern France.

In a year like none other, in the fall of 2020 Roger's beautiful and devoted wife of 77 years, Glenna, fell terribly ill. Roger and Glenna met growing up as neighbors and married in Cherryville, New Jersey five days after Roger graduated Advanced Glider Pilot Training. When Glenna became ill, I was still employed but had not flown for a few months. This gave me extra time with my young family but it also gave me extra time to devote to Roger. On a rainy day in October, Glenna was taken to the hospital. In the middle of a pandemic, and under the advisement of his family, Roger stayed home. I didn't go over there that day with anything in mind other than keeping Roger company. I just hoped the small talk and friendly banter would take Roger's mind off of reality. Roger was eager to chat and I could sense it. I'll never forget the feeling I suddenly had sitting in Roger's living room that day. Now or never. I knew it was time.

Within a matter of hours, on his dining room table there sat a large stack of pictures,

documents, and original orders dated August 1944 stamped “Top Secret”. Roger answered all of my questions and seemed to hold nothing back. Perhaps it was the stress of the situation, or maybe he was just eager for someone to listen. Either way, I’m still in shock at his openness.

I left Roger’s house that day regretting that I had not asked his story sooner, but I was relieved at how much information he was providing. Roger loaned me some photos to take and show the family that day which he’d taken near Le Muy, France on August 15th and 16th, 1944. I really had no idea what was in my possession at the time. After doing a bit of research on the Glider Pilot Committee’s website I reached out to the Leon B. Spencer Research Team. A long discussion ensued and my understanding of Roger’s treasure trove of history became clearer. I have no idea how many glider pilots might have taken a camera along with them on their mission(s), but my guess based on what I have seen and now know is “not many”. How many of those that took a camera along in World War II are still able to provide context to each picture? I hope the rhetoricity of that question is obvious. The last I was told by the research team, there are perhaps only a few more than 20 living glider pilot veterans. Did I mention luck?

In late December 2020, at 95 years old, Glenna Smith passed peacefully at home with Roger by her side. I was flying my first trip back at work in nine months. It’s always difficult to get that sort of news on the road, but Roger has a large and loving family who were able to grieve with him. I arrived home a few days later and immediately went to see Roger. Standing 5’7” tall, weighing in at possibly 100lbs (If you include his lap dog Fritz), I always tell my other friends that Roger could still beat me up in a fist fight. And I truly mean



it. His current physical presence fails to reflect the man and human that he is. Roger loved Glenna with all of his heart and in that moment when I told him I was sorry, he was more worried about how I was doing. The last few months of Glenna’s life were difficult for Roger and I did what I could to help. He was so focused on making her comfortable and being with her. Now that she was gone, he seemed a bit anxious and lost.

In the meantime, I had been communicating with the Research Team and just starting to get some clarity as to how important Roger’s pictures, documents, and memorabilia were to the preservation of the WWII glider history. I now knew better than to wait any longer. During the month of January 2021, I interviewed Roger for a number of hours and, at the request of the Research Team, he loaned me his documents and pictures for me to scan and share. Since then, we have met nearly once a week to clarify and add context to, so far, only a portion his material. He seems settled and excited when we meet, and it’s usually the highlight of my week.

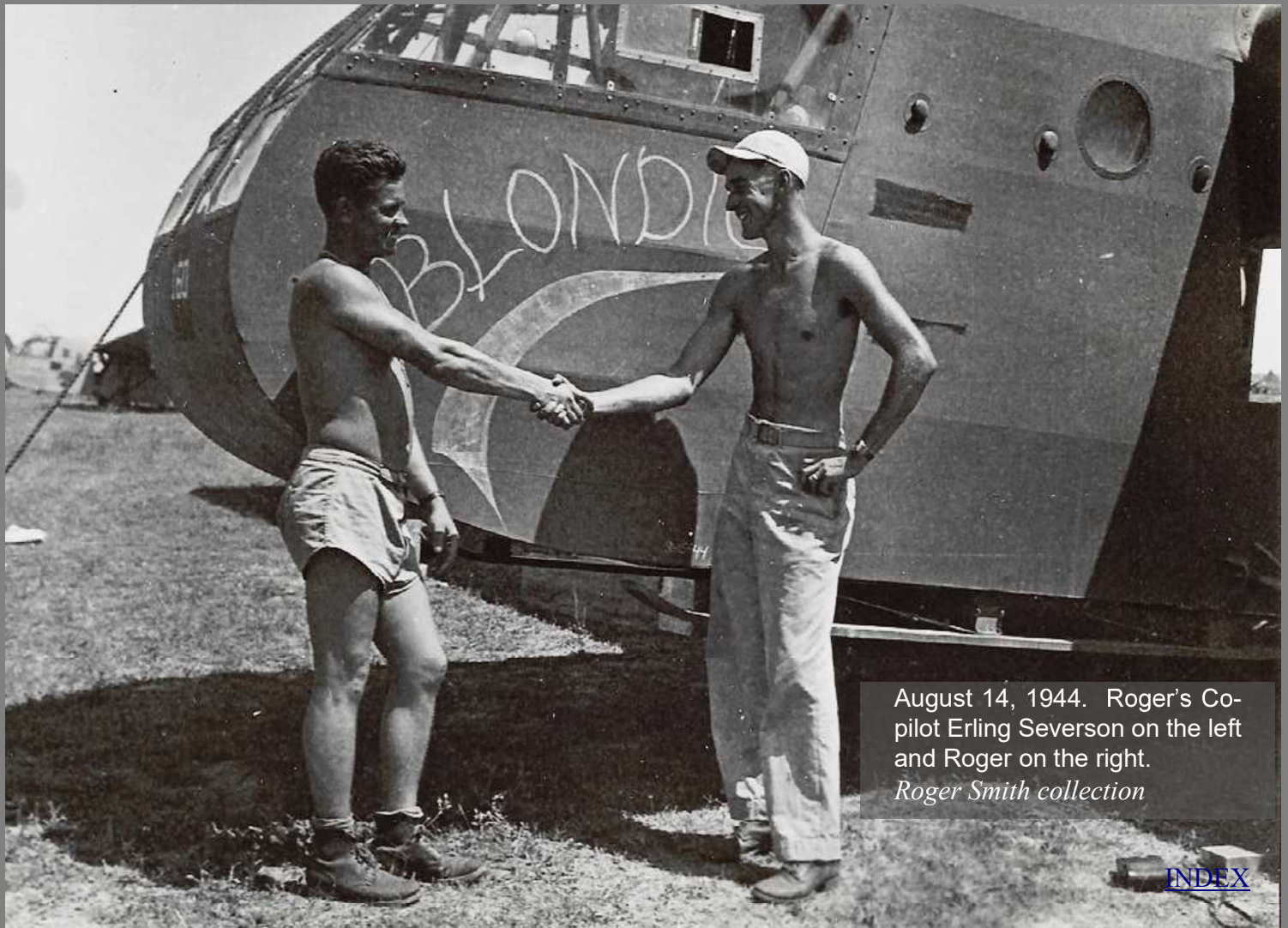


The coin tossed for both the dress rehearsal.  
*Roger Smith collection*

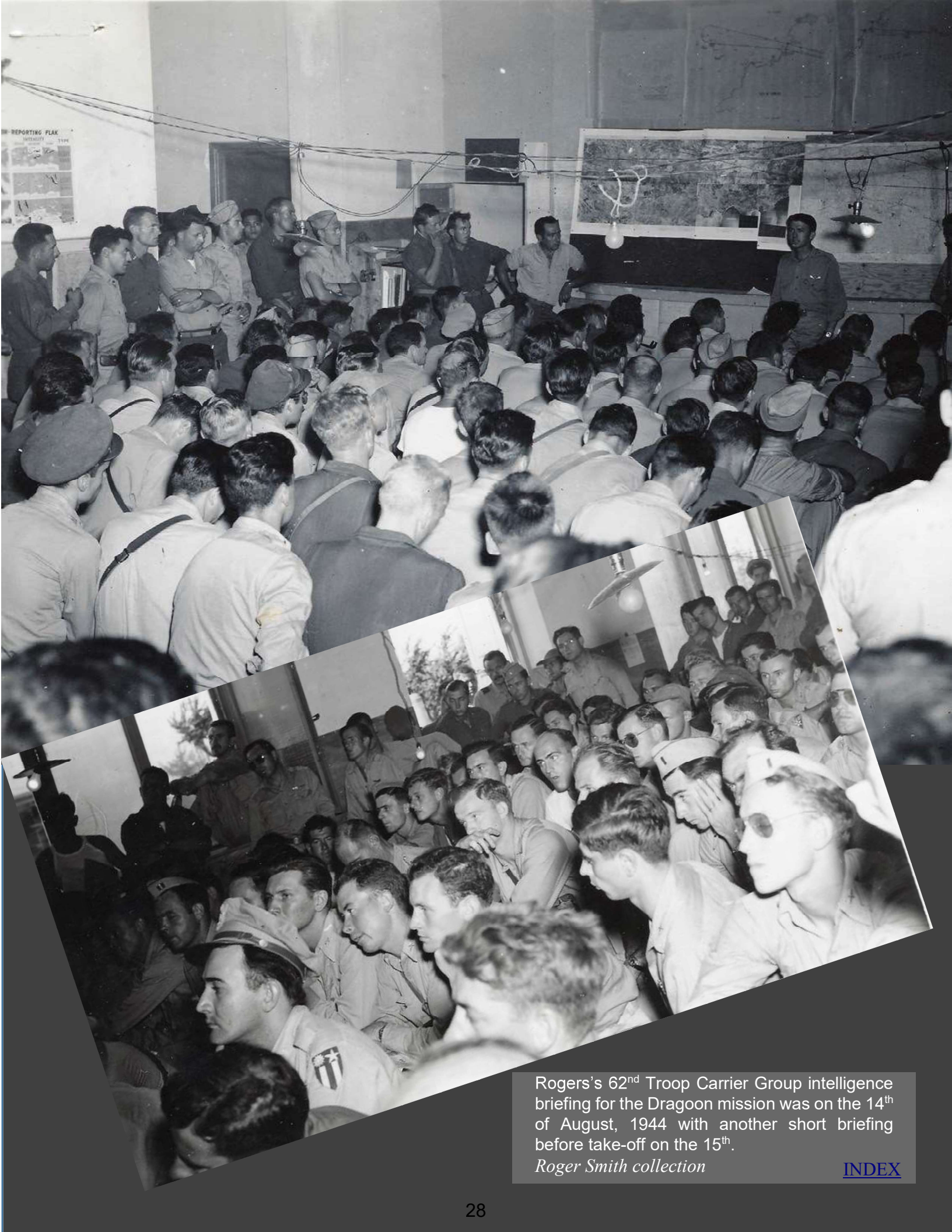


Roger William Smith graduated Advanced Glider Pilot Training in Lubbock, TX on October 26th, 1943 in class 43-16. Five days after that appointment to Flight Officer he married his childhood sweetheart Glenna (aka: Blondie) in Cherryville, NJ. He departed Newport News, VA in a Navy Transport on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1944 and stepped foot on land again on April 9<sup>th</sup> in Casablanca. At the end of April, after a train ride across Africa, he again boarded a vessel to Naples. After the Germans bombed the harbor his first night in Naples they left for Palermo. A few stops and a couple months later, he was in Rome with the 8th Squadron of the 62nd TCG preparing for Dragoon. Four weeks to the day after his 21st birthday on the morning of August 14th 1944, Roger and his Co-Pilot Erling Severson flipped a quarter to see who would fly their CG-4A for the final Dragoon dress rehearsal. Erling won the toss.

The dress rehearsal went smoothly and true to his word, Erling, who was slated to pilot the CG-4A glider in the combat mission, codenamed DOVE, again flipped the same quarter to see who would be at the controls of their CG-4A when they departed in the afternoon of the 15th. In one of Rogers most precious pictures of all, he, as the pilot, kneels proudly



August 14, 1944. Roger's Co-pilot Erling Severson on the left and Roger on the right.  
*Roger Smith collection*



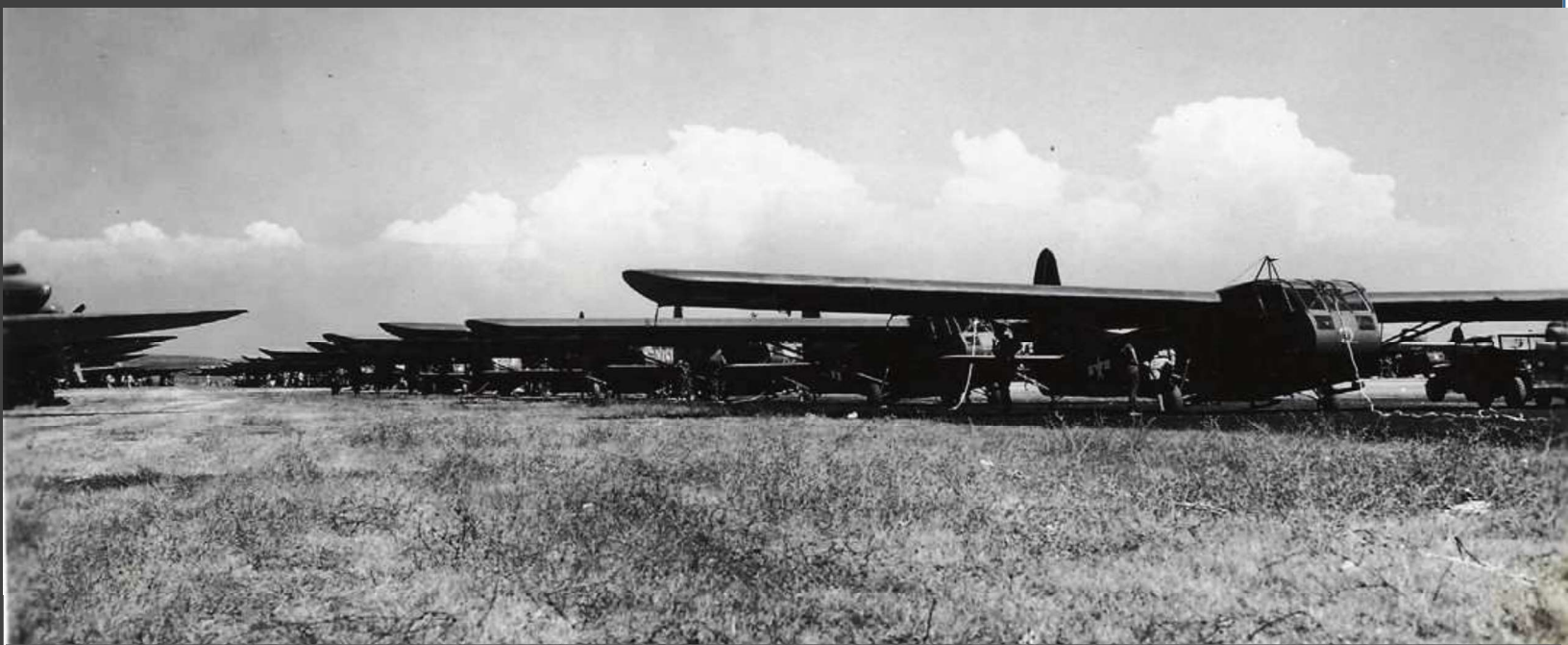
Rogers's 62<sup>nd</sup> Troop Carrier Group intelligence briefing for the Dagoon mission was on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August, 1944 with another short briefing before take-off on the 15<sup>th</sup>.

*Roger Smith collection*

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Rogers's 62<sup>nd</sup> Troop Carrier Group consisting the 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 51<sup>st</sup> Squadrons. Men from the 8<sup>th</sup> squadron stay cool before take-off on the 15<sup>th</sup>. *Roger Smith collection*



Rogers's 62<sup>nd</sup> Troop Carrier Group before take-off on the 15<sup>th</sup>. *Roger Smith collection*



Rogers's 62<sup>nd</sup> Troop Carrier air field. Take off from Galera Airdrome in Italy. Note the amount of dust in the air. *Roger Smith collection*

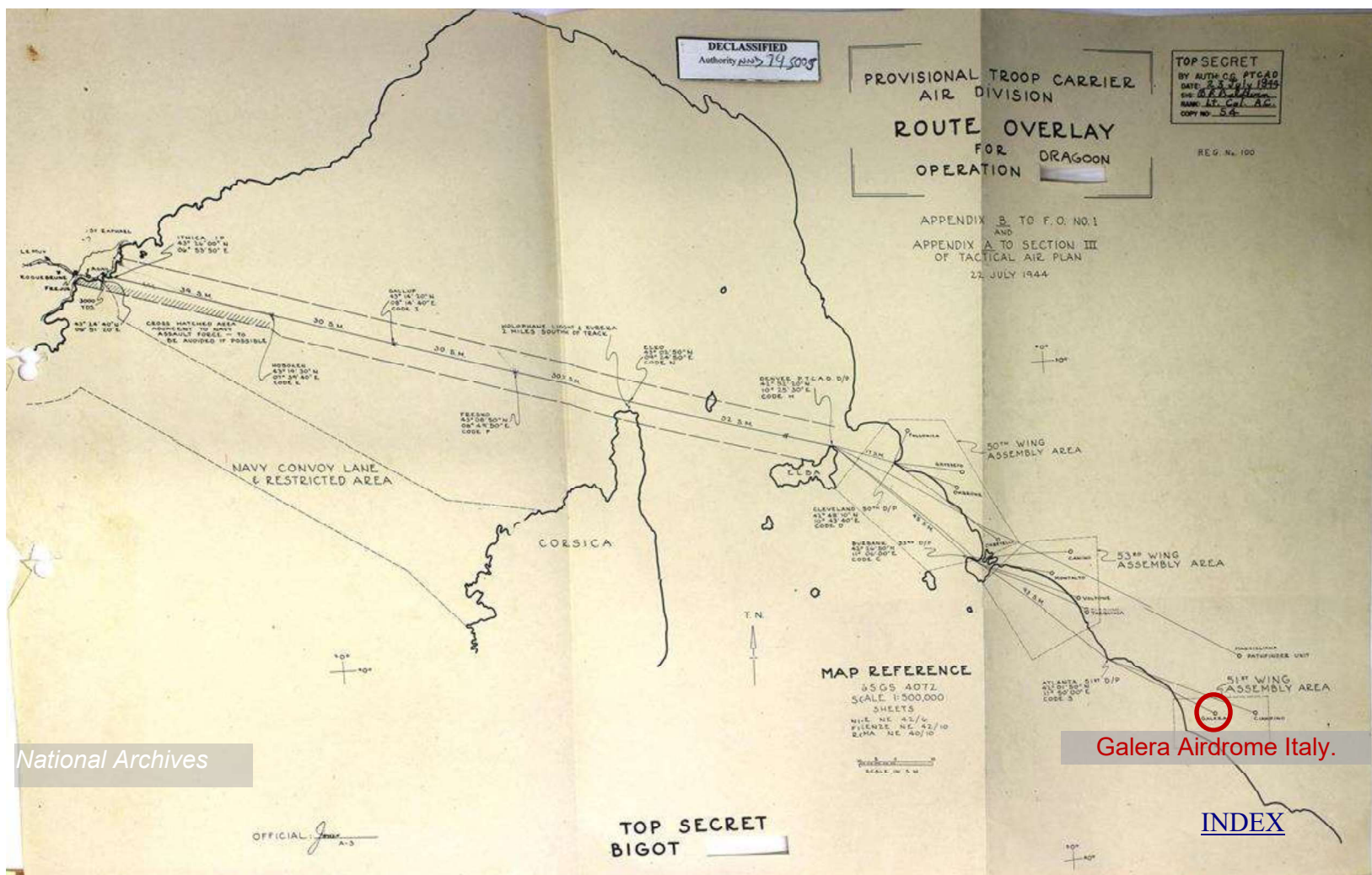


next to his artwork adorned on the left side of glider No. 42-79160 he nicknamed “Blondie”. With a hole drilled through it, and dangling with his dog tags, that quarter is one of very few things Roger brought home from Europe. On the morning of August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1944 Roger awoke to the sights and sounds of C-47’s returning from Southern France. Aircraft returned from mission code named Albatross, a Paratrooper drop. Roger, his squadron mates, and others members of the 62nd TC Group made final preparations for the glider operation. Their Serial, number 22, was made

gliders (born down with personnel and heavy cumbersome equipment) took off in elements of two (2) at twenty (20) second intervals. The serial was formed as it passed back over Galera Airbase on course at 1620 hours. Its formation was a pair of pairs echeloned to the right, with gliders in trail, and with 1000 feet between elements. Major Jones, the Group Executive, with Col. Edris as his copilot and Capt. Omart of the 8<sup>th</sup> Squadron as his Navigator, led the formation. ... The route flown was identical with that of this morning’s paratrooper mission, and the LZ was the field where the paratroopers had dropped LZ O. The altitude enroute to the I/P was two thousand feet MSL. After crossing this point it varied from one to two thousand feet MSL.

One (1) glider was seen in the water at Gallup about 100 yards from the ship. All checkpoints were clearly visible. The haze, battle smoke and scattered clouds at 1000 feet cut down visibility after crossing the I/P. The LZ was clear of the smoke and haze, and the red “T” (see aerial photo) and the green smoke were clearly visible on the LZ.

**62<sup>nd</sup> Troop Carrier Group Narrative for DOVE:** Beginning at 1545 hours on August 15th, forty-eight (48) of this Group’s (all of which were assigned to its 4 squadrons) C-47s and forty-eight (48) of its CG-4A gliders, being Serial number 22 in the PTCAD lineup, began their takeoffs from Galera airbase. Aircraft and



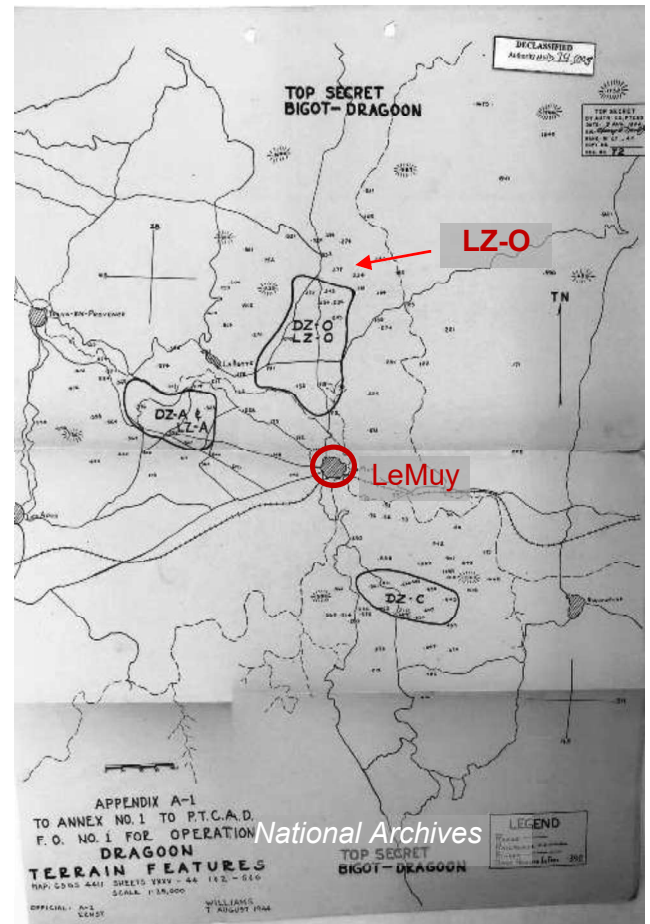
All gliders cut loose over the LZ at altitudes of 1000 to 2000 feet on a heading of 282 degrees between 1854 hours and 1900 hours. The tow planes dropped their ropes in the field W. of the LZ. The LZ did seem crowded, but our crews felt our gliders landed without excessive difficulty.[]

up of 48 tow ships towing 48 gliders. Roger was in glider number 32 and it was loaded with engineering equipment from the 887th Airborne Aviation Engineer Co. This was the next to last serial scheduled serial to begin departure at 15:45 hours and to reach a very crowded landing zone at 18:58 hours.

The departure went smoothly and Roger was even able to snap a few pictures with the camera he had tucked away with his issued gear. The three-hour transit went quickly and was over the LZ at almost exactly the scheduled release time (18:59 hours) Roger's tow ship signaled for release at 1000' above the ground. Roger said: *"I can remember after I cut loose, while searching for a landing spot, off to my left and down a bit on the ground, I see a glider with one wing down and his wing caught and he cartwheeled."*

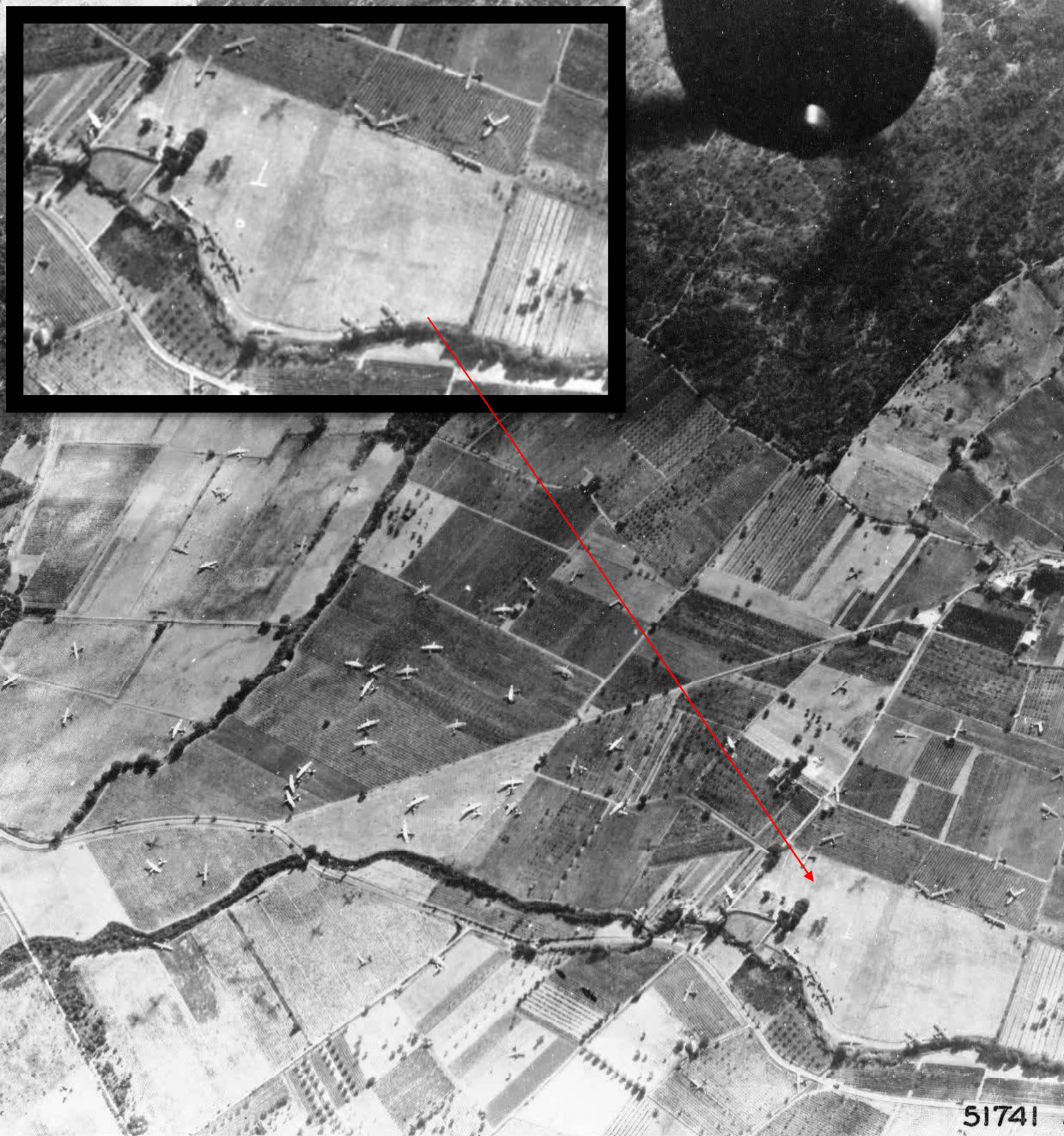
Despite the shock of that moment, Roger made a successful landing. They touched down in a vineyard and came to rest in a dirt field. He eliminated two Rommel's Asparagus emplacements with his left wing and he said *"It made a hell of a noise when you hit those"*. The water purification unit, one airborne trooper, and the rest of the cargo area that was *"so full you couldn't crawl back there"* made it to the intended LZ fully intact, thanks to the skills of Roger Smith, and Erling Severson.

Once on the ground and sure of no enemy engagements, Roger snapped a photo of



Zane Graves stands by Rommel's asparagus, in LZ-O, intended to destroy the gliders as they landed. Under the Service Travail Obligatoire (STO) were young and old French citizens who could not work in Germany as forced laborers were made to put up the poles. When the Germans were not looking they set the poles only two feet into the ground. Gary H. Graves collection

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Caption: "These Gliders, towed by Douglas [C-47s] of the Troop Carrier [Groups] of the Twelfth Air Force, landed in this field in Southern France, and the airborne troops dug in to take over enemy positions from the retreating Hun". --National Archives photo. [Editor's Note: The picture in the upper left shows the T and O identifying Landing Zone O. This was identified by Research Team member Jean Michael Soldi who lives in and studies Southern France. He also pointed out that because the LZ was so small compared to the number of gliders that the pathfinders who set up the O and T signal moved their gliders out of the way. You can see them lined up along a hedge just below the O. A similar photo was taken by Roger two weeks later flying copilot in a C-47 but the T and O was no longer visible but the gliders still lined the [hedge](#). No gliders were retrieved from Southern France.]



Roger Smith, Erling Severson, Chalk 32 of the 8th Troop Carrier Squadron, 62nd Troop Carrier Group, 51st Troop Carrier Wing, 12th Troop Carrier Command. Photo taken D+1 Aug 16. Roger Smith Collection.

“Blondie”. But he was so excited that he double exposed it. He snapped a roll of film on the mission including another picture of “Blondie” after it was unloaded the next day. He also took pictures of other gliders on the ground. Some fully intact and some quite the opposite. Until evacuation they dug foxholes, guarded POW’s and then made the four hour [hike back to the beach to St. Raphael](#) where within four days they were evacuated to Corsica. Roger was able to hook up with his training buddy Flight Officer Virgil Sorenson, 7<sup>th</sup> TCS, for the rest of the mission.



Aug. 15, 1944  
Sorenson & his home.  
Good old Foxhole

Aug. 15, 1944 Sorenson & his home. Good old Foxhole. Roger Smith Collection.

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**62<sup>nd</sup> Troop Carrier Group  
Narrative for DOVE cont:**

On August 19 glider pilots from the 62nd Group began to return. GPs who had landed in Southern France on D-Day were [evacuated by boat to St. Catherine](#) A/D in Corsica. From there to Ciampino and then Galera Airdromes. Preliminary survey indicates there were eight casualties. [1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Joseph Andrews in Chalk #28, 4<sup>th</sup> TC Squadron, was killed.]



On the Riviera: Glider pilots waiting for a boat to Corsica then a C-47 back to their home base in Italy. *Hans den Brok Collection.*

Four months after the War ended in the ETO and four weeks after the Japanese surrender, Roger boarded a Navy coal collier in Livorno, Italy, on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1945, and stepped back onto American soil 14 days later. Roger stayed in the service and had an extensive military career beyond Europe, but September 19<sup>th</sup>, 1945 was the last time anything went into his flight record.

I've had the distinct pleasure to share a number of Roger's pictures with the families of glider pilots. It's my honor to share these memories with the families and it makes Roger happy every time I tell him who I've been in contact with. When the research team asked me to write this article I didn't think twice. In my son's lifetime the last World War II veteran will likely be gone. With them, the remaining heart and soul of this country's greatest generation. I refuse to let those remaining go without honoring their sacrifice and making sure they know that it's appreciated with all my being. I promise to continue the legacy that these brave men and women deserve and one day I'll share stories with my son about the greatest neighbor anyone could ever ask for.

As for Roger, he's doing fine. He will turn 98 in July and I keep telling him when he turns 100 were going to have a major party. He walks his best friend Fritz every day and shoots skeet 2-3 times a week. When it snows, he has my sidewalk shoveled before my first cup of coffee. He still checks in on my projects but mostly it's just to greet a good friend. He's a humble man and I've come to the conclusion that that reason alone is why he didn't want his story documented by the Collings Foundation. But not to worry, I'm here to tell his story for him. I have never met a better model of a man than Roger William Smith. His work ethic, his integrity, his love of family and country is unparalleled. I thank God every day for making my journey in this life cross paths with Roger.

I was recently asked by the research team if I could get Roger to the next Glider Pilot Reunion. I promised them if there's anyway it's possible, we will be there. When that happens, please say hello and let me introduce you to one of my best friends, and MOS 1026 Glider Pilot, Roger William Smith. ■

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