

A Unique Glider Tow – Parachute Exercise in Sicily

By Colonel Mark C. “Plug” Vlahos, USAF-Ret
Leon B. Spencer Research Team

As the U.S. Army airborne and glider missions continued to evolve in 1943, several exercises took place at in the Pope, Camp MacKall, Laurinburg-Maxton (L-M), Lumberton area of North Carolina. On October 29th, 1943, the 436th Troop Carrier Group (TCG) would be tasked with a mission from the 82nd Airborne. A C-47 and two gliders would be loaded with a small number of 82nd Airborne Division troopers. The C-47 would tow the two CG-4A gliders (double tow) and after a short time in the air, the C-47 pilot and two glider pilots, simultaneously, would give a jump signal to the jumpmaster and the paratroopers would jump from all three planes at the same time in the vicinity of the air field. There is a great writeup and even film footage of this event on our organization's website at: <https://ww2gp.org/training/gliderParatroopDrop.php>

While the C-47 proved it had enough power from its two Pratt & Whitney R-1830 Twin Wasp Engines to perform a double glider tow with paratroops and both gliders and the aircraft itself, the reality was the aircraft's range would be greatly reduced, making it not practical to fly a combat mission in this configuration. Also, these exercises proved that jumping from a CG-4A was just not practical. [note: The R-1830 Twin Wasp was selected as the powerplant for both the four-engine B-24 liberator heavy bomber and the

twin-engine C-47 Skytrain. The production run of 173,618 R-1830 engines make it the most-produced engine in aviation history.^{1]}

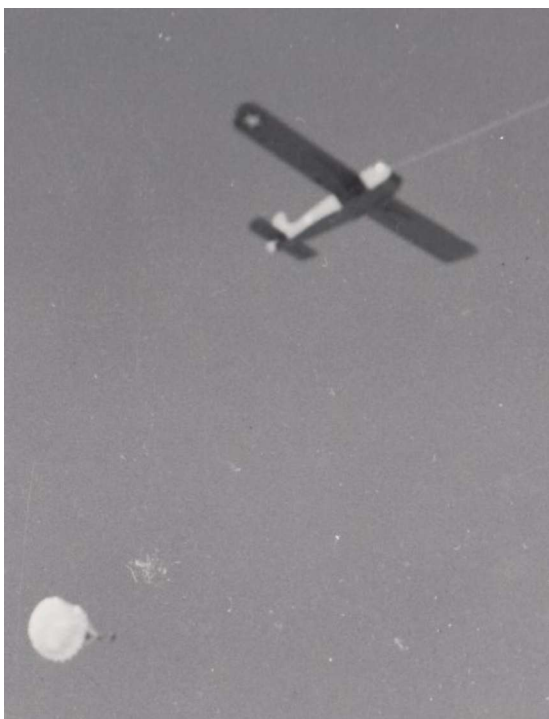
As I continue to focus my research efforts on Troop Carrier and Glider Operations in the Mediterranean and Balkan Theaters of Operation, I was surprised when I came across the events of October 25, 1943, (just a few days prior to the exercise at L-M) at Ponte Olivo Aerodrome in Sicily – a unique C-47 paratroop drop and glider tow exercise involving twenty-six C-47 aircraft, the same number of CG-4A gliders from units in the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing (TCW), and paratroops and glider troops from the 456 Field Artillery Battalion, 82nd Airborne Division. I found the description of this exercise in the History of the 51st Troop Carrier Wing. Even more amazing, I found a series of photographs (which Patricia shared with me awhile back) that perfectly match the dates and events of this exercise! The process of research, discovery and putting these materials together is what makes work as a historian interesting. This was just one day in the life of troop carrier and glider crews overseas in WWII.

While newer parachute infantry regiments (PIR) of the famed 82nd Airborne were being formed and exercising back home at L-M, the

509th PIR was the first unit of the 82nd Airborne to deploy to Europe for Operation Torch – the invasion of North Africa, followed by the 504th and 505th PIR, of the 82nd Airborne for Operation Husky – the invasion of Sicily. During operation Husky, the 52nd TCW dropped both the 504th and 505th PIR into Sicily on the nights of July 9th and 10th 1943. Up to this point, only the 51st TCW had glider tug practice and combat glider missions under their belt. The purpose of this mission was to initiate a 2-month long, extensive glider-tow training program for the groups of the newer 52nd TCW now based in Sicily. All troop carrier groups in both the 51st and 52nd had left North Africa and were based in Sicily the first week of September 1943. What makes this exercise even more amazing is that just one month prior, on the nights of September 13th and 14th, both of these combat - tested troop carrier wings very successfully

dropped thousands of paratroopers behind the beaches of Anzio as part of Operation Avalanche – the invasion of Italy. [note: these missions codenamed Giant I and Giant II also saw the first combat use of pathfinders – another major evolution in the continuing development of the Airborne Troop Carrier and Glider missions.]

On the morning of October 25th, the empty C-47s and gliders arrived at Comiso Aerodrome, where the 64th TCG was based. Here they were loaded and marshalled to begin the exercise. At 1:00 pm all units were ready. Immediately after take-off, 8 of the gliders dropped their tactical landing gears by parachute because of the special purposes of this demonstration ². The gears were dropped so the gliders could make a skid landing. Check out this amazing sequence of photographs from the exercise.

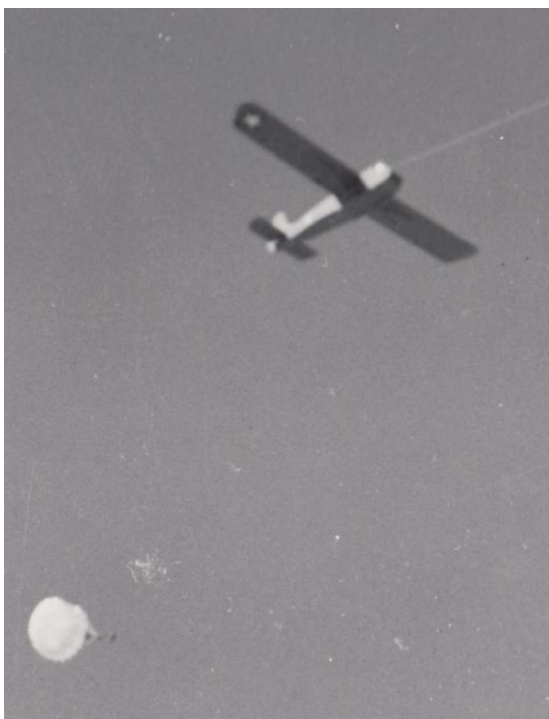


Caption: The landing gear, dropped by a glider participating in the 52nd troop Carrier Wing Maneuvers in 1943, [the gear] landed on Comiso Air Field Sicily. Both the gear and the parachute are in good condition.
Photo Source: U.S. National Archives, courtesy of the NWWIIGPA research team.

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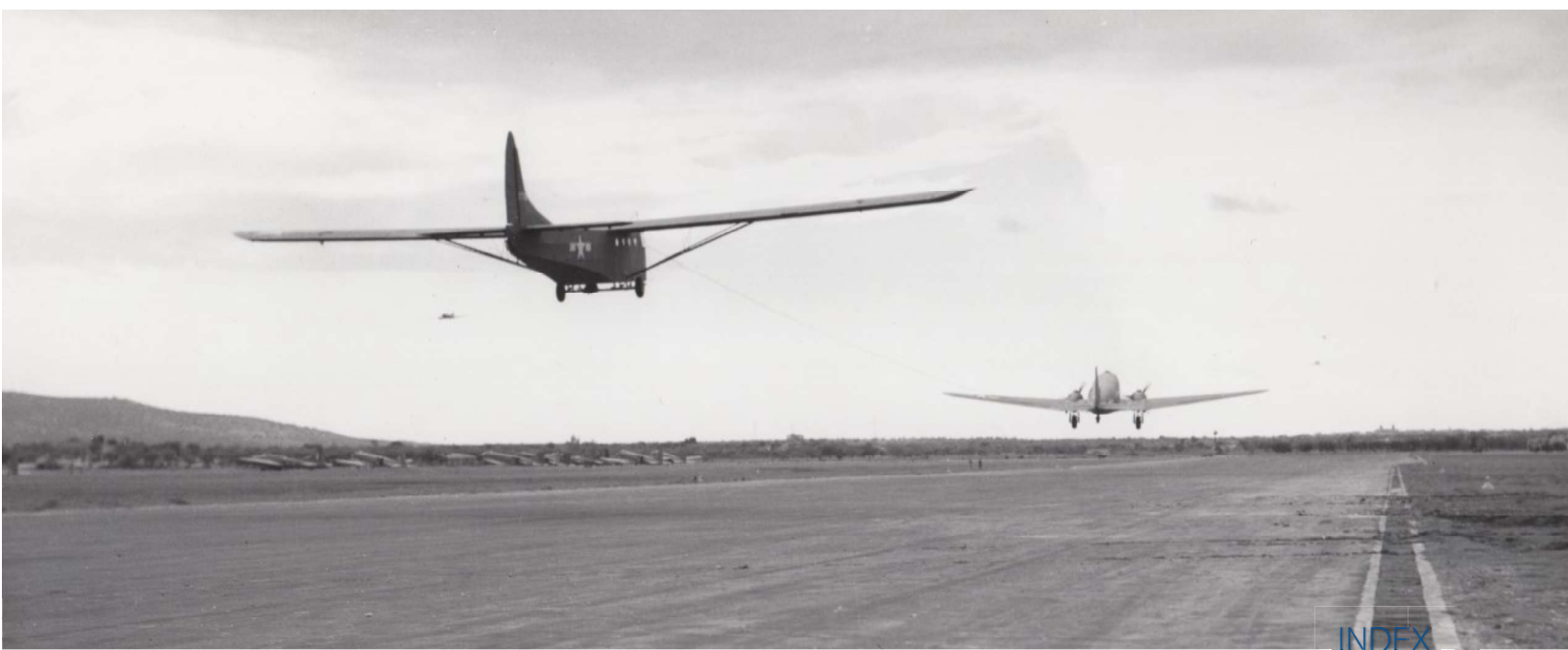
Caption: *Douglas C-47 tow planes with their WACO CG-4A gliders attached prepare to take off from an airfield at Comiso, Sicily, 125 October 1943. They participated in the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing maneuvers over Sicily.*
 Photo Source: U.S. National Archives,





Caption: A glider, towed by a Douglas C-47 is airborne over the runway at Comiso Airfield, Sicily, 1943. During the maneuvers of the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing the glider will be released of Ponte Olivo Airfield, and the paratroopers in the tow plane will jump. Oct 1943.

Photo Source: U.S. National Archives, courtesy of the NWWIIGPA research team.





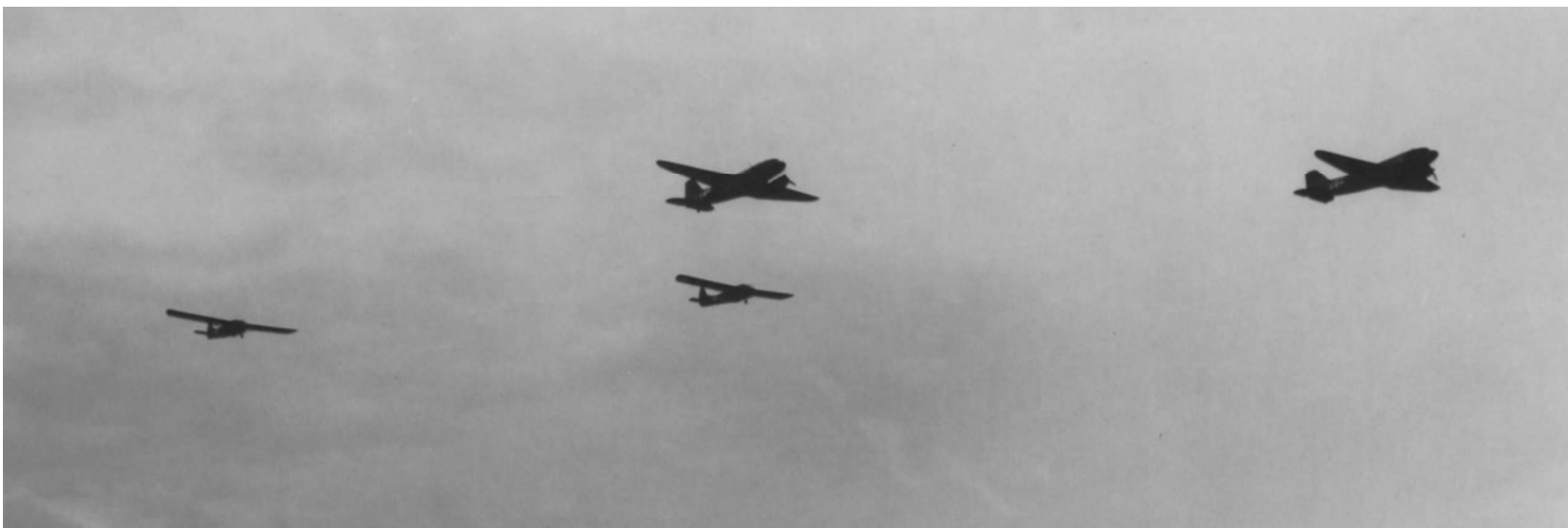
Over the engine of a C-47 in formation you can see another C-47 taking off with a glider in tow. This is Cosmiso Air Field.

Photo Source: U.S. National Archives, courtesy of the NWWIIGPA research team.



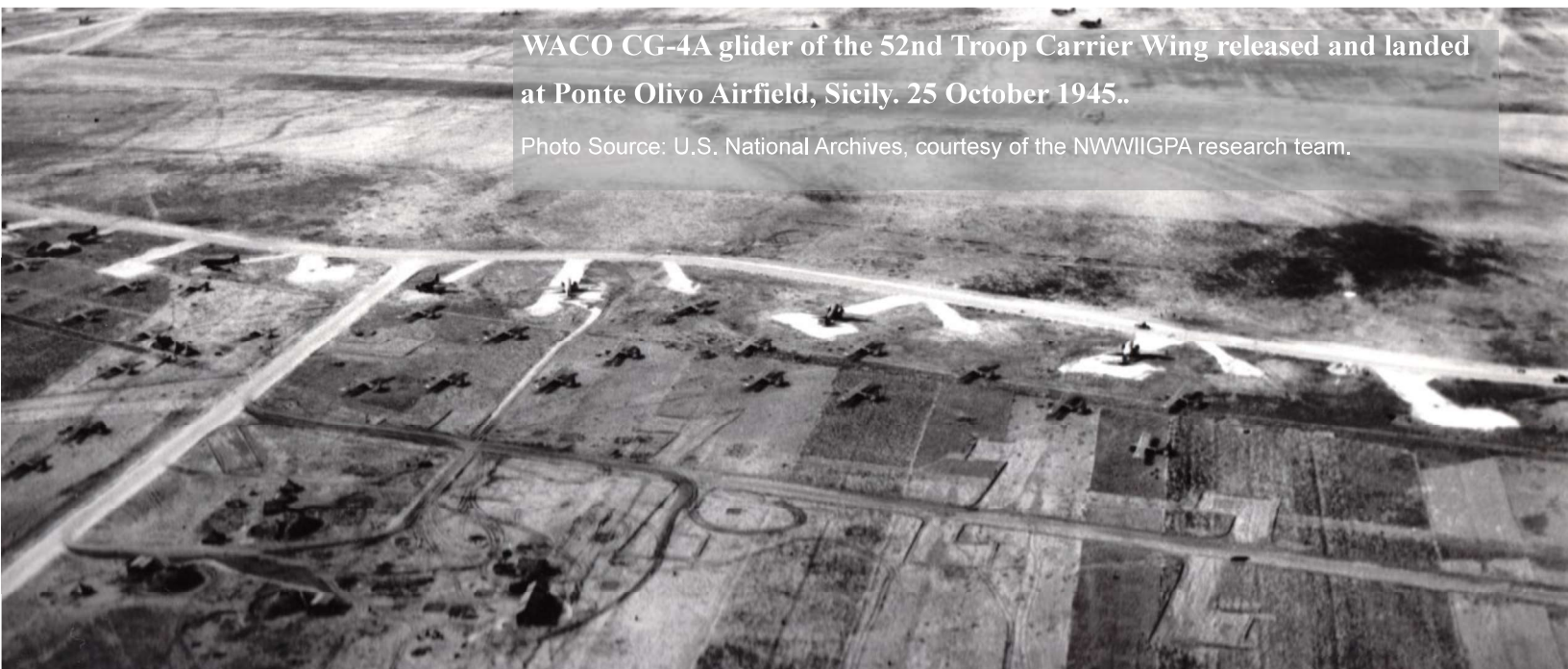
Caption: Waco CG-4A gliders towed by Douglas C-74's of the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing, in flight over Sicily after taking off from airfield at Comiso, Sicily, during their maneuvers. 25 Oct 1943.

Photo Source: U.S. National Archives, courtesy of the NWWIIGPA research team.



WACO CG-4A glider of the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing released and landed at Ponte Olivo Airfield, Sicily. 25 October 1945..

Photo Source: U.S. National Archives, courtesy of the NWWIIGPA research team.



The C-47s formed up in elements of 2, with approximately one-minute interval spacing between elements. The formation lead aircraft arrived at Ponte Olivo about 2:30 pm, making their approach from the south. The first 18 gliders were released about ½ mile to the east of the aerodrome and made landings on training landing gear at the south end of the aerodrome to the east side of the runway. After release of their gliders, the 18 tug aircraft continued their flight for approximately ½ mile, first dropping their tow ropes then dropping their loads of paratroopers a half mile to the north of the airdrome. The remaining 8 aircraft approached the release

zone over the same route releasing their wheelless gliders southeast of the aerodrome where they landed in a small, cultivated field adjacent to the aerodrome. These 8 gliders made use of parachute arresters in a proficient manner which enabled them to come to a complete stop within 100 to 200 feet after first contacting the ground. Then the 8 tug airplanes dropped their tow ropes and paratroopers at the same points where the first 9, 2-ship elements made their drops. All the gliders' landings were successful having been to designated areas without mishap to personnel or combat equipment.



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One of the gliders landing in a field adjacent to the aerodrome had its skid damaged when it passed over a ditch some 5 feet in width. All equipment was unloaded rapidly and correctly.

This exercise demonstrated the feasibility of combined glider-paratroop operations using airplanes both as troop carriers and tow ships. It further demonstrated the possibility of initiating glider operations at a point away from the home base of airplanes and gliders since it showed that they can be moved to a strange field, loaded, marshalled, and taken

off to begin an operation in a period of hours. The exercise was very successful, exactly the kind of realistic training needed to build confidence among tug and glider crews. On hand to observe this key exercise testing glider airborne capability was Major General George S. Patton, Commanding General, 7th U.S. Army and Brigadier General Paul L. Williams Commander Northwest African Air Forces Troop Carrier Command (Provisional). After the exercise, General Patton drafted a Commendation Memorandum to General Williams, who in turn forwarded a copy to every glider pilot that flew the exercise.

HEADQUARTERS SEVENTH ARMY
A. P. O. #758, U. S. ARMY

27 October 1943.

*F/R. Manner
Flg. good job!*
*Paul L. Williams
Brig Gen USA*
SUBJECT: Commendation.

TO : Brigadier General Paul L. Williams, Troop Carrier Command.

The demonstration at Ponte Olivio and Comiso Airfields, as executed by your command on 25 October 1943, of loading, dropping by parachute, and landing, was the best that it has been my privilege to witness. The towing and landing of the gliders, the dropping by parachute of the personnel of the 82d Airborne Division, the assembling and putting into action of heavy equipment, was executed with a dispatch and proficiency evidencing a high state of planning, discipline and training.

I wish to commend you and all personnel connected with this demonstration for their outstanding performance.

G. S. Patton Jr.
G. S. PATTON, JR.,
Lieutenant General, U. S. Army,
Commanding.

A few of the glider pilots that flew this day were veterans of the British Ladbroke Mission as well. While a complete listing of the glider pilots who flew this exercise does not exist they were from multiple troop carrier squadrons. One glider pilot who was there and who is with us today was Fred H. LUNDE from the the 49th Troop Carrier Squadron, 313th Troop Carrier Group. Fred contacted me with the following information about the exercise:



Glider Pilot Research Team Adviser,
FRED H. LUNDE, 101
49th Troop Carrier Squadron

My recollection was that five groups of the 49th were given detached service with the 82nd Airborne under General James Gavin. We were told the 82nd wanted to know first hand what the gliders were capable of. How they operated in small

places etc.

While there I asked general Gavin if we could make a parachute jump with his unit. At that time he said yes but later said no. He couldn't take on that responsibility.

At the end of our detached service we were to fly at dusk. Pathfinders would be dropped setting up a landing area (LZ) for the gliders. We were told that we must see the lights red and green and release pronto or the C47 pilot would release the tow rope. Paratroopers were being dropped on the (DZ) a mile away. I was the lead glider pilot with Benbow copilot. I wasn't aware of the massive-ness we were going to witness. To top it off I was slightly color blind red and green so tilting my left wing enough to allow Glider Pilot George M BENBOW to help see the lights. We both saw them in time to release, making my base leg long enough to get down into the wind parking where I was supposed to, getting out watching this massive landing of gliders. Our gliders were empty but the ones following had loads. Some flew onto the hillside beyond the landing area. Some crashed into one another. I never heard of injuries. As mentioned by Mark earlier General Patton was a witness and gave us a letter of commendation.

[Note: Both Lunde and Benbow received the Air Medal for the Holland Operation. They were the first glider pilots in the history of the war to hold a defensive position with the 82nd Airborne. Their fighting wasn't over when their evacuation convoy was attacked by the enemy. See: [My 9 Days in Combat](#).

Finally, and importantly, the transfer of glider pilots and mechanics was accomplished in October 1943 to equalize the glider personnel between the 51st and 52nd TCWs. Veteran

glider pilots from North Africa officers. In and Sicily were distributed among troop carrier groups of both wings to serve as glider operation February of 1944, the entire 52nd TCW, with all its groups would transfer to England as part of the D-day buildup. The 51st TCW, with the 60th, 62nd, and 64th TCGs would remain in Italy for the rest of the war and support all combat operations in Italy and the secret war in the Balkans.



Generals George S. Patton and Paul L. Williams chat with C-47 crewmembers and glider pilots prior to takeoff at Comiso Aerodrome, Sicily
(Photo Courtesy of National Archives)

1. Manufacturer's product page, R-1830, November 11, 2013.
2. History of the 51st Troop Carrier Wing and Components 1 Jun 1943 to 28 Feb 1945, p. 144. U.S. National Archives.

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80th Anniversary of the invasion of Burma is nearing, March 6, 1944. The invasion was launched from Lalaghat, India. Caption: *Glider pilots of the 1st Air Commando Force pose in front of camouflaged gliders at Lalaghat, India.* —Courtesy U.S. National Archives.

COVER PHOTO: - Glider pilots of the 302nd Troop Carrier Squadron, 441st TC Group, just before take off to Holland for the Market mission. Austiin Lee Perkins collection

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