

A RACE AGAINST TIME:
ASSEMBLING AND EMPLOYING 500 CG-4A "WACO" GLIDERS IN NORTH AFRICA
AS PREPARATION FOR OPERATION HUSKY—THE INVASION OF SICILY

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Under G.O. No. 23, Headquarters Northwest African Air Forces (NAAF) dated 20 March 1943 the NAAF Troop Carrier Command (Provisional) was activated on 21 March 1943 under the command of Brigadier General Paul L. Williams.¹ The standup of a provisional Troop Carrier Command (TCC) was necessary to oversee the now two complete Troop Carrier Wings operating in North Africa and to plan their role in Operation HUSKY - the invasion of Sicily. The 51st Troop Carrier Wing (TCW), comprised of the 60th, 62nd, 64th Troop Carrier Groups (TCG) under the command of Brigadier General Ray A. Dunn was operating in North Africa since November, 1942. Reinforcing the 51st TCW for Operation HUSKY was RAF 38 Wing, under Wing Commander Barton and two squadrons of the 315th TCG (the other two were in England). The newly formed 52nd TCW, comprised of the 61st, 313th, 314th, and 316th TCGs under the command of Colonel Harold L. Clark had just arrived from the States. Note: the 316th TCG actually deployed in December 1942 to Egypt, but was attached to the 52nd TCW for Operation HUSKY.

The idea and approval for Operation HUSKY, the code name later given for the

invasion of Sicily, was decided at the Casablanca Conference in January of 1943. By late April, preliminary invasion plans called for the use of paratroops in both American and British operations prior to amphibious landings of ground forces. The final allocation of airborne forces saw the American 82nd Airborne Division assigned to support General George S. Patton's sector and the British 1st Airborne Division assigned to support the British Commander, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery. In preparation for Operation HUSKY, the NAAFTCC (Provisional) then directed a heavy training program to be undertaken between all C-47 and Airborne units from 1 April 1943 until 30 June 1943. Toward the later part of the period, a series of combined training exercises was carried out between the 51st TCW and the British 1st Airborne Division and between the 52nd TCW and the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division. In May 1943, orders were issued for the first time in the history of the USAAF requiring the tactical employment of gliders.² Specifically, glider employment between British Airborne and American Troop Carrier units was directed to the 51st TCW.

As part of the Operation HUSKY buildup, the first U.S. glider pilots began arriving in

North Africa in March 1943. By May 1st, there were 105 American glider pilots, 50 glider mechanics, but only four (4) CG-4A “Waco” gliders in North Africa. These four had been ferried by 60th (1 glider), 62nd TCG (1 glider) and 64th TCG (2 gliders) C-47s a distance of 3,800 miles from Accra, Gold Coast Colony (now the capital of Ghana) to airfields in Algeria. The route flown was: Accra, Roberts, Dakar, Atar, Tindouf then to the assigned fields of the Groups.³ The task to assemble and ferry the first four American “Waco” gliders from Accra to Relizane was given to 60th TCG glider pilots 1st Lt. Bennett Y. Allen, 2nd Lt. Irvin C. Kinney, Jr., F/O Russell D. Parks and F/O Jerry S. Sonken, glider mechanics, and Engineering

Officer Capt. George F. Brinkman from the 10th TCS. [Author’s note: the story of the journey of these first four gliders is worth an article in itself! Look for details in my next book.] At this time, the 60th TCG along with part of the 1st British Airborne Division and British Glider Pilots from the 1st Airlanding Brigade were stationed at Relizane and Thiersville, Algeria.

Soon more gliders, packed in crates, glider pilots and mechanics began arriving at five aerodromes in North Africa. The assembly of a large number of gliders was the first challenge NAAFTCC (Provisional) had to overcome. The first four gliders that arrived in Accra had sat outside for five months, had



American Glider Pilots in front of a CG-4A “Waco” Glider #247 at Relizane, Algeria; #247 was the first glider to land in North Africa (Photo Courtesy of F/O Don Fritz Collection)



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Crane lifting crates with glider parts. This photograph is probably taken at Greenham Common where many of the gliders for the ETO air lifts occurred. It does show how the crates were moved from ships or trains. (Photo Courtesy of National Archives, USAAF photograph)

not been ventilated, and water had gotten into the crates. Metal fittings and flight controls had rusted, gluing became loose, and fabric deteriorated. The repair and assembly work required (basically a total rebuild of the glider parts) took the glider pilots and mechanics who arrived with the four tow planes a month to complete.⁴ If the remainder of the 500 gliders arrived in the same condition, NAAFTCC (Provisional) would have faced an impossible task. Thankfully this did not happen. On April 22, 1943, at 11:55 a.m., the first CG-4A glider #247 from Accra, piloted by F/O Jerry S. Sonken landed at Relizane.⁵ That same day Capt. John E. Lyons of the 7th TCS, 62nd TCG landed at Nouvion towing one CG-4A glider. The other two C-47s from the 64th TCG encountered difficulty after taking off from Atar and were delayed reaching their airbase.⁶ Shouts of joy erupted from the U.S. glider pilots as this was the first CG-4A they had seen since flight training back in the States.

While the gliders were being assembled at Accra, the next and much larger shipment of gliders arrived at North African ports now under Allied control. These gliders had only been crated a short time and were in much better condition. However, the challenge now for NAAFTCC (Provisional) was that glider crates arrived at six different ports. The crates were then shipped via rail or truck to three major Air Depots, run by NAAF Service Command. The Air Depots were already maxed out and did not have enough qualified people to assemble the large shipment of gliders.

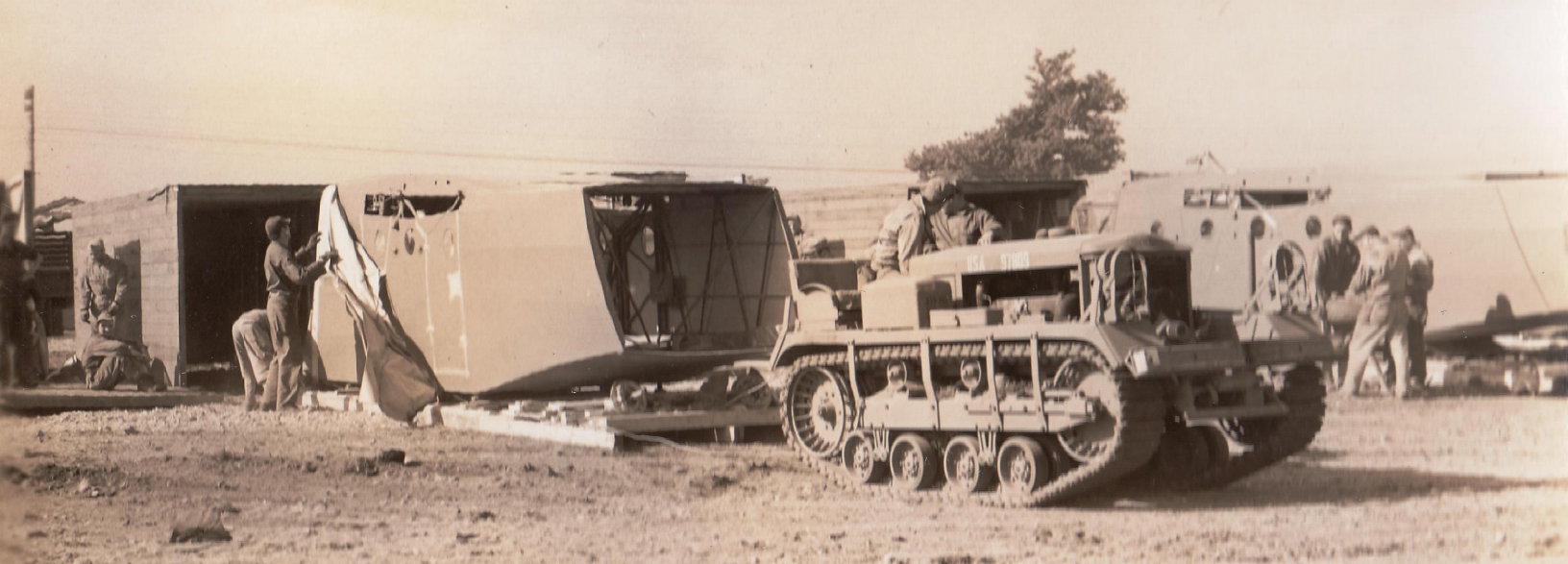
Two glider pilots, 2nd Lt. Charles E. Knoblauch II, 314th TCG (52nd TCW) and F/O Jerry S. Sonken, 60th TCG (51st TCW) were then assigned to the NAAFTCC/A-3

All boxes needed to match serial numbers. Note this the front box serial number is 43-12107. (Photo Courtesy of National Archives, USAF Photograph)

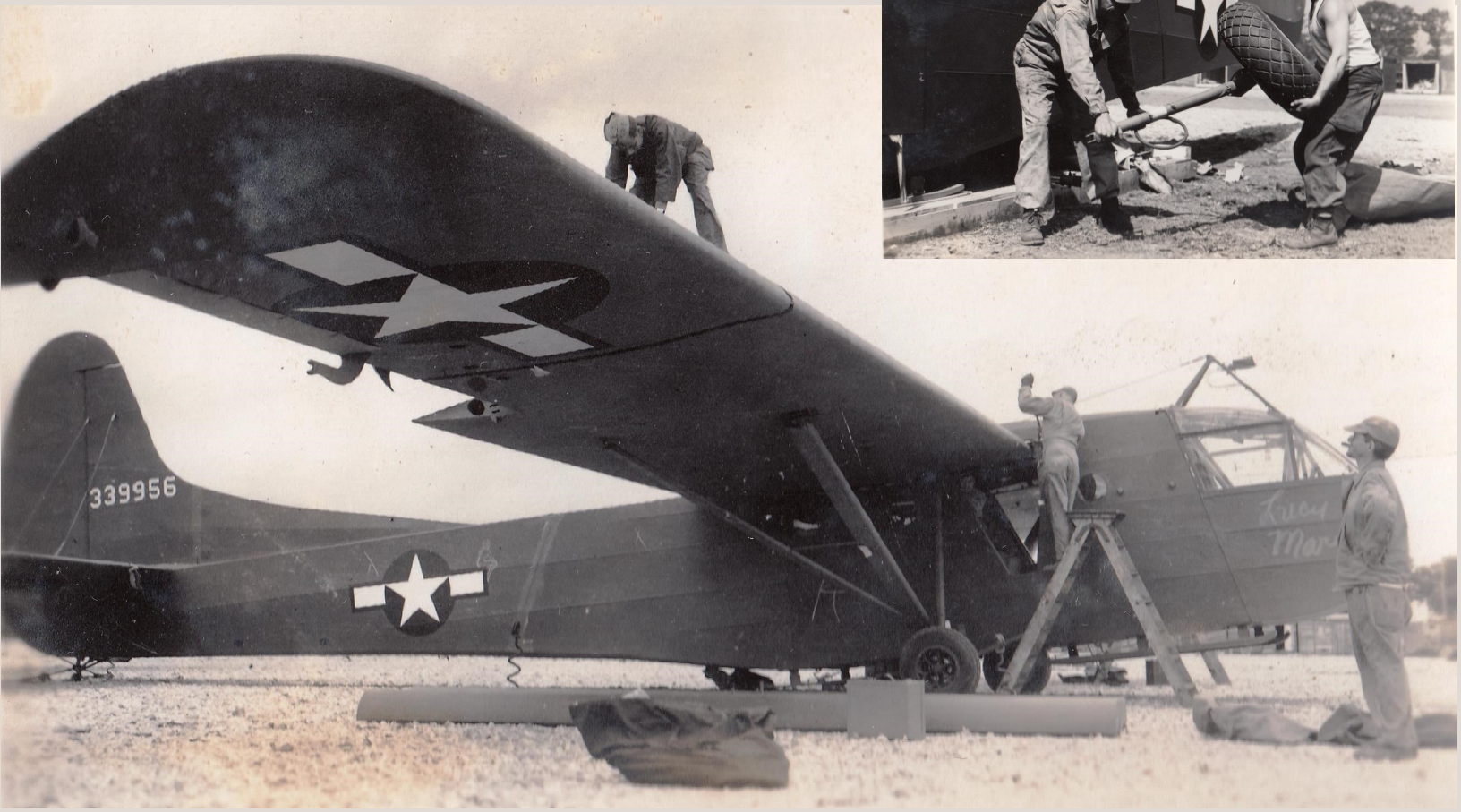


Section as Glider Operations Officers.⁷ These two men had the very important job of tracking assembly status, scheduling pickup and distribution of all gliders in North Africa. Additionally, they were responsible for the maintenance status of all gliders assigned by Group and solving parts and supply issues related to keeping gliders airworthy. The importance of their work cannot be underestimated. While these two men may not have flown as many combat missions as other glider pilots with their date of rank, the work they did in North Africa laid the foundation for the success of all glider operations in the European and Mediterranean Theaters of Operation in World War II. The three major Air

Depots for glider assembly were located at Casablanca, French Morocco, La Senia Airfield, Algeria and Maison Blanche Airfield, Algeria. Each glider required five different crates for packing and shipping, thus by June 1943, 500 gliders arrived in North Africa in 2,500 crates not without logistic problems. Except for the Ford Company, all the other gliders were each individually made and the part in each crate needed to match with its partner crate by serial number. The largest of the five crates were 24 feet long, 8 feet tall and 8 feet wide. Dock workers in the States loaded ships without regard for keeping the five crates



Glider Mechanics re-assembling gliders.
(Photo Courtesy of National Archives)



for each specific glider together. Their concern was loading the ship properly for weight and balance and facilitating a quick offload at the destination port. Obviously, this caused logistical problems finding each box with its matching serial number once the crates arrived in North Africa. To assist Service Command, Troop Carrier Command sent nearly every glider mechanic on detached service to assemble gliders. There was no standardization between assemblies at the three Air Depots assemble gliders. There was no standardization between assemblies at the three Air Depots; the one utilizing an assembly-line type process was able to produce 12 gliders a day.⁸ Inspectors had to sign off each assembly step by the mechanics and upon completion a glider was given another thorough inspection before a flight test. An untrained crew would be considered fully trained after completion of 2 or 3 gliders. It is documented that thirty (30) men could assemble a glider in a day for a total of 250 man hours. Tractors and cranes for handling the large crates and moving heavy sections into place were required.⁹

Finally, once a glider was assembled, it needed to be flight tested and then a C-47 was needed to ferry it downrange to Troop Carrier Groups in Algeria. Again there was a shortage of tow ropes and qualified ground crew trained to prepare and hook a glider up for take-off. Due to the late arrival and assembly of gliders in North Africa, ferrying had to be done at the same time airborne training was being conducted. A tow ship would circle the field at the assembly point as gliders had not been test flown. If the glider was not in perfect condition, the glider cut off to land, otherwise they would proceed on to their destination.

Even once assembled and deployed forward, equipment and qualified maintenance personnel shortages challenged glider operations. Many of the gliders did not have a complete tow rope and there was always a shortage of sister links and release plugs. Tension meters were not available and had to be shipped from the United States and England. Tools, wood working equipment, spare parts, fabric, and dope were not available. There were never enough vehicles for ground handling. The intercom systems between the glider and tow plane arrived in theater almost too late to be utilized on Operation HUSKY.

As planning for Operation HUSKY progressed, the first-ever large-scale Allied glider assault mission was built into the plan. With a code name of LADBROKE, the mission was tasked to the British First Airborne Division to execute. British planners quickly discerned that the probability of 6 pound anti-tank guns being landed in close proximity to the objective, at night by two separate gliders, and pulled by two separate tug aircraft was minimal. This was the major tactical limitation of the American "Waco" glider when compared to the British Airspeed "Horsa" glider. Lieutenant Colonel Chatterton, the commander of the British Glider Pilot Regiment (GPR) deemed the steep dive capability and the load carrying capacity of the "Horsa" essential for Sicily Coup de Main operations. However, in April 1943, the British had the same problem as the Americans: there were no "Horsa" gliders in North Africa. The nearest serviceable "Horsa" gliders were 1,350 miles away in England. Due to technical difficulty and lack of space, transferring "Horsa" gliders by sealift was not possible. Thus, in May 1943, the British initiated Operation BEGGAR, the dangerous and

long-range towing of “Horsa” gliders by Halifax bombers to North Africa. Just like the Americans, the British found themselves in a race against time. [Authors note: I highly recommend reading Mike Peters’ excellent book *Glider Pilots in Sicily* for an account of these dangerous missions.] By July 7, two days prior to Operation HUSKY commencing, the British had successfully ferried only 27 “Horsas” from England to North Africa.¹⁰

Due to the lack of available “Horsa” gliders and a July invasion date, the only option for the British was to fly American CG-4A “Hadrian” gliders (the name given to the CG-4A by the British). Not only was there a race against time to assemble and forward de-

ploy CG-4As, but British GPR pilots had to be trained to fly them as well. Complicating the challenge even more was the fact that the British GPR contained only pilots and was totally dependent on American units to furnish maintenance and ground handling operations. The majority of personnel were untrained and sufficient time was not available for training. There were not enough mechanics to assign a crew chief to each glider.

Flight training for British GPR pilots became the priority while combat training for American glider pilots suffered. It is known that 53 American glider pilots, mostly from the 60th, 62nd and 64th TCGs, provided flight training for the British.¹¹ A six-week, intensive flight



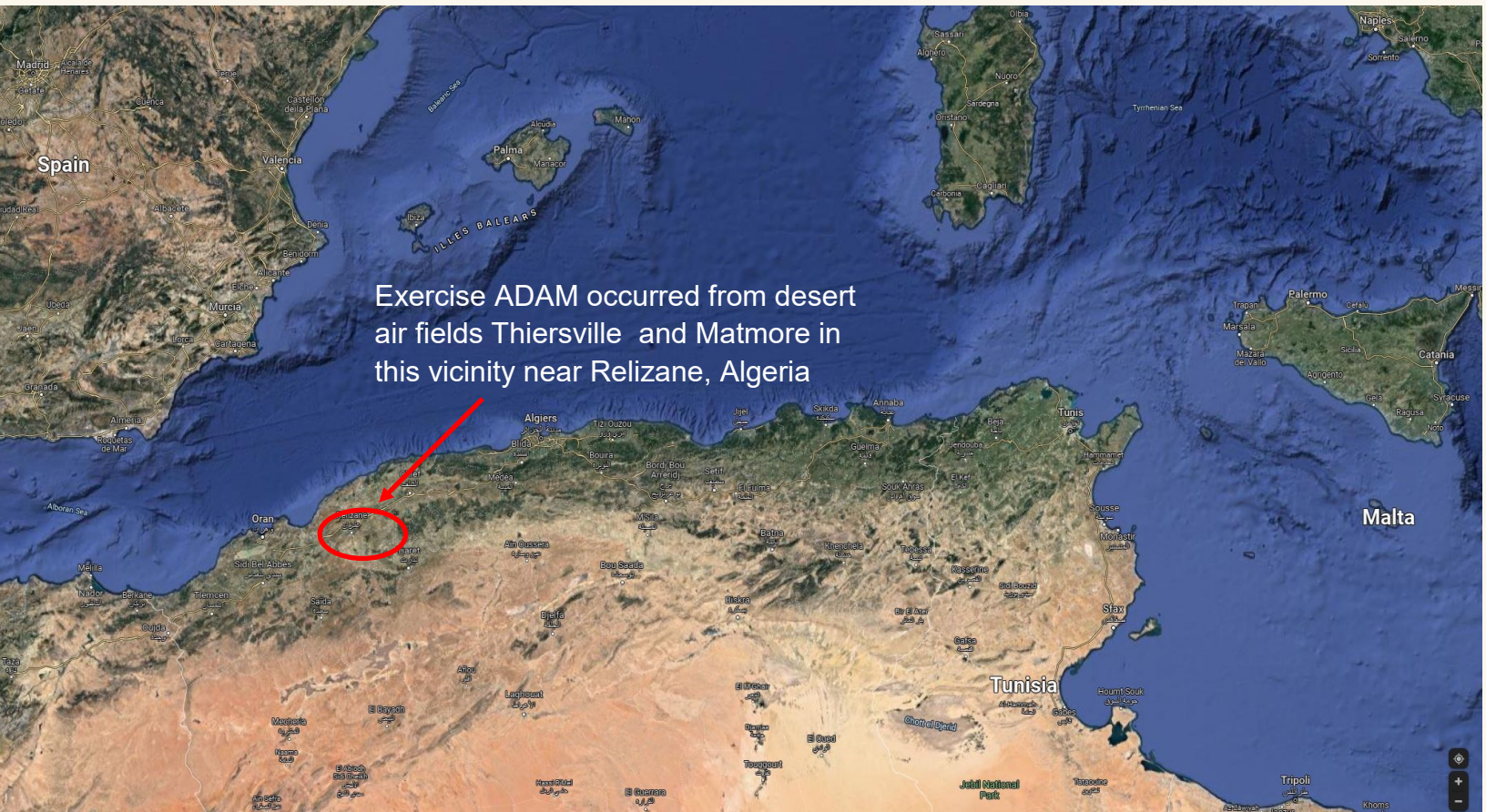
British soldiers of the 1st Airborne Division practice loading a jeep on an American CG-4A “Waco” glider prior to Operation LADBROKE
(Photo from authors’ collection)



training program for the British GPR, utilizing USAAF C-47 tug crews ended just two weeks prior to the invasion. These last two weeks were needed to forward deploy the American TCGs and British 1st Airborne Division to Tunisia and the departure bases for Operation HUSKY. Each British GPR pilot received an average of 4.5 hours of flying, 16 landings and 1.2 hours of night flying in the CG-4A.¹² Two large-scale tactical Missions were flown. On June 14, 1943, less than a month prior to D-Day, Exercise ADAM took place with 56 “Waco” gliders and C-47 tug crews involved. Exercise ADAM was launched from the strips at Thiersville and Matmore. On June 20, Exercise EVE took place with 72 “Waco” gliders and 632

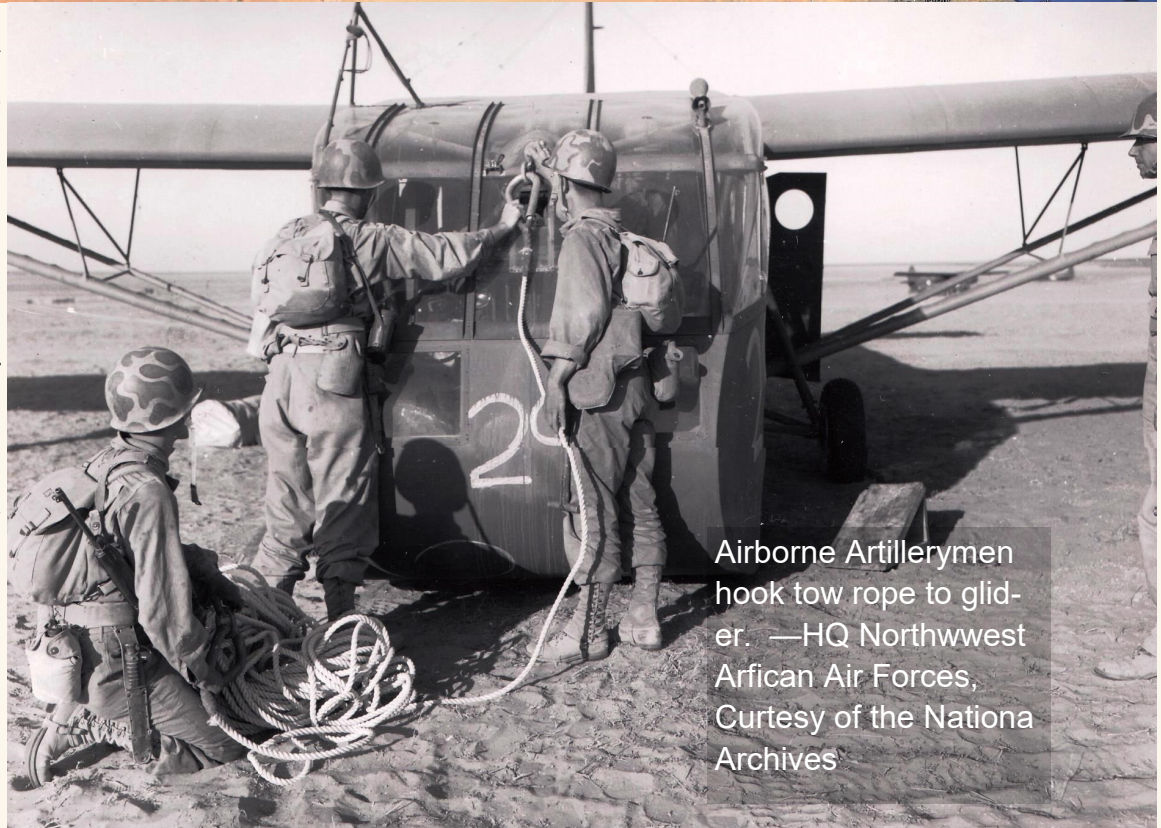
Officers and men of the British 1st Border Regiment. This time the American C-47s were augmented by Albemarle aircraft from 296 Squadron RAF.

By June 25, 1943 a total of 375 CG-4As were assembled and operationally deployed to American 51st TCW bases. This remarkable feat was completed in less than 60 days and just in time for Operation HUSKY. The 322nd and 329th Service Groups attached to NAAFTCC (Provisional) were extremely valuable during the preparation phase of operations. The service and support rendered proved conclusively that each Troop Carrier Wing should have a Services Group attached to it.¹³ On June 27, 1943 the final phase of



Exercise ADAM occurred from desert air fields Thiersville and Matmore in this vicinity near Relizane, Algeria

LADBROKE began – the forward deployment of the “Wacos,” “Horsas,” and the entire British 1st Airborne Division from Algeria to Tunisia. This was no small task for NAAFTCC; the trip would average 650 -750 miles and fully-loaded glider and tug combinations needed to climb above 9,000 feet to cross the 7,000 foot-tall peaks of the Atlas Mountains. Sadly, one “Waco” glider crashed shortly after clearing the Atlas Mountains; the tail came off the glider and it nose-dived into the ground killing all 14 onboard from the British 1st Airborne Division. In addition to the fatal crash, another two gliders made forced landings enroute, fortunately with no



Airborne Artillerymen hook tow rope to glider. —HQ Northwest African Air Forces, Courtesy of the National Archives

casualties. These long transit flights provided valuable experience over a relatively long transit route; much needed prior to the LADBROKE and FUSTIAN missions. The FUSTIAN mission was a planned follow-on combined Paratroop – Glider mission executed a



**Airborne Troops Entering glider...Troops of the Glider Field Artillery
Battalion, enter a glider for invasion maneuvers. June 1, 1943...
(Photo Courtesy of National Archives)**



**A C-47 from the 60th TCG takes off from Relizane, Algeria
Towing a CG-4A "Waco" Glider
(Photo Courtesy of F/O Don Fritz Collection)**

few nights after LADBROKE. Finally, the training and transit of the tug-glider combinations proved itself a strategic weapon, with a range of 1000 miles.

The hard work accomplished by American and British Army personnel enabled a launch of 129 “Wacos” and 8 “Horsas” on LADBROKE. Due to a shortage of qualified pilots in the GPR, 26 American glider pilots volunteered to fly as co-pilot on both LADBROKE and FUSTIAN. While there were some prob-

lems on initial takeoff with loads shifting and gliders having to cut off, not one “Waco” glider experienced mechanical difficulties (not counting the late-to-arrive intercom systems) worthy of a mission abort. A testament to the effort of all the American Glider Mechanics and Crew Chiefs assigned to NAAFTCC (Provisional). While the results of LADBROKE were disastrous – the majority of gliders were cut loose too far offshore to make land – never again was a release point planned 3000 yards off shore at night on a glider mission.



Of the 22 American Glider Pilots who flew LADBROKE, 19 landed in the water and six died in the mission.
(Photo Courtesy of National Archives)

1. Reel No. A6000, page 5
2. Ibid, page 12
3. Reel No. A0967, p. 2111, Capt. John E. Lyons Trip Report.
4. Reel No. A6000, page 13
5. Reel No. A0969, F/O Jerry S. Sonken, 11th TCS Trip Report.
6. Reel No. A0967, p. 2111, Capt. John E. Lyons Trip Report.
7. Reel No. A6000, various pages
8. Reel No. A6000, page 13
9. Ibid
10. Peters, Mike. Glider Pilots in Sicily, page 87; 1st Battalion GPR War Diary.
11. National WWII Glider Pilots Database
12. Reel No. A6000, page 13
13. Ibid, page 25