THE WIZARDS OF CROOKHAM COMMON

By: Leon B. Spencer

Chances are that if you flew a Waco CG-4A glider in the ETO during World War II it was assembled by glider mechanics of the 26th Mobile Reclamation & Repair Squadron. This specialized unit, fresh from the United States, was activated on 10 November 1943 at Crookham Common, a former British golf course west of London in Berkshire. Its initial complement was 2 officers and 157 enlisted men, most of them privates. When the squadron arrived at their new overseas home they were greeted by row upon row of enormous wooden crates containing America's newest combat weapon, the military cargo glider. They had been arriving in England by ship since July 1943. Just one of these disassembled motorless war birds required five enormous packing crates.

There were no barracks or mess facilities at Crookham Common, so squadron members were billeted and fed at Camp Columbia "A," a neighboring base. There were also no hangers at the base. Work crews had to be transported to and from Crookham Common daily, a considerable inconvenience. One of the first priorities of the commanding officer was to design and set up a glider assembly line and start cranking out gliders. There was no technical data or precedent to draw on, so the mechanics had to improvise. Field tests and experiments were conducted and either approved or abandoned. The approved procedures subsequently resulted in an assembly line made up of wing, fuselage, final assembly and inspection teams. Much of the month of November 1943 was devoted to setting up work areas and getting established. To simplify glider assembly all of the crates had to be rearranged by manufacturer and marked for easy identification. This chore in itself was a mammoth undertaking.

By the end of December 1943, 167 gliders had been assembled, despite the foul English weather and inadequate tools. Glider mechanics were also dispatched to troop carrier bases at Ramsbury, Membury. Keevil and Aldermaston to assemble CG-4As that had been shipped to those locations. It was soon determined that a hanger and specialized ground equipment were necessary at Crookham Common if improved productivity was to be realized. Personnel of the squadron designed and fabricated the required equipment in short order, with measurable results.

The CO also determined that considerable time could be saved if housing and mess facilities were available at Crookham Common. Within days he hit on the idea of converting the glider crates into makeshift barracks. Employing a little elbow grease and some good old American ingenuity, the empty containers were quickly converted into living space. Windows and doors were cut out, roofing was applied, bunks were moved in and a stove was installed. A single CG-4A fuselage crate was large enough to provide adequate living space for four men.

Once living accommodations were provided the men set about building several mess halls, a headquarters building, post exchange, barber shop, tailor shop and a fire station. Each mess hall required seven, 24 ft. by 8ft. by 7 ft. high crates. The unsightly empty packing crates soon blossomed into a small military community. It would soon become known variously as Shanty Town and Crate City, U.K. More impor-

tantly, it was home for members of the 26th. About this same time a Butler hangar was erected, but was not spacious enough to accommodate all of the work crews.

During January, February and March 1944, 593 gliders were assembled despite bone-chilling cold and rainy weather. Windstorms in December and January totally destroyed 44 assembled gliders and damaged 149 more, many of them suffering major damage. In the latter part of February a new CO, Captain Robert W. Stewart, took command of the squadron.

In preparation for the upcoming Allied invasion of Normandy, the 9th Air Service Command ordered that the assembly of gliders be greatly accelerated. A quota of 600 gliders was set for April alone, exceeding the combined output for the past three months. Working fifteen hour days, seven days a week, the glider mechanics of the 26th not only met their quota, but exceeded it by more than fifty percent. When the month ended, 961 gliders had been delivered, an unbelievable record. Squadron personnel strength varied that month from 167 to 270. In recognition of its outstanding performance the squadron received two letters of commendation from higher headquarters.

In May, June and July 1944, 606 gliders were assembled and delivered. Griswold Nose Modification Kits were installed on 247 gliders during the month of May. A glider recovery team was dispatched to France shortly after D-Day to salvage gliders and glider parts from Normandy. Its members often had to complete their work in fields that were still mined. It was not until August 1944, in preparation for the invasion of Holland, that a second accelerated glider assembly program was ordered. 838 gliders were assembled during the month of August, 700 of them in a sixteen day period, a remarkable accomplishment. On August 15 a new record was established when 100 gliders were assembled in a single day. This outstanding performance elicited a third letter of commendation.

It was not until January 1945 that a third accelerated glider assembly program was ordered. In this case five service areas were ordered to assemble 600 gliders, which included 13 of the large, 42 place, Waco CG-13A gliders. April 1945 was the last month that gliders were assembled. The war was phasing down and Ninth Troop Carrier Command felt that it had enough assembled gliders on hand. The squadron was disbanded later that month.

In reflection, the 26th MR & R Squadron excelled in every task it undertook and in everything it was asked to do. Its members even built their own sleeping, messing and work facilities, a task that was not part of their duties, but they did it willingly. When squadron members were asked to accelerate productivity it did so without question and exceeded every goal set for it. Its work crews assembled gliders under the worst possible conditions of exposure - rain, mud, cold, fog and windstorms. Fog was so bad at times that the work crews couldn't see the end of the wing of the glider they were working on. Crews worked under these conditions day after day without complaint and with little recognition. The legend of the 26th passed into history on 25 April 1945, but its members will long remember their deeds and the fine men who served in its ranks. In the seventeen months of its existence it can be proud of the fact that it assembled the gliders used in the Normandy, Southern France, Holland, Bastogne and Wesel invasions.

October 22, 1998