The Adventures of Jim, Sr â€“ Part II

Description

Itâ€™s the 5th of June here, just before midnight on the 6th. 61 years ago, Lt Jim Helinger, Sr, was making his preparations to fly a glider full of troops and be one of the 200,000 men to invade Europe. I canâ€™t begin to imagine what his thoughts and feelings were.

Here is Part II of the story Jim, Sr told me (Part I is here).

Part I is here.

For two months, Jim was assigned to Primary Flight Training at Coleman, TX. His training aircraft was a Fairchild PT-19, a monoplane with two open cockpits. Following primary training, he was sent to Sherman-Dennison, TX to train to fly the Vultee BT-13 Valiant, which provided the student pilots with more instruments, so they could become proficient flying in bad weather, or at night. Under the normal pipeline for pilot training, the pilots would have then be split out for advanced training in Advanced Single Engine (fighters), Or Multi-Engine (bombers, transports).

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An urgent call came in to the beginning pilots: An offer to become glider pilots. Attached to this request was incentive: 50% extra flight pay. That would be added to their current pay, 20% overseas pay and combat pay they would be receiving when they were sent overseas. Jim volunteered to be a glider pilot.

The training for gliders first took Jim home to Louisville, KY, where it looked like that would be the main location for glider training. The Army changed its mind and changed the training from Bowman Field, KY. When Jim got wind of this, he tried to pull his application for gliders, but, it was too late, so it was back to Lubbock Field, TX.

Most of the pilots in the glider training with Jim had backgrounds as Ã¢â‚¬Å“service pilots.Ã¢â‚¬Â• That was the term used for pilots who ferried aircraft to and from the factories. Most of these service pilots were older men, in their mid to late 20s.

Once again, Jim found himself in a PT-19 as the surrogate for a glider in the training pipeline. They flew four hours a day, and had ground school for the other four hours a day. Both parts of the day were Ã¢â‚¬Å“intenseÃ¢â‚¬Â• according to Jim. One of the requirements was to learn to Morse Code. Jim had a problem with this and had to spend his evenings in the training lab, trying to get proficient enough to pass the test. On the tenth evening, he broke through the barrier and was able to pass. He never used Morse Code ever again after the test.

With graduation came the big band at the ceremony, the presentation of the pilot wings with the distinctive Ã¢â‚¬Å“GÃ¢â‚¬Â• in the center, to delineate Ã¢â‚¬Å“glider.Ã¢â‚¬Â• It was off to two weeks of hard earned furlough, which he spent back home in Louisville, KY.

At the end of the two weeks, Jim reported to Laurinburg-Maxton, NC for overseas combat training, which was combined with the 82nd Airborne Division troops. Six weeks of landing gliders in fields and

also in lakes followed, with another week of furlough at the end of this training phase before shipping overseas. For the duration of his time in the service, Jim was assigned to the Headquarters Company of the 442nd Troop Carrier Group.

Jim flew a glider into the Utah Beach invasion area behind Normandy on D-Day. On landing, the glider pilots fought with the Airborne troops, until the area was secured. Once the landing area was secured, the glider pilots would walk backwards, still ready to fight, back to the gliders. Once there, Jim was one of the officers trained to survey the airframees and find the airworthy ones. When found, they would rig a set of goal poats, a tow line and then fire a flare, to alert the orbiting C-47 (equipped with a tailhook) to make a low pass and snatch the glider from 0 to 135 MPH and off the ground. He said he had to wrap his arms around the steering wheel, and lean forward, holding on tight, that it was quite a shock to take back off like that. He did say some of the glider pilots somehow â€œforgotâ€• to return to get a ride back, and fought with the ground troops all the way to Germany.

He flew supplies into PattonÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s Army, when they were being cut off from the normal supply train, so General Montgomery could push ahead. No one was really paying attention to what the glider pilots were doing, so General Patton had supplies brought to him, including gasoline for his tanks, via glider. Jim flew some of those missions. One of the missions he flew, he carried donkeys, that would be used as pack animals to carry gas cans. The donkeys were not happy with their accommodations and managed to kick holes in the fabric covering of the rear of the gliders.

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Jim prefers to only briefly describe some of the technical details of the operations, such as a response to a question most people wouldnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t think to ask: Ã¢â‚¬Å“Did you stay and fight with the airborne troops, or did you get out of the combat zone and how?Ã¢â‚¬Â• His focus is on the slices of life that defined the fun and good things. He did say he had also helped liberate the death camp at Dachau in Germany, and that was all he said about that.

More to follow in Part III

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