Chapter 9

FALL AND WINTER 1944-45

— BRINSON'S HISTORY —

After operation MARKET, air supply missions increased in tempo. More supplies were flown to the Continent during October than from D-Day to the end of September. By the first week of October, an average of 70 Group aircraft a day were flying eastward loaded with gasoline, clothing, ordnance equipment, and ammunition. Brussels was the most active Continental offload base, but there were numerous missions to Lille, Laon, Cherbourg, Metz, Valenciennes, and Paris More "engine trouble," necessitating an overnight delay, developed in Paris than at any other airfield in Europe.

The weather began to change in November with the arrival of cold penetrating winds, and occasional sleet and snow. Numerous personnel changes began to take place about the same time. After several weeks of confinement in a hospital, Colonel McLelland relinquished command of the group to Lieutenant Colonel Lyon, and, on 2 November, departed for the US. Lieutenant Colonel Gibbons became Group Executive Officer, and Lieutenant Colonel Mandt moved from the 43rd to take over Operations (S-3). Lieutenant Barnes became Group Engineering Officer.

Lieutenant Colonel J. S. Smith assumed command of the 34th Squadron when Lieutenant Colonel Dekin departed in November; Major Sigurd Morton succeeded Lieutenant Colonel Peterson in the 43rd, and Major G. A. Rylance took over the reins from Lieutenant Colonel Hamby in the 310th.

A large group of pilots and navigators who had left the U.S. two years earlier received their orders to return. Among them were John Andrews, L. T. Campbell, Ed Connelly, Bob Crone, Jim Crumbie, Carl Fittkau, Joe Hardin Ernest Dale Kohler, Jess Mathers, Maurice Dean, Paul Melucas, Bert Sanders Joe Krysakowski, Hal Varley, Wally Sitarz, Harry Scott; Sam Peek,

Lloyd Perry, Bill Nicholson, Norman Green, Stan Snidow, Ed Schwerin, F. C. Melton, and Roger Matzdorf Also departing was PFC Charles Chapin, the oldest man in the 315th.

In mid-November, 95 new pilots arrived at Spanhoe directly from flying schools. Consequently, each squadron was required to initiate a training program to qualify them in the C-47s. Just about the same time, two B-24 crews (less gunners) were sent to Spanhoe, complete with planes, to qualify one or two crews from each squadron of the 315th on the B-24. With increasing need for gasoline for the trucks and armored vehicles in Europe, someone had come forward and proposed transporting fuel to forward airfields in modified B- 24 aircraft, designated C-109s. The C-I09s were B-24 aircraft minus guns and armor plating and with additional fuel tanks placed in the nose section, upper fuselage, and bomb bays. The total capacity was 2,900 U.S. gallons. Ferry crews delivered four new unpainted

(Above) Consolidated Aircraft Company B-24 Liberator bomber converted to fuel tanker in 1943 and assigned to the 315th TCG in 1944. *Photo from https://315group.org*

C-109s to Spanhoe in December and January.

The 315th received permission from HQ, 52nd Wing, to "stand down" for two days in early November for "Second Anniversary Overseas" parties. Committees were selected for both the officers and enlisted men's parties; arrangements were made with all known sources to obtain adequate sources to obtain of spirits; and "kick off" time for the first party was set for 1600 on 4 November. A squadron historian described the festivities for this particular party in this fashion: "On 4 November, a group of entertainers from London's Windmill Theater ('We Never Close') was called upon to well-spiced hors d'oeuvres to the pure entertainment portion of the celebration. While the entertainers were not so pure, they were, when mixed with a modicum of Scotch and gin, well, entertainment. The evening was polished off by a dance 'de luxe' in the Station Cinemansion (Nissen Hut mess hall) decorated for the occasion (and for every other occasion) with wine colored parachutes (not fit for operational use because of moths, mice, etc.), replete

with an orchestra, floor show, and refreshments. After the evening was polished off, "the guests were."

It is difficult to determine whether this description of the festivities was written while the historian was "polished off" or not. No matter _ the music, dancing, and entertainment were topics of conversation for many weeks following the parties. (One lieutenant navigator was reported as having last been seen last in the early hours of the morning after the party while driving an ambulance clad only in a cap and shoes.)

Operation EVE, a practice exercise with units of the British 6th Airborne Division was held in late November. The mission was flown from Shepard's Groove airfield in Suffolk and in the course of a three hour mission, 1,276 paratroopers were dropped in Wiltshire. Seventy Group aircraft transported steel matting for runways ("PSP") to Merville, France on 30 November. All rerurned on schedule. "On pay days, they always do." commented Technical Sergeant Staskiewicz of Group Operations.

December arrived and so did winter weather, with a vengeance. On the 9th there was a heavy frost, and on the following day snow began to fall in sufficient quantities to stop all flying. Dense fogs covered the Spanhoe area from the 13th through the 16th. The visibility was so restricted that nightly "liberty runs" by truck to Leicester and Kettering were canceled. Just about this time, by coincidence only, cigarette rations were reduced to five packages .a week, causing smokers who were regular convoy riders to be even more depressed. Chipping Ongar, a base northeast of London, in Essex, was inspected by Colonels Lyon and Gibbons in December as a possible future home for 315th. All thoughts of a move were shelved, however when the Germans began their offensive in the Ardennes, and the Group was placed on thirty minute alert to move reinforcements to the Continent. Takeoffs from the troop carrier airfields in Rutland, Northamptonshire and Lincolnshire were almost impossible from the 19th through noon of the 24th as a pea-soup fog covered much of England. Around noon on Christmas Eve day the weather improved enough for 74 planes to leave Spanhoe for Rheims and Leon, with reinforcements for U.S. forces in the Bastogne area. Early on Christmas morning, Airfield A-68, south of Rheims, was strafed by German fighters, but one of the 315th planes there were damaged. All 74 planes returned to Spanhoe on Christmas afternoon - a Christmas which was reported to be one of the coldest on record in England. Although there was no snow, there was an extremely heavy frost and rime ice on the wire fences around part of Spanhoe Airfield resembling tinsel on a Christmas tree. Captain Suttle and Lieutenants Hayden and Alwood, detached from the 315th to the IX Troop Carrier Command's Pathfinder Group, were captured by the Germans when their plane was shot down while dropping supplies near Bastogne during the Ardennes offensive.

The two group planes which flew from Twin Woods Farm on the 18th of December to airlift Major Glenn Miller's orchestra to Paris returned safely; but the Norseman aircraft carrying Miller failed to arrive. The plane was never located.

(Above) Glenn Miller (with the trombone (leader of the Army Air Force Band from 9 July 1944 to 15 December 1944. Others unidentified. Photo courtesy of unidentified veteran of the 315th TCG

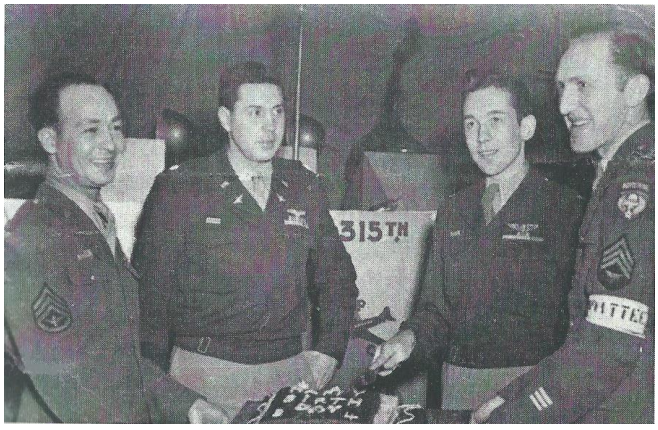
The new year brought with it some increased activity in training, especially with the pilots who had arrived the preceding November, but several heavy snowfalls and winter storms hampered daily flying. Six aircraft and eleven gliders were damaged on 18 January when winds at the airfield reached a velocity above sixty miles per hour.

During January, the 315th was directed to transfer a number of enlisted men to the Ground Forces as soldiers who had been wounded or incapacitated by frostbite and considered unqualified for further combat duty were assigned to the Air Forces. Most of the new arrivals were given duties in the motor pool and kitchens. Quite a few of the men on the aircrews went off to the rest homes (one near Torquay, another near Blackpool) for a

week's relaxation. Among those who went during this period were Lieutenants Ross, Guthrie, Drummey, Sergeants Blase, Hayford and Hampton.

H. B. Lyon, the group C. O., received notice of his promotion to colonel while on leave in the U. S. in February. Around the same time, Major A.B. Oakes, the Group Flight Surgeon, was promoted and transferred to 52nd Troop Carrier Wing to become the Wing Surgeon. Captain D.S. Hatton, 310th Squadron, replaced Lieutenant Colonel Oakes as Group Flight Surgeon.

February provided somewhat better weather allowed glider towing and simulated paradrops. On the 21st, sixty gliders were picked up at Aldermaston, Welford Park, and Ramsbury and towed to fields on the continent. Several new C-46 transport planes were delivered to the 315th toward the end of the month. No instructors were provided with the planes; therefore, a few crews were chosen to study the "tech orders" for the plane, start the engines and takeoff. Within a few weeks all except four of the C-46s were transferred to the 313th Troop Carrier Group at Folkingham. That group was the only troop carrier group in the European Theater to be provided with enough C-46s to use them on a combat airlift. Later events showed that the C-46, while undoubtedly an excellent cargo aircraft, had certain drawbacks when exposed to light flak and small arms fire.



(Above) November 1944, the 34th Squadron celebrates its' second year overseas. The man second from the left is 315th Group Commander Lieutenant Colonel Robert Gibbons and to his left is Major Stan Smith, the new 34th Squadron Commander. Note the three hash marks on the sleeve of the Sergeant at the far right indicating three 6-month periods of overseas service.
Photo courtesy of D. Appleby

Two Group planes were lost within two weeks in late February and early March. Lieutenant Bruce McKern, piloting a 310th plane, disappeared on a flight returning from the Continent. No trace of the plane was found. A 43rd Squadron aircraft, returning from Brussels crashed shortly after nightfall on 5 March in bad weather near Halton RAF Station, Buckinghamshire. The crew was 2nd Lieutenant Charles V. Smith, 2nd Lieutenant Robert W. Madding Technical Sergeant Winfield Scott, and Staff Sergeant David Francis. Early in March the weather turned almost balmy, and, in addition to the normal freight missions, training activities increased. The next First All Airborne Army paratroop mission was just around the corner.

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FALL AND WINTER 1944-45

— CHOLEWCZYNSKI'S "VOICES"—

2nd Lieutenant Charles Voegelin
Pilot, 43rd Troop Carrier Squadron

After Operation Market Garden, we had to go into Grave to bring out gliders we were bringing out the ones that could be towed out. When I, was waiting to take off - and mind you, it took a while to hook them up - I could hear the sounds of enemy fire, and we had to take off in that direction I remember telling the glider pilot, "Be ready, if anything hits my airplane, you are oil your own." That nylon tow cable would often snap back straight into the glider's cockpit.

1st Lieutenant Jacob E. Mancinelli
Navigator, 309th Troop Carrier Squadron

About a month after the drop at Driel, the Polish paratroopers held a "return to England" celebration and invited those of the 315th on the Driel mission to have dinner with them. Apparently, earlier that day medals were awarded to the troops and they were all in their best uniform and proudly displaying their medals, worthy of the heroes they proved to be on one of our most difficult missions. Their commander gave a speech and thanked us for our part in their mission. He praised us for our courage in keeping the formation in order, so that they were able to remain together. Their chaplain also included our dead and wounded in his prayers - in Polish. After they were appropriately reinforced with the available libation, a paratrooper played his accordion as several of the soldiers individually danced a lively Polish dance. It was a proud, happy, Polish-wedding-style celebration.

Letter from Lieutenant F. Radomski, Polish Forces, to OJ Smith

Dear Lieutenant Smith

I think you'll wonder who is writing you, but I'm sure you'll remember me and all the boys who were in your C-47. First of all, I should like to thank you for dropping us in a very right place. Perhaps it saved our lives. Your plane (no. 13) was really lucky because everyone is alive. Only two of us have broken legs on the landing place, but they are already in England too. There we had a few very warm days. How are you and all your friends? We worried and worry very much about you and your friends from our plane. Good luck and happy landing and all good wishes from me and my boys.

Yours Sincerely,
Radomski

1st Lieutenant Richard L. Adams
Pilot, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron

After Holland we did trips to France and Belgium, usually to fields with PSP. We did some unloading. Sometimes the pilots also got "Jerry-can calluses" because nobody wanted to stay around there. The quicker you could unload, the quicker you could get back.

What always amazed me, when I think about it, was all the damned airplanes that were on the island of England. All those airplanes, and there was no navigation control. There were airplanes in the sky 24 hours a day, absolutely 24 hours a day. You would take off, and if you had bad weather and in England the weather is lousy anyway - you would have to try to get over the top, fine, but then you had to get down on the other side.

If you could just visualize all the damned airplanes, it was frightening. Early in the morning, the B-17 s, and then after them, the fighters. Then after them, troop carrier would go. Then they all started coming back. When the 17s would be taking off, the British bombers would be coming back. 24 hours a day, if you could imagine, with no air traffic control up there. You'd figure there would be tons of mid-air collisions, but there just weren't that many. The good Lord was looking out for everybody. It was a mess. I know a couple of times I let down, broke out and below was a group of B-17 s or some other kind of airplane. You were just at the right place at the right time. Except for some "bunchers," there where no kind of navigation controls. What the hell the Germans would use them, and there was no point in advertising.

Captain Julius H. Petersen
Pilot, 309th Troop Carrier Squadron

Jake Sternoff was with me on a mission. We landed in Brussels that night We went to the Metropole Hotel, and I never knew he sang. The Metropole Hotel was huge; you could probably get a thousand, two thousand people in it. There were British and French and everything else there. Jake got up a table and started singing. Boy, I'll tell you, he had the whole place drinks were coming from all over. After that I took Jake as co-pilot on two or three other flights, or he would be pilot on a plane with us. I always told him, "Jake, anytime I went anywhere I took you with me," and we got free drinks. When he would sing the free drinks would come pouring in.

2nd Lieutenant Irving Sternoff ("Jake")
Pilot, 309th Troop Carrier Squadron

I got along fine with the girls in Brussels. I spoke to them in Yiddish, and they spoke back in Flemish - and we understood each other fine.

1st Lieutenant Monroe Zartman
Pilot, 310th Troop Carrier Squadron

Christmas came early for the 315th, when a large silver B-24 Liberator bomber that had been converted to a bulk fuel tanker arrived at each squadron. The four-engined C-109, the new Army Air Corps' mobile “gas station" could carry some 3,000 gallons of fuel to depots on the Continent.

Fumes reminded you that this was no ordinary cargo plane. Smokers had their matches and Zippos taken for the duration of the ride. Those who crewed the C-I09 were reminded of "Lucky Lindy" flying to Paris surrounded by extra gas tanks. There were fuel cells crammed into the nose section, the main fuselage, and the wings, including tip-tanks that gave the Davis wing on the B-24 an extra dimension of "flap." There were no gun turrets, and 110 armor plate to save weight. The only thing between you and any projectiles was thin aluminum.

When you crossed the Channel, you felt like you were riding in a large firecracker. Even the random fire

of some ground-pounder _ enemy, or even one of ours celebrating Allied Success - could factor you into an unsolved mystery. Your odds increased greatly when the destination airfield was lined up, but there was still a 50/50 chance that you would blowout the nose-wheel tire when slamming the tanker onto the noisy, undulating, slippery-when-wet PSP runway. They always seemed short enough to require heavy braking. If you went off the end of the runway, there was usually a quagmire waiting for you. At any rate, the 310th always carried an extra nose-wheel assembly in their C-109s.

Yet this new concept for carrying bulk fuel probably saved more than a few aircrew from double hernias. Two full Jerry cans, one in each hand, felt like two 100 pound bags of cement after the first few, whether loading or unloading the Goonies. My sagging shoulders reminded me that a C-47's normal load was some 125 cans. When General Patton had to halt his tanks for lack of fuel, the message would trickle down to 315th Ops hut, and the C-109 was the answer. But for most of us it was too late; we had already taken our lumps flying fuel in *C-47s.*

2nd Lieutenant Robert L. Cloer
Pilot, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron

During December, for many days the weather over either the Continent or England was so poor that no supplies or air support could be provided for our troops. Then came the German offensive, which would become known as the Battle of the Bulge. The weather had been socked in for five or six days, when word Came on the morning of December 18th that the weather was clearing. That day must have been an all-out effort for Troop Carrier to haul badly needed supplies to the continent. After the 315th' s planes departed on the main mission, Wing added a requirement for the Group to provide two aircraft and crews for a classified mission: pick up the Glenn Miller band at Twinwood Farms and fly them to Orly Field, Paris. The 34th provided a plane. Lieutenant William M. Perkins was the pilot, and I was flying co-pilot.

We landed at Twinwood Farms about 1030, and parked on the back edge of the ramp. Shortly, two large British buses crossed the ramp and stopped in front of the planes. The band debarked with nobody in a hurry. I was surprised by the lack of rank, both with the band, and with the people seeing them off. 1st Lieutenant Don Haynes and Warrant Officer Paul Dudley were with the band, and I believe there was a lieutenant from the base. Perhaps it was because it was a classified mission, and no one was supposed to know.

2nd Lieutenant Richard J. Kucklick
Pilot, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron

One of the C-47s dispatched was from the 310th Troop Carrier Squadron, piloted by 1st Lieutenant Lawrence Tapper. I was flying co-pilot. As a twenty-year-old who had just arrived in England during the autumn of: 1944, I was impressed with the prospect of carrying this great band. The Glenn Miller band had been the most popular big band during my high school days in rural northern Ohio. No wonder I stood bug-eyed as we loaded these celebrities on our plane.

I recall that the weather was typical for England in December; cold, wet and windy. We sat and waited for what seemed like hours.

2nd Lieutenant Robert L. Cloer
Pilot, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron

After a while, the instruments and equipment were loaded, and no one seemed in a big hurry. Then Sergeant "Peanuts" Hucko told Haynes that he had left his trumpet back at the barracks. After a few hot words, they got him a vehicle to get the horn, which took another 20 minutes or *so.* When Hucko returned, no one still seemed to be in a hurry. As a mere 2nd lieutenant, I was told nothing. I assumed that we were waiting for Major Miller.

We talked to the band members while waiting. They explained that part of the deal with going to Paris was to first pre-record six weeks of programs for AFN [Armed Forces Network] and BBC so no one would know they were gone. This was in addition to regular daily programs. Some of the horn players said that they could still not un-pucker, Finally, we took off When we landed at Orly, no one knew we were coming. There were no arrangements for transportation or quarters for the band. A third plane arrived, an ATC C-47 that brought band members who had played in London the previous night.

2nd Lieutenant Richard]. Kucklick
Pilot, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron

The weather on the continent was dear and mild. We hung around waiting, I assumed for Major Miller. I spent the time talking to my boyhood idol, Technical Sergeant Ray McKinley, the band's drummer. I guess because when I was a kid I wanted to be a drummer, and had even taken lessons. I was celebrity-struck with McKinley.

Sergeant McKinley mentioned that he had missed breakfast and was quite hungry. I told him that I thought that I could help him out, and asked him to follow me up to the cockpit. Most of us carried some boxes of K-rations with us because we never knew when we would be back at the base when we were flying supply missions. I explained to McKinley that I was down to my last one, but he was welcome to it as long as he ate it in the cockpit out of sight of the others. So he sat in the co-pilot's seat and we chatted while he ate.

2nd Lieutenant Robert L. Cloer
Pilot, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron

After a lengthy wait for transportation for the band, we explained out need to leave in order to cross the Channel before dark. German intruder aircraft had been following *C-47s* in at night, and we were prohibited from crossing the Channel at night. We unloaded the band and the equipment when a sergeant came up and said that he had a load of POWs to take back to England.

We waited a little longer and then said to heck with it, and started to taxi out. A bus load of women drove alongside and flagged us to a stop. A captain nurse came on board and said that she had our load for us. Perk told her that we were supposed to take POWs back. She smiled and told him, "These are your POWs: Pregnant Outbound Women." We dropped them off at Croydon before returning to Spanhoe.

2nd Lieutenant Richard J. Kucklick
Pilot, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron

It was several days later that we learned that Major Glenn Miller had never arrived in France, and was presumed lost. To this day nobody knows what happened that stormy morning in December except that Miller, another passenger, and the pilot never arrived in France, and were presumed lost.

In February 1946, I was discharged and returned to Olmstead Falls, Ohio. One day, my wife and I read that the Glenn Miller Band, now under the direction of Ray McKinley, was playing at a local ballroom. We eagerly made arrangements to attend. The night of the dance there was a good crowd, but after the first break, I managed to get up to the bandstand. I yelled up to McKinley, "Hey Sarge, are you still hungry?"

Ray turned around, smiled, and said, "I remember you. You're the lieutenant that gave me that box of K-rations when I was starving that day in Paris" We went on to reminisce about the trip, and what had happened to Glenn Miller, until McKinley had to again take the bandstand.

2nd Lieutenant Robert L. Cloer
Pilot, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron

There are a number of things very odd about the Miller disappearance. The missing aircraft and personnel were reported as such nine days later instead of the 48 hours required by regulations. The men had disappeared but the C-64A Norseman that had carried Miller from England was found, undamaged and intact by a French farmer in early 1945. Three men are missing, and from time to time, new theories turn up as to what happened to the greatest bandleader of the time. What happened and who knew might all be]art of the biggest cover-up of World War II.

2nd Lieutenant Inez A. Leland (Mrs. Inez Glass)
Flight Nurse, 818th Medical Aero Evacuation Squadron

We had made many trips to Liege, Belgium - a major supply base and also home to two Army General Hospitals. The Battle of the Bulge had started in mid-December, and Liege was now in the path of the German advance. It was .few days before Christmas, and we had taken over a planeload of shovels and

other field equipment. Before any wounded could be loaded for evacuation, the weather socked us in. There were several planes carrying nurses and we were taken to quarters in a small hotel on the edge of the city, a few miles from the airstrip.

Down the street from the hotel, music drew our attention to a civilian club, and we decided that it would be an opportunity to both get something to eat and have a little fun. All we had with us were our

medical kit bags, where we carried dressings and other medical equipment. We had to keep the medical bag with us at all times because there was morphine in it.

The place was packed, as was the dance floor. It was a merry crowd, composed of both military personnel and civilians. I didn't drink, but that did not stop everybody else. It seemed that the war was a thousand miles away.

The hours passed, and as it was approaching nine o'clock, the throbbing of buzz bombs overhead brought everything to a halt. All was hushed, except for the pulsating racket above. All eyes were staring at the ceiling, and then the grinding screech stopped.

A cold chill ran down my spine as everybody glanced around looking for cover. Then began a few pregnant seconds of dead silence, except for the pounding of my heart, and then a loud explosion.

The party was over, and we spent a helpless and sleepless night in the hotel, punctuated from time to time by the sounds of other buzz bombs overhead. Fortunately, they continued on overhead and the explosions were far away.

We went out to the airstrip, happy to leave, when we discovered that two of the C-47s had been destroyed by the memorable explosion. We didn't bring any casualties back with us that day, all the nurses dead-heading back to Cottesmore on one airplane.

1st Lieutenant Monroe Zartman Pilot,
310th Troop Carrier Squadron

One of the airlifts to Liege was so important that it was led by Major General Paul Williams, commanding officer of IX Troop Carrier Command, himself Unfortunately, the PSP surface of the runway was in such poor condition that the general blew one of the tires on his C-47 on landing. He and his crew returned to Cottesmore on another aircraft. The General’s bird was left in Liege. Another crew from his headquarters went to bring another tire and fly the plane back in the morning.

When I came in with my C-47, it was already dark. We were carrying a load of Jerry cans, and we also blew a tire landing on the sharp PSP [pierced steel planking].

Now, Liege was not not Brussels or Paris. The Battle of the Bulge was raging and in the distance you could hear artillery. Closer to home, buzz bombs were landing. It was not a good place to RON [remain overnight].

The crew chief, John Stewart, and the rest of the crew were in agreement. Spotting another C-47 parked nearby with a flat tire.. I made a snap decision. It was a supreme effort, but by 0400 hours, we had another tire on our plane. We left the flat lying near the jacks and took off without leaving a note. When we arrived at Spanhoe, we were tired and grimy, but had big smiles on our faces.

I am sure that General Williams was not smiling when he got the report on his aircraft, now with two flat tires, and only one spare. There were “inquiries" about the incident, but there were almost two hundred C-47s that landed there that day. This was one reason that I never explained to anybody why I was smiling until a good number of years later.

Sergeant Raymond Schwartz
Radio Operator, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron

December 1944 was the beginning of a wet and cold On December 16, the Germans commenced a fierce attack in Belgium which came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. For days, the skies remained overcast and rain fell constantly. Flying was impossible for fighters, bombers, or even C-47s. On December 24th the weather cleared and the sun shone brightly. A number of planes from the 315th Troop Carrier Group were designated to fly from Spanhoe to bases in southern England to pick jp troops and transport them to France to reinforce the forces fighting the Germans. Our forces in the city of Bastogne had also been surrounded

We took off in the morning and, as usual, formed into flights of 3-plane formations., As my plane was not the leader of a flight, we didn't have a navigator. Clifford Carroll was the Crew Chief and he maintained the plane superbly. I don't recall who the pilots were. It seems that the pilots were frequently assigned to different airplanes. The troops were waiting for us at the airfields in the south. They promptly boarded our planes and we took off and headed for Belgium.

The skies were clear and the flight was uneventful. I observed the soldiers and their equipment with somber feelings. It dawned on me that the day was Christmas Eve and they were

obviously going into dangerous combat and in winter conditions - not a very pleasant experience for them.

In the afternoon we landed at an airfield in France, and the troops departed on trucks which went in the direction of the front lines. We now faced a quandary. In those days, whenever we had the opportunity to remain on the Continent overnight, we preferred to do *so,* as we enjoyed the experience. On the other hand, the following day would be Christmas Day. Everyone knew that was when the Army served the best menu that could be imagined. Furthermore, the sun was starting to set in the West. We were informed that we would be prohibited from flying at night due to the proximity of combat conditions. What to do?

The decision was promptly made to return to Spanhoe. Engines were started and soon we were up in the air and forming into formation for our return flight. As we crossed the North Sea and arrived over the coast of England, the sun was setting and evening twilight had begun. By the time we arrived at Spanhoe night had fallen. Although blackout of lights at night was the standard order in England during the war, the airfield was lit up for our landing. The runway lights were clearly visible in two parallel lines. The planes peeled off from formation and proceeded to circle and make their final approach to the runway.

As my plane lined up on the runway, I was standing just behind and between the two pilots. I watched the landing operation with fascination. The runway lights were very clear and becoming brighter. Air speed was decreased and the landing gear was lowered. When we were approximately 2200 yards from the end of the runway and still about 200 feet up, a strange development occurred. A thick blanket of fog seemed to roll across the runway and the lights were completely obliterated. In effect, we had been blinded.

The pilot shoved the throttles forward and yelled" Wheels Up!" The co-pilot immediately complied and the plane shuddered as it struggled to recover airspeed. It finally did and we rose to a relatively safe altitude and circled the field hut could see nothing. Lights were no longer visible; fog had covered the entire area.

Not knowing where to go or what to do, the pilot turned to me and told me to send out a Mayday message. I was dumbfounded, not ever having sent out a distress message. I asked the crew to switch their intercoms to my radio frequency in case I was unable to understand the reply to my message.

The radio code name for the 34th Squadron was "Twisted" and the large letter on the tail of our plane was "A". I called, "Mayday! Mayday! from Twisted A - Able. Come in please." An English RAF girl promptly responded and, after learning of our predicament, advised us to fly south. (I later learned obey our flight tower at Spanhoe heard my call and, knowing our predicament, they followed our progress.) We flew south as directed and found another open field with runway lights lit. We requested landing instructions and fifteen minutes after landing at this field, the fog descended and blanketed the entire area. We were glad to be safely on the ground.

We found ourselves to be the only Americans on an RAF base remember, this was Christmas Eve. The fog covered the area for five days before it dissipated and allowed us to take off and return to Spanhoe. Obviously, we missed that good Christmas dinner. I have no idea if any other planes from our Group had a similar experience on that occasion.

1st Lieutenant William M. Perkins
Pilot, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron

Winter had arrived, coming early, cloaking the northern European continent and much of the British isles in a mantle of white. Weather conditions over England and the Continent had curtailed flying activities for mmm moo the mouth. This sock-in resulted from unpredictable meteorological phenomena which brought low cloud cover, snow showers, and intense fog. This shrouded the landscape, restricting visibility and interrupting the delivery of needed supplies to the combat forces on the battlefront.

On December 24th, the persistent weather conditions were still problematic. Orders were issued by SHAEF [Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces] and 9th Air Force to the 315th Troop Carrier Group to immediately airlift troops and equipment from bases in England to the battlefront on the Continent.

Personnel mustered to augment and shore up hard-pressed combat units were drafted from support units based in Britain. Those unfortunate individuals selected for deployment were served a special Christmas dinner,

issued combat gear, and then ordered to board the waiting C-47s for the flight to the battlefield.

Flight conditions were considered marginal, with gray haze obscuring the sky and a thin veil of fog drifting lightly over the snow-covered ground. Lieutenant Shandry, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron, was appointed to lead the flight, with myself in position off the left wing and Lieutenant Lawrence St. John on the right.

With fighting activity and flight operations substantially curtailed in anticipation of the Christmas season, some of the experienced pilots and crew members who had been in Britain for a long time were granted temporary leave in the USA. The absence of these seasoned crews necessitated the assignment of recently arrived untrained pilots to fill co-pilot positions. Most of the replacement pilots were inexperienced recent graduates from flight school who had no training or flying experience in C-47s.

The young flight officer assigned as my co-pilot for this mission was a recent replacement pilot who had been in England such a short time that he was unfamiliar with emergency procedures, navigation aids, and airfield locations. Such an apprenticeship, although justifiably necessary, adds to the responsibilities of the aircraft commander. This requires supervision, instruction and guidance which distracts from the performance of flight functions, especially in emergencies.

The weather during the daylight hours remained favorable. Except for restricted visibility, flight conditions were unconstrained. The first round-trip completed from the airbase in England was routine and uneventful. We encountered no problems or difficulties except for precarious landing conditions experienced in the snow-covered meadows selected as assemblage and mobilization encampments near the combat area. The fighting was so close the sound of small arms and artillery fire could be heard resoundingly intense and too loud for comfort.

By the time we arrived with our second flight late in the afternoon, the temperature had dropped near the zero degree mark, and daylight was fading Then the twilight rapidly vanished as the shadow of night moved in.

The crew members of our flight group huddled together beside one of the parked aircraft, discussing the events of the day and debating the problems and difficulties anticipated in spending the night in the cold so close to the combat action. The whining and rhythmic sound of a single-engined airplane cut short the conversation. An Me-109 suddenly zoomed in just above the treetops and immediately began attacking with long bursts of gunfire. The bullets kicked up the snow, narrowly missing a row of C-47s parked along the, edge of the field. The pilot unexpectedly ceased firing and nosed skyward. As he gained altitude he continued on an easterly heading toward Germany. Fortunately he did not return for another pass at the parked airplanes. Possibly he had used all his ammunition.

As the excitement from this sudden incident ebbed and emotional sensibility returned, Lieutenant Ray looked at St. John and me, candidly making the statement, "I'm getting the hell out of this place. You guys can come with me or stay with the rest."

Shaken as a result of the strafing, and evaluating the possibility of another attack in such an exposed location, both Lieutenant St. John and myself decided the safest solution was to join the flight leader for a hasty departure.

Cranking up the Gooney Bird's engines, we taxied out on the snow-covered field, now enveloped in mist and darkness. Lieutenant Ray turned on his landing lights and wing formation lights, and we followed him, taking off into the overcast night sky bound for Spanhoe. We gave little thought to the difficulties we would encounter during the return.

Flying formation through cloud envelopments, with only the blue formation lights visible on the lead airplane to maintain a safe formation position, became an exacting task. After crossing the English Channel and reaching the coastline, we found the whole landscape cloaked in total darkness. Using the assigned restricted code, we established radio communication and requested assistance in locating an airfield. The emergency landing system (Darky) was promptly activated, and circular perimeter lights visible in all directions came on, marking numerous airdromes below us.

Selecting the most visible illuminated circle, the flight leader changed his heading, hopeful that circumnavigating the lighted ring would lead to the location of the lighted landing runway approach path. This effort to land the aircraft, however, was unsuccessful, and the attempt had to be abandoned as the result of a dense cloud of fog moving in, which killed all visibility below. Innumerable other attempts to locate a

usable landing strip were terminated, wasting valuable time and consuming essential fuel. We continued the fervent search, chasing the gaps in the ghostly shifting sea of fog that hovered below us.

A circular display of lights ringing an airfield was sighted, and it appeared to be free of fog. Upon completing a pass around the illuminated track, we spotted the light of the hooded incline approach channel lights and started our descent for landing with Lieutenant Ray in the lead followed by my plane, and St. John in the rear. The runway lights were now visible and in view, with the green runway elevation light indicating the aircraft aligned at the desired glide angle for completing a successful landing. As Lieutenant Ray's plane drew near the approach end of the runway, a blinding mass of thick fog swept over the ground, blocking all visibility.

Suddenly flying blind into the foggy wall of white mist, I was forced to go to my gauges and begin instrument flight procedure. A quick check of the radio altimeter indicated fifty feet. With no forward visibility, I rammed the throttles to full power and nosed the plane up. At 2,000 feet, I was trying to radio Lieutenant Ray, who was also forced to abort the landing attempt, when I heard St. John's voice through my headset, "Which way did you turn after landing?" I reported, "Failed to complete landing due to lack of visibility. Now cruising back at 2,000 feet. Out." St. John was probably able to see the runway coming in behind and low enough beneath the reflective glow of the landing lights of my airplane, to complete a landing, but unable to see anything through the fog.

Unable to reestablish communications with the flight leader, I was somewhat confused and didn't know my position. My only recourse was to continue the search for an airfield where I could land.

Again we spent a considerable amount of time chasing the illusive and ever-moving fog formations from point to point to locate a serviceable airfield. Each time a place was spotted that appeared to be free of fog, the chase was on in an attempt to reach the area before the fog moved in. This exercise burned excessive amounts of fuel and added to our dilemma. The situation was reaching a crisis point with fuel running low. The fuel gauge indicted both wing tanks were almost empty.

My solution was to place the airplane on an eastbound heading toward the sea engage the auto pilot, and bail the crew out before the fuel ran out.

I was about to give the order to leave the aircraft, when glancing out the side window, I observed a glistening cluster of lights in an unbroken circle, below and to the left, remarkably in the clear.

After flying a circle a few times looking for the hooded lights of the landing strip approach funnel, we spotted them. By now fog had begun to drift in. Banking the C-47 sharply and steering down the lighted corridor in rapid descent, I instructed the co-pilot to put the landing gear down and activate the flaps in the half-down position. As the close end of the runway was in sight with the green guide light in view, I turned on the landing lights. Suddenly the visibility in front was zero. The landing lights' reflected rays brought to view an impenetrable sea of white fog.

I moved the throttles to full power position and instructed the co-pilot to "milk up" [slowly retract] the flaps. He inadvertently positioned the lever in the full up position and the flaps moved up rapidly. The right engine failed to respond to the power setting, coughed and quit. The airplane was traveling at a landing speed, just above the stall point and was dropped like a spent rock. hit the ground with a jarring thump.

Braking to a stop, we left the aircraft and stepped into total darkness, happy to have our feet on the ground, but confused of our whereabouts. We stood gaping, trying to find spot of light that might lead us to some habitation. After a short time scanning the dark in all directions we detected a faint light and moved in that direction. *As* we walked toward the light, we discovered the aerodrome control building was the source.

Climbing the stairs and entering the control room we surprised the RAP people on duty who were busily involved in attempting to guide one of their planes to a safe landing. Because of the impenetrable fog, the effort to bring in an RAP plane was unsuccessful, and the pilot was sent on to another field.

Startled by the sudden unexpected entrance of four American aircrew, they momentarily stopped what they were doing. Astonished and incredulous, one of them, in a very distinct British accent remarked, "Where did you bloody Yanks come from?"

I described the problems we had, and our landing under the precarious socked in conditions. Astonished that we had accomplished such a skillful feat under formidable conditions, they could only say, "Bloody lucky, you Yanks."

The conditions essentially closed the airfield to

traffic as a result, and the operations personnel closed the control tower for the night and escorted my crew and I to Wing Headquarters. After a brief introduction and explanation for our intrusion, we were cordially welcomed, furnished lodging, and offered an apology for the mess being closed and no food immediately available.

However, an invitation was extended, inviting my crew to attend the annual Christmas party at the Non-commissioned Officers Club - an annual tradition where the commissioned officers are special guests of the NCOs on Christmas Eve.

The dense enduring fog held the region wrapped in a surrealistic white fairyland. This atmospheric phenomenon prolonged our unscheduled stay at the RAP installation for the entire Christmas holiday period, which included Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day, and the day following. Christmas day was spent at a special dinner in the officers' mess.

On the fourth day of our ad-hoc visit, the invasive blanket of fog finally dispersed, bringing into view a winter wonderland of pure white with, every object and vegetation covered in a thick mantle of glistening hoarfrost which sparkled brilliantly in the sunlight.

During those days the immovable fog remained, obscuring the landscape. The location of *the C-47* we abandoned on Christmas Eve remained unknown. After the fog lifted, the lonely bird was found in the middle of the airfield, covered in a coat of crystal white frost.

After sweeping off the wing surfaces, doing a pre-flight check and refueling the empty tanks, we expressed our thanks to our British hosts hospitality afforded us at RAP Station Brize Norton, and flew off to Spanhoe

From the Official War Diary Historical Record of the 34th Troop Carrier Squadron December 1944

With the half-informed knowledge of the military situation hanging heavy upon us this Yuletide, there was still evidence of Christmas cheer. On Christmas Eve the enlisted personnel of the base played host to over 150 British children at a party in the American Red Cross building. Toys and candy were given as gifts. And when they had their fill of ice cream and cake the well-mannered children thanked their hosts, and the gay gleams in their eyes indicated that they thought the Yanks "jolly good."

The cooks, somewhat bleary-eyed from nocturnal labors, concocted Christmas Day meal fit for all the royalty in Europe: roast turkey stuffing, cranberry sauce, vegetables, apple pie, fresh apples and oranges. The kitchen police was a particularly gratifying sight: master, technical, and staff sergeants busied themselves with these generally detested duties. few days later, on the 28th, the enlisted men enjoyed slightly more mature entertainment in the form of a squadron dance held dance held in the base "ballroom," where 160 girls, including over 100 from nearby ATS camps were delighted guests. The newly-organized Enlisted Men's Counci capable Staff Sergeant Bernard "Dick" Rubin to head the dance committee; and this proved to be a wise selection, for the dance, in the opinion of the guests, was "the nicest ever held at the post." Music, from jive to rumba, was excellently rendered by the station orchestra. The high spots of the occasion; a square dance, refreshment served in cabaret style at candle-lit tables and a running flow of beer.

2nd Lieutenant Charles Voegelin
Pilot, 43rd Troop Carrier Squadron

It was a terrible thing using gliders. I hope they never do it again. You needed pilots that had to be well-trained. We used to go out in 72 ships, each pulling two gliders. When the last guys got to the landing zone, the goddamned traffic pattern was out so far that those guys didn't have a chance of finding a spot to land. Everybody was getting a little bit higher to get out of the propwash. The first guys were coming over at, say, 1,000 feet, and right in line with the landing zone. By the time the end of the stream comes, they were up to maybe 1,800 feet to stay out of the propwash. Those guys were way the hell out on the base leg, and never had a chance to get in there.

Glider pilots would fly as co-pilots with me just to get their flying time. They never had a chance to train properly. They'd train going on combat missions. Both for tow pilots and glider pilots, they could never get enough training. But we tow pilots hated it. The only thing that was more difficult than towing gliders in formation was practicing tight night formation with those hooded lights.

Flight Officer David Trexler
Glider Pilot, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron

They had an L-4 light airplane we could occasionally fly to keep up our flight time. We did fly

gliders maybe twice a month.

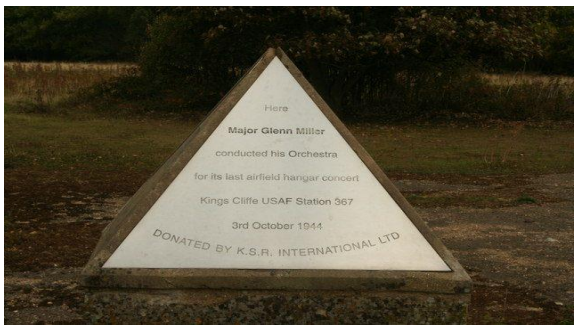
The only time I had any trouble was when we had a 52nd Wing glider- tow operation. There were five groups in the wing. Each squadron was involved, and with 16 gliders in each squadron we were a long, long train. We were flying four planes and gliders line-abreast, single tows. Our tow made a hard 90-degree turn on the left end of this line-abreast formation.

Suddenly, I was flying. Bill Ward was in the right seat watching the tow rope, when the tow plane disappeared. I was looking for the airplane, and I couldn't imagine what happened to it. Bill saw that the tow rope was hanging right straight down, and he released it.

We had had about two feet of snow just before. We saw a big lake, but it hadn't been cold enough to put a solid layer of ice on it. There was a big field next to the lake, and I pointed it out to Bill who said, "Yeah, that looks good."

As I started to level off, I looked down to the side and there was 'a fence there. I could just see the top of the fence. It was still at least 50 feet below us, so I popped the stick and sucked it back, and about that time we hit. We were on a fairly sharp up-slope. Consequently, the right gear got knocked off. We had a crew chief back there, and fortunately he was sitting someplace other than where the strut came in through the side. Nobody was hurt.

It was an overcast day. There were no shadows, nothing. That field looked perfectly flat. We looked around, and 10 and behold, a quarter to a half mile away at the top of the hill, there apparently was a road, and a Bobby on a bicycle. He came just about opposite where we were and got off that bicycle and started walking toward us, through at least two feet of snow.

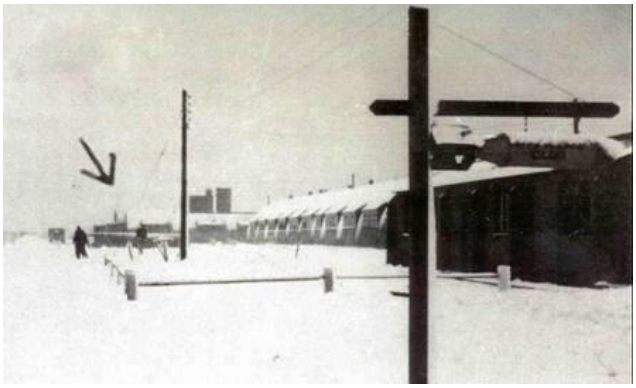


(Above) Memorial plaque at Kings Cliffe airfield: Here – Major Glenn Miller – conducted his Orchestra – for the last airfield hangar concert – Kings Cliffe USAAF Station 367 – 3rd October 1944 – Donated by K.S.R. International Ltd. The next day, the 34th TCS flew the orchestra to Paris LeBourget; Maj Miller was to come individually but was lost and never recovered.

We weren't too far from Spanhoe, and I guess the police or somebody made a call. We told him what outfit we were in. About an hour later a weapons carrier came and picked us up, and brought some guards over to stand by the glider.

We got back and our tow crew was waiting for us. They said that if we hadn't released when we did, they would have crashed. They had stalled when they went into this left turn and they went right out of sight. I must have been glancing to the left because of this turn, and during that second that I glanced away he completely dropped out of sight. Bill Ward, without saying a word to me, just reached up and popped the release. The tow pilots said that the crew chief couldn't get to their release because they were in stall condition, and the C-47 was dropping like a rock. They said that we saved their butt by releasing when we did. They had stalled, and weren't flying, just dropping nose down. They couldn't pick up speed as long as we were still attached to them. As soon as we released, they picked up sufficient speed to pull out. I guess we were probably 4,000 feet above the ground, maybe not even that high

— End of Chapter—



(Above) Spanhoe in winter. Arrow points to Mess Hall.

(Below) Snow-covered flightline; 310th Squadron C-47s with gliders behind each one. Probably prep for a training flight as the 315th never towed gliders into combat.

Photos from https://315group.org