



ARMY AIR FORCES PHOTO

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THE first large scale military glider operation in history was the invasion of Crete in May, 1941. The most recent was the airborne invasion of Normandy in June of 1944. It is necessary to compare these two operations to understand what a tremendous development has occurred in the slightly more than three years separating these actions. In the invasion of Crete, the gliders were used in conjunction with much larger numbers of paratroops, air landed troops, and invasion forces from the sea. However, the British Navy was present in such strength that practically none of the seaborne troops were able to make shore, and the island fell to airborne assault. The gliders were most successful in their attack on the Maleme airdrome, near which they landed in a river bed, in advance of landing by paratroops. Once the airdrome was secured, Ju-57's landed (often crash-landed) to bring in more troops, which eventually captured the island. At the time, the glider assault on Crete seemed to be at a very large scale. In this operation the landings were made by day, and not more than forty or fifty gliders were sent against any one objective. A total of about 70 gliders were used, carrying about 10 men each—a total of about 700 men. By present standards, this was a small scale glider mission. And yet, it was a large operation for that time, since gliders for military use were new and untried, having appeared only in small numbers before, in Poland, Norway and Belgium.

The airborne invasion of Normandy, on the other hand, makes the Cretan business seem like a pretty small affair, in numbers, technique, and complexity of planning. For this was the initial assault wave of the largest over water invasion of history. While in Crete the German DFS 230 gliders carried ten men each, and no heavy

equipment; in Normandy we used CG-4A's carrying 15 men and Horsas carrying 25 men, or heavy artillery and transport vehicles. Even Hamilcars were used, which brought in airborne tanks. And instead of 700 men, here, three airborne divisions were involved, which required many hundreds of gliders to transport their thousands of troops and their great quantities of supplies.

Furthermore, they landed at night, without lights, behind German coastal defenses to seal off the invasion beachhead on the east coast of the Normandy peninsula. This was a movement which would have been totally impossible before, and which required the most exact planning, the most careful coordination with sea and ground forces, exact timing, and the highest degree of air discipline and precision flying on the part of the glider pilots. The success of this operation is unquestionable, and its success was due to the accumulated experience of those three years. Beyond any doubt, the glider has now been accepted as a tactical weapon of great military importance. Gliders have now been used tactically in a variety of ways, but this is still a new weapon. The extent of its tactical possibilities is not known, and will not be discovered without further use in actual theaters. However, we can analyze the various ways in which gliders have been used tactically, and we can suggest ways in which they may be used.

In such an analysis, it is very important to keep a close eye on the characteristics of a glider which make it useful for military operations. This may sound too easy. Our military gliders were designed to carry airborne troops and equipment into combat. Their military characteristics were determined according to this primary mission. This appears very obvious, yet for the first years of our army program, discussions have raged about the CG-4A and other military gliders as though they were designed

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