

A World War II Glider Pilot

Before the War

Gordon Clark Chamberlain was the eldest child of a middle-class San Diego family. Gordon, his sister Barbara, and their parents enjoyed exploring the San Diego backcountry and taking driving vacations in the western states. Always interested in the military, Gordon joined the Officers' Club of Hoover High School's R.O.T.C. unit in October of his senior year, one month after World War II broke out in Europe.

Chamberlain attended San Diego State University in fall 1940. He served on the Associated Students publicity committee, was president of the college Toastmasters organization, and starred in a college production, *The Colonel's Lady*. During the summers he worked at a local department store and became acquainted with his future wife, Eloise Jensen.

"A Job Which I Knew Held Considerable Peril..."

On December 29, 1941, Chamberlain enlisted at Fort Rosecrans, San Diego, as an aviation cadet. After 11 hours of flying, he was still unable to take a plane up on his own; he was eliminated from the program and discharged in March 1942. Three months later he tried again, this time enlisting as a glider pilot, "a job which I knew held considerable peril later on..." he wrote in his diary. Chamberlain graduated from the glider program in February 1943. He spent several more months in training in Louisville, Kentucky. In May, 1943, Eloise came to Kentucky and they were married.

Military Experience

Glider pilots were new for the U.S. Army in 1942. These wooden aircraft were attached by cable to military transport planes and towed to the target. Landing infantrymen and equipment behind enemy lines, gliders had some advantages over other aircraft. They flew silently, and thus were especially effective during night landings. They could land heavy equipment, such as tanks, jeeps, and anti-aircraft guns. Gordon Chamberlain was a glider pilot in the 436th Troop Carrier Group; his job was to land troops and men ahead of the Allied armies during an operation and then to make his way back to the nearest Allied base.

In January 1944, Chamberlain traveled on the *Queen Mary* to England. He and his squadron began flying training missions. There were long periods when the glider pilots could not fly because of the weather. The pilots went to village pubs, played poker, and slept until noon. On one of the missions, Gordon "cracked up my glider — into two others. Didn't get hurt,

but I was lucky." He was forced to work in the service squadron until all three gliders were repaired.

By the middle of May 1944, the pilots knew that invasion day was close. They took courses in paratroop drops and received new rifles. They went on nighttime navigation runs "about 7 miles across country."

"Thirty hours from now we will make our drive. We hope God will be with all of us."

The day before D-Day, Chamberlain and his fellow pilot, Casey, tossed a coin to see which one would act as pilot; Chamberlain won the toss. He wrote in his diary, "Thirty hours from now we will make our drive. We hope God will be with all of us." Their glider took off at 4:45 a.m. for France carrying infantrymen and heavy equipment. At 7:00 a.m. they crashed in an open field. The landing knocked Chamberlain and Casey unconscious. When they awoke they found their seats twisted to face the back of the glider; the infantrymen aboard their glider thought their pilots had been killed. Gordon and Casey delivered their troops and equipment and lay in the field for hours to avoid German fire.

Chamberlain then set off for the beaches to return with a litter-jeep to collect the injured. Once back on the beach, he and Casey were assigned to guard 217 German prisoners being sent to England. Chamberlain received a Presidential Unit Citation and the Air Medal for "superb performance in initial troop carrier phases of the invasion." In a letter to one of his professors at San Diego State University, Gordon responded to praise of his actions at Normandy by crediting the medics with extraordinary heroism. "I know of many an airborne man who would not be alive today had it not been for the tireless efforts of those [medics]... many of whom made excellent targets for German snipers."

Chamberlain's troop carrier group carried out other missions during 1944 and 1945. They dropped paratroopers in Holland during Operation Market Garden in September 1945. They assisted in dropping supplies to the 101st Airborne division surrounded at Bastogne. In December, Chamberlain attended navigation classes and learned about radar. "Pretty interesting!" he remarked in his diary.

Operation Varsity: the mostly costly glider mission

In February 1945, Chamberlain's group relocated to France. It was obvious that an important airborne mission was ahead. "We draw weapons tomorrow and get our glider assignments... I won't worry once I can act on the ground, but I know how scared I'll be while in the air." Operation Varsity, the crossing of the Rhine River into Germany, included 906 gliders, the

largest fleet in the war. It ended up being the most costly in terms of airborne casualties. Eighty-eight pilots lost their lives, including Gordon Chamberlain.

A San Diego State college friend, James Wallace, saw Chamberlain's final landing site and recalled: "I saw him in the field but there wasn't much anyone could do. He landed his load in good condition and took care of his troops." After landing his glider, Chamberlain was killed by enemy fire.

Commemoration

In late March, 1945, Gordon Chamberlain was buried in Margraten, Holland, in the site that would become the Netherlands American Cemetery. On Memorial Day 1946, Mary Knicknie, of Maastricht, Holland, wrote to Chamberlain's family, requesting permission to care for Chamberlain's grave. "I beg you to send me his home address. For I think that the picture I made from his grave are [*sic*] great souvenirs for his family." This program, still functioning today, is called "adopting" a grave. When Knicknie passed away, the Offermans family adopted Chamberlain's grave. "During the war, the Germans imprisoned my father for hiding Jews," Mr. Offerman says. "The Americans liberated him from a Nazi prison two days before he was scheduled to be executed. I show my appreciation for the sacrifice of these Americans by putting flowers on Gordon Chamberlain's grave at least once per month."