26 MOBILE RECLAMATION AND REPAIR SQUADRON

MISSION

LINEAGE
26 Mobile Reclamation and Repair Squadron activated, 10 Nov 1943

STATIONS
Crookham Common, Berkshire, England

ASSIGNMENTS

COMMANDERS
Maj Henry F. Hass,
Capt Robert W. Stewart, 26 Feb 1944

HONORS
Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

OPERATIONS
The 26 Mobile Reclamation and Repair Squadron was activated at Crookham Common (AAF

Station 429), Berkshire, England, on 10 November 1943. It was assigned to the Ninth Base Air Depot Area. Two officers, First Lieutenant Thomas P. Chalcraft, and Flight Officer Henry H. Stout, and 157 enlisted men were initially assigned to the squadron. As the ranking officer, Lt. Chalcraft, assumed temporary command of the unit. His military specialty was engineering, but he was also an expert glider pilot, having set nine world records in sailplanes and gliders prior to entering military service.

When the squadron arrived at Crookham Common, a former British golf course west of London, its members were amazed to see row after row of huge crates containing America's newest military weapon, the Waco CG-4A troop and cargo glider. They were familiar with the CG-4A, but never had they seen so many in one place. Their new home was one of nine sites in England selected for the storage of American gliders. Each of the disassembled craft was housed in five huge numbered shipping crates. Crate 1 contained the nose section, Crate 2 the fuselage section, Crate 3 the tail section, Crate 4 the outboard wing sections and Crate 5 the inboard wing sections. When Lt. Chalcraft saw all the glider crates he realized he had his work cut out for him. The next few weeks and months would tax the ingenuity and stamina of every single man in the squadron.

American gliders began arriving in England in July 1943 and were stored at Aldermaston, Ramsbury, Membury, Keevil, Andover, Middle Wallop, Crookham Common, Stoney Cross and Warton. The first CG-4A was assembled at Aldermaston by inexperienced British civilians under the supervision of Eighth Air Force Service Command. A few additional gliders were assembled there and at the other storage sites, but not many. One thousand fifty-six (1,056) gliders arrived in the UK between July and the arrival of the 26thM. R. & R. Squadron in November 1943.

After reviewing the task before him Lt. Chalcraft decided that one of his first priorities was to was to design and set up an assembly line. This had to be accomplished with no prior experience or precedent to draw on. Supervisory personnel began setting up assembly lines and assigning work teams. Each team was assigned to a specific area of responsibility. The broad plan included a wing assembly area, a fuselage assembly area and a final assembly and inspection area. Additional work teams were formed and dispatched to Ramsbury, Membury, Keevil and Aldermaston to assist in glider assembly. Everyone knew that the gliders were being readied for the upcoming invasion of fortress Europe, so it was important that the job be done right. Soon after the squadron was activated the personnel strength grew to several hundred assigned members and a varying number of attached personnel, sometimes in excess of two to three hundred. One hundred twenty-nine (129) of the glider mechanics in the initial complement came from the 45th Air Depot Group. They had joined the 45thfrom Laurinburg-Maxton Army Air Base and Pope Field, North Carolina, via Seymour Johnson, North Carolina, and the overseas staging area at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. They had arrived in Glasgow, Scotland, on the Queen Mary on 1 November 1943. These young glider mechanics, mostly privates first class and privates, had received their technical training at Sheppard Field, Texas. Other squadron personnel came from the 33rd Mobile Reclamation and Repair Squadron, the 13thBCD, and the 95th Service Squadron.

Since no barracks or mess halls were available at Crookham Common the squadron was initially assigned to Camp Columbia "A" for quarters and rations. This was an inconvenient arrangement, but couldn't be helped. The work crews were transported back and forth each day. Most of the month of November was devoted to getting established and setting up work areas. Lt. Chalcraft soon determined that it was not possible to implement high-geared glider assembly program until a rearrangement of the sprawling storage area could be effected. Right from the start the assembly crews began having difficulties because glider components built by different manufacturers did not fit together well. A lack of uniformity in manufacture was a constant source of trouble. When the crates had been off-loaded from the British lorries before the squadron's arrival they were stacked in a random manner. No one realized at the time the importance of locating like serially numbered crates together. The problem was soon resolved when Sgt. Jack L. Welborn, a glider mechanic, was assigned as chief clerk in the engineering office. He got the job after making an offhand remark to another mechanic that keeping track of the crates was a simple task and that any fool could do it. His brash comment was overheard by the squadron engineering officer. One of Sgt. Welborn's first actions was to note the location of glider crates with the same serial number on 3 X 5 cards. These cards reflected the manufacturer, serial number and location (area and row) of each crate. A complete glider could be located by referring to the card file.

After a few weeks experience the assembly crews found that the CG-4As built by the Ford Motor Company and Gibson Electric Refrigerator, both Michigan firms, were the easiest to assemble, while those built by Roberson Aircraft Corporation of Missouri and Commonwealth Aircraft, Inc. of Kansas were not easy to assemble. Castings built by the latter two firms were occasionally found to be faulty. The biggest handicap to glider assembly during December 1943 was the foul English weather. The assembly teams were plagued with rain, mud and high winds. On 18 December a disastrous wind swept across Crookham Common destroying four assembled gliders and damaging eighty-two (82) more, forty-four (44) of them severely. Another impediment to efficient operations was the lack of specialized ground equipment needed to assemble and repair gliders. Fortunately, the latter problem was soon solved by S/Sgt Benton M. Walker, a squadron welder. Using his exceptional mechanical skills, Sgt. Walker designed and supervised the fabrication of the unique equipment needed. Despite the cold, rain, mud, wind and lack of equipment 9) CG-4A gliders were delivered during the month and seventy-four (74) more were on hand ready for delivery.

On 21 December the squadron moved from their temporary quarters at nearby Camp Columbia "A" to their newly created housing at Crookham Common. Living accommodations had been fashioned from some of the empty glider crates. The Number 2 crate, containing the glider fuselage, provided adequate space for four men. It measured 24'3" in length, 6'10" in width and 6'11" in height. As the glider fuselages were pulled out the men moved in. They weatherproofed the roof, cut out windows, put in a stove and installed bunks. The occupants thought the idea was pretty clever and were amused at the media attention it drew. The sprawling array of crates soon became known as Shanty Town. It would ultimately boast its own mess halls, barber shop, tailor shop, headquarters building, theater, fire station and post exchange. Sunday religious services were held in the makeshift theater. This imaginative project

was a typical example of American wartime ingenuity at work. It was still necessary to go to Camp Columbia "A" to shower, and it would be January before the Shantytown mess hall was ready to serve meals. It took seven Number 2 crates to build the mess hall. This grass roots AAF station would ultimately become the sole glider assembly point in the United Kingdom. Rain and damaging winds continued to hinder glider assembly operations. On the night of 22 January 1944 strong winds damaged forty-four (44) gliders beyond repair. Sixty-seven (67) other gliders received minor to severe damage.

This setback did not alter the spirit or determination of the work crews, who delivered one hundred sixty-three (163) gliders in January. An additional forty (40) gliders were on hand ready for delivery. Three additional officers, Second Lieutenants Judd H. Qualline, Walter C. Shumaker and William 1. Bratt, were assigned to the 26th during the December-January period. The unit strength exceeded five hundred (500) personnel, assigned or attached, for the month of January. The additional manpower was needed to meet its assigned tasks.

Captain Robert W. Stewart became the commanding officer of the 26th on 26 February 1944. He replaced Major Henry F. Hass, who had assumed command that same month. Lt. Chalcraft became, the squadron engineering officer, his primary military specialty. The repair of wind damaged gliders consumed some of the month, but the unit still managed to deliver eighty-seven (87) gliders, with an additional forty-nine (49) ready for delivery. The officer strength of the squadron was now up to ten." Orders came down from higher headquarters in March to accelerate the assembly program. The men knew the Normandy invasion must be near. Additional facilities to accommodate more assembly teams were established. Barracks and tents were erected and two additional mess halls were set up. At the end of March 1944 over two hundred sixty-six (266) men were assigned or attached to the squadron. Because of the unrelenting pressure on assembly crews to meet seemingly impossible goals a special program was set up by Lt. Qualline to relieve the tension and provide the troops with some much needed recreation.

The commanding officer knew that a continuous heavy workload with no breaks could seriously hurt unit morale. During the month one hundred thirty-eight (138) gliders were delivered and another one hundred sixteen (116) were on hand and ready for delivery. In April 1944 the most intensive program of glider assembly ever attempted was begun. A quota of six hundred (600) gliders was established for the month, a 236% increase over the previous month. The crews worked a backbreaking dawn to dusk shift to take advantage of the longer days. Because of the sixteen-hour work days the weary but enthusiastic assembly crews were fed four times a day. They were kept informed of their progress by a large scoreboard over the mess halls. The wood working crews worked around-the-clock in three shifts in the one Butler hangar erected after the unit arrived in November. The design of a Butler hangar was unusual. The interior ceiling and sides were made of canvas suspended from the underside of a massive steel framework. Interior lighting in the hangar proved to be inadequate and the structure was unheated.

The accelerated production schedule meant working seven days a week. Squadron personnel responded to the new demands by assembling nine hundred thirty-one (931) CG-4A gliders that

month, exceeding their quota by more than 50%. This laudatory achievement reflected a devotion to duty worthy of the highest praise. The squadron's outstanding performance was recognized by letters of commendation from the commanding officer of the Ninth Air Force Base Air Depot Group, Colonel Charles W. Steinmetz, and the commanding general of the Ninth Air Force Service Command, Major General Henry 1. F. Miller. Three additional officers were assigned to the squadron in April, Second Lieutenants Julius 1. DeBoer, Morton H. Breslauer and George G. Kaline.

During March and April 1944 SHAEF headquarters had requested a daily count of assembled gliders by 2359 hours each day. Sergeant Welborn, the chief clerk in the 26thengineering office, was charged with this responsibility. He submitted the daily coded report to General Paul Williams' office at Ninth Troop Carrier Command by 2200 hours. The Ninth retransmitted it to SHAEF by midnight. Since the 26th had no communications center it was necessary to use the facilities of the 101st Airborne Division next door. A password was needed to gain access to the 101st compound which wasn't given to Sgt. Welborn. For several days he was able to talk himself onto the facility, but was always accompanied by a trooper. He was subsequently given a pass signed by the 101st Provost Marshal, Major Robert L. Gregory. Even so, he still had to be accompanied by a guard. One day his closed jeep was hit by rifle fire when the driver didn't hear the command to halt. The matter was quickly cleared up.

Quite unexpectedly in April the most famous glider of World War II, The Fighting Falcon, was uncrated and assembled. The work crews were surprised to see a name painted on the fuselage when it was removed from its crate. The Falcon was destined to be the No.1 glider in the lead serial on D-Day, 6 June 1944, and would carry Brigadier General Donald F. Pratt, Assistant Division Commander of the 101st Airborne Division, and his aide-de-camp, Lt. John L. May, as its passengers. Unfortunately, the general was killed when the glider, piloted by Lt. Colonel Mike Murphy, smashed into a hedgerow, near Hiesville, France. The Falcon was built by the Gibson Electric Refrigerator Company of Greenville, Michigan, and donated to the Army Air Force by the public school children of that city. The students raised $72,000 selling war bonds and stamps, enough to buy four CG-4A gliders, but only one was named. The Fighting Falcon was christened and turned over to the Army Air Force on 19 May 1944 at Black Athletic Field in Greenville. A number of city officials and government officials were on hand. It began its journey to England about two weeks later on two railroad flat cars. When General Williams heard about the glider and its background he directed that it be the lead glider in the upcoming invasion of Normandy.

Feverish assembly activity continued in May 1944. Work crews labored without letup from dawn to dusk, but the weary men faced their task with determination. Five hundred ninety-three gliders were assembled and delivered by the end of the month. To add to the already overwhelming burden the new CG-4A Griswold nose modification kits (Technical Order 09-40 CA-47), began arriving and had to be installed on many gliders previously completed. It was installed on two hundred forty-seven (247) gliders in May, one hundred fifty-three (153) on newly assembled CG-4As at Crookham Common and ninety-four (94) on gliders already

delivered. 2nd Lt. George G. Kalins was appointed post exchange officer in May. Two hundred seventy-nine (279) personnel were assigned to the unit at the end of the month.

Glider assembly virtually ceased in June since the demand for large numbers of gliders had been fulfilled for the moment. However, the heavy workload continued unabated. On 3 June 1944 Captain Edward J. Kennedy was appointed squadron quartermaster officer. The D-Day invasion of Normandy three days later dwarfed all other activities in the UK. The men at Crookham Common were proud that they had done their part The Griswold nose mod was installed on sixty-four (64) gliders and litters were installed on ninety (90) C-47s. Only one CG-4A was assembled and delivered -a slow month by previous standards.

On 23 June, Detachment "A," composed of one officer, Lt. George H Boynton, and eight glider mechanics; M/Sgt Pat O'Sullivan, M/Sgt Percy Smith, M/Sgt Ed Flemming, T/Sgt Eliseo Blasquez, S/Sgt James Davis, Sgt. Don Anderson, Sgt Joe Pace and Sgt. Jack Welborn, was formed and flown to France to salvage gliders employed in the invasion. The repair crew traveled light, carrying only small hand tools, a change of underwear and a pair of socks. They landed at an airstrip near Omaha Beach. From there they were taken to St. Laurent sur Mer where they were supplied with a jeep and a 6 X 6 truck and sent to St. Mere Eglise. Many of the invasion gliders had landed near there. The crew camped out in a pasture near town and often had to work in areas that were still mined. Only twelve (12) gliders were found to be repairable. These were patched up and snatched out of the pastures by specially-equipped C-47s. Useable parts were salvaged from the unflyable gliders and the carcasses were then burned.

Other detachments were formed and sent to distant bases in June 1944. Detachment "B," composed of one officer, Captain Joseph E. O'Brien, and sixteen (16) mechanics and technicians, was flown to Criequeville en Bessin, France, on 28 June to repair A-20 and B-26 type aircraft. Nineteen (19) aircraft were repaired and three were dismantled for shipment back to the United Kingdom. When an aircraft tire needed changing the mechanics had to improvise by borrowing a screw jack from a 6 X 6 truck. The truck jack was placed under the jacking point of the strut and then a hole a foot and a half deep was dug under the wheel to get the clearance necessary to remove the wheel and tire. It was a crude arrangement but it worked. Two C-47 wing changes were also accomplished at airstrip A3. The replacement wings arrived from the UK unassembled and had to be assembled before hanging. Since a suitable hoist was not available the mechanics had to rig an A-frame. Another detachment, composed of one officer, Lt. William 1. Bratt, and forty (40) glider mechanics, was dispatched to Bottesford, Langar and Fulbeck, England, where the mechanics repaired four hundred twenty-four (424), twenty-four (24) and seventeen (17) gliders respectively. Warrant Officer Delbert W. Vaughn and a working party of forty men (40) were dispatched to Wormwell, England, to repair battle damaged aircraft. Sometimes parts had to be scavenged from other similar aircraft damaged beyond repair.

Between 7 and 16 June the team repaired fourteen C-47s, two B-26s and one B-17. In July 1944 a comprehensive cleanup campaign was begun at Crookham Common. The immensity of the task was enormous when you consider that thousands of huge crates littered the area. Four

thousand six hundred fifty-five (4,655) crates were opened in April alone and an additional two thousand nine hundred seventy-five (2,975) more were emptied in May. Intact crates, loose lumber, metal, paper and salvaged glider parts were separated and placed in specific areas. Refuse and unsalvageable parts were stacked in piles and burned. Much of the good lumber was claimed by other organizations for building projects, which aided the 26th housekeeping chore materially. A Detachment "C" was formed on 10 July and flown to Querqueville, France. It was composed of two officers and sixteen (16) mechanics and technicians. On 17 July, 2nd Lt. William J. Bratt was appointed station engineering officer. Eleven (11) CG-4As were assembled during the month and forty-five (45) C-47s were fitted with litters. Three hundred thirty-seven (337) personnel were assigned or attached to the 26th on 31 July 1944.

All of the detachments involved in salvage and repair duties in France were returned to Crookham Common on 1 August 1944. On that same date a new glider assembly procedure was established and another accelerated assembly campaign began. The invasion of Southern France and Holland were just weeks away. Two large storage areas containing some sixteen hundred (1,600) glider crates were moved to accommodate the new assembly setup. The straight-line assembly plan would save considerable time and effort. Eight hundred thirty-eight (838) gliders were assembled during August, seven hundred (700) of them in a sixteen (16) day period under adverse conditions. It was an accomplishment worthy of the highest praise. On 15 August a new all-time assembly record was set when one hundred (100) gliders were assembled in a single day. The unit received a letter of commendation from Colonel T. S. Voss, Commanding Officer of the 15tAdvanced Air Depot Area for their superior performance. The CO was now acutely aware that he had a very special group of young men assigned to his squadron.

S/Sgt Benton M. Walker, who designed the specialized ground equipment needed by the squadron after its arrival in the United Kingdom, was recommended for the Legion of Merit. He was credited with designing a glider towing dolly, a specialized ladder for repair crews, aileron carriers, an inboard and outboard wing trailer and a moveable maintenance shelter frame, all peculiar to the CG-4A glider. Taken as a whole the devices greatly reduced the man hours required to assemble, repair and move a glider from one point to another on the compound.. On the 26thof the month the squadron was relieved from assignment to the Ninth Air Force and assigned to the Ninth Troop Carrier Command. Thirteen hundred sixty-four (1,364) personnel were assigned or attached to the unit at the end of August 1944. That same month Sergeant Lorentz H. Peterson, a member of Detachment "C," was recommended for the Purple Heart for injuries suffered during an air attack on the night of 28-29 July 1944 while on detached service in Normandy, France. He was struck in the nose and face by falling shrapnel from nearby anti-aircraft guns firing at enemy aircraft.

The accelerated assembly of gliders continued until mid-September 1944. On 5 September Major Arthur J. McGettrick, CO of the 33rd Mobile Reclamation and Repair Squadron, replaced Captain Robert W. Stewart as commander of Crookham Common. This allowed Captain Stewart to devote full time and attention to his job as CO of the 26thMobile Reclamation and Repair Squadron. On 17 September 1944 the invasion of Holland began. The largest number of gliders

ever assembled took part in the first phase of that operation. The sky was darkened as the huge armada passed overhead. During the month twelve hundred (1,200) men on detached service with the 26thwere retimed to their proper stations. A small number of gliders were assembled during the month, but the number is not listed in the official unit history. Work continued on the salvaging of scrap lumber and the repair of glider components. WO (jg) Delbert L. Vaughn was promoted to Chief Warrant Officer. Fifteen (15) sheet metal workers were placed on detached service to AAF Station 479 for repair of military aircraft.

On 14 October word was received to gear up for another accelerated glider assembly project. One hundred eight (108) additional personnel were shipped in and attached to the 26th for duty. In spite of heavy rains and mud the assembly line continued without letup. The number of gliders assembled during the month was not recorded in the unit history, but the number must have been substantial. On 26 October 1stLt. William J. Bratt, who had been on a special glider project in Holland returned to Crookham Common. Sergeant Lorentz Petterson was awarded the Purple Heart on 28 October 1944. Four men were sent to AAF Station 464 and five sheet metal workers were sent to AAF Station 479 on detached service. The fifteen (15) sheet metal workers already at AAF Station 479 on detached service were returned to Crookham Common. Two hundred twenty-two (222) personnel were assigned to the 26th on 31 October.

The glider assembly project begun in October was still underway in November. Many of the gliders being assembled would be used in the invasion of Germany, some four months away. Rain and mud during the month slowed production, but not deter the work crews. They kept at their task without complaint. The first Waco CG-13 glider was uncrated and assembled in November 1944. Sixteen (16) technicians from the 26th were away at technical training schools in the UK; five at the British Oxygen School at Cricklewood; nine at the American Component No.8 School at Lancashire, and two to the Dowty Equipment Company at Cheltenham. It was common practice for British families near the schools to house the students. Two members of the 26th, Sergeants Jack L. Welborn and Gail Bird, who were students in a welding school, stayed with a British family within walking distance of their school. Two hundred twenty-one (221) personnel were assigned to the unit on 30 November 1944.

During December 1944 a few CG-4A and CG-13A gliders were assembled. Captain Robert W. Stewart, Commanding Officer of the 26th M. R. & R. Squadron, was promoted to Major. Sevenmen were attending training schools throughout England. At the end of the month the glider assembly project was halted completely. All personnel attached to the unit for duty were returned to their proper stations. Two hundred twenty-two (222) personnel were assigned to the squadron at the end of December.

In January 1945 the 26th embarked on a new program of assembly. This time it was the new and larger Waco CG-13A glider. A number of them had arrived on the station in crates. Fourth echelon maintenance was performed on a number of Commonwealth CG-4A gliders. Also, a number of incomplete CG-4As from a former accelerated assembly program were completed. On 5 January the most ambitious project of the month was started. Twenty (20) gliders a day, totaling one hundred (100) crates, were transported to five distant service groups for assembly.

Previous precautionary measures implemented at the station prevented all but minor damage to a few gliders during a violent windstorm on 18 January. On 23 January forty-two (42) members of the squadron, who served on detached service in France in either Detachments "A," "B" or "C," were awarded battle stars for the Normandy (6 Jun 1944 to 25 Ju11944) and. Northern France (25 Jul 1944 to 14 Sep 1944) campaigns. Two hundred forty-seven (247) personnel were assigned to the squadron for duty on 31 January 1945.

The assembly of CG-13As continued in February along with fourth echelon repair of Commonwealth gliders. Six hundred (600) crated gilders were shipped to other stations for assembly during the first fifteen days of the month despite adverse weather conditions and limited equipment. On 21 February a new CG-4A assembly program was begun. Engineering personnel were increased to three hundred (300) mechanics and technicians. The assembly quota for the next forty-five (45) days was set at six hundred (600) gliders. Two hangars on the adjoining airfield, AAF Station 486, were used for final assembly so work could continue during inclement weather. The assembly program started slowly because of a lack of engineering equipment. By the end of the month it showed promise of equaling former records.

Thirty-three (33) assembled gliders were delivered for the month of February 1945. Twelve (12) CG-13As were delivered and eleven (11) Commonwealth CG-4As were repaired. Twelve (12) gliders which had been left unfinished by Team "B," 82nd Service Group, were sent to the 26th for completion.

In April 1945 the squadron was authorized a personnel strength of seven (7) officers, one (1) Warrant Officer and one hundred seventy-five (175) enlisted men. The unit received orders that month to assemble all gliders remaining at CrookhamCommon. One hundred sixty-nine (169) CG-4As and eight (8) CG-13As were assembled and delivered during the month. Sixty (60), five thousand (5,000) pound, units of lumber from glider crates were prepared for shipment to the continent and all remaining crated gliders were removed from the base.

On the 23 April 1945 Mobile Unit Number One (a machine shop mounted on a 6 X 6 truck), used for off base work, was reassigned to AAF Station 548. The following day General Order No. 51 was issued by IX Troop Carrier Command disbanding the 26th Mobile Reclamation and Repair Squadron (Heavy) effective 25 April. The last two CG-4A gliders to be assembled at Crookham Common were delivered on that date. During its seventeen-month existence squadron personnel had assembled and delivered over five thousand (5,000) gliders used in the invasion of Normandy, Southern France, Holland, Bastogne, and Wesel, Germany. Shortly after the disbandment order was received all personnel attached to the 26th were returned to their proper units. Some departed by military aircraft on 26 April. All personnel rendered surplus were assigned to Detachment "B" of the 29thAir Depot Group. In its closing days the squadron was awarded the Meritorious Service Unit Plaque for outstanding performance between 1 May 1944 and 31 October 1944.

Looking back in retrospect, the 26th M. R. & 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 support facilities, a task that was not part of their duties, and they did it willfully. When squadron members were asked to accelerate the glider assembly schedule it did so without question and far exceeded its assigned goals. Its assembly crews built gliders under the worst possible conditions of rain, mud, cold, fog and wind storms. The fog was so bad at times that you could stand at the wing tip of a glider and couldn't see the fuselage. The crews worked under these conditions day after day without complaint, and with little recognition of its superior performance. These stalwart men quickly learned the value of teamwork during the hectic months between November 1943 and April 1945. The legend of the 26th passed into history on 25 April 1945, but those who served in or were associated with the squadron, will long remember its exploits and the fine men who made up its ranks.

Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency, U.S. Air Force, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.