

**Pay Here**



**Free to RUSI of  
NSW Members**

The article with the first page available below is reprinted with permission from United Service (the Journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales, a non-profit body).

The price of \$10, helps us to defray the costs of bringing this popular article to you.

Please pay for this single article using PayPal or Credit Card, or consider applying for Annual RUSI-NSW Membership to receive quarterly printed copies of United Service, gain free access to all online resources plus other significant benefits.

[www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership](http://www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership)

**Pay Here**

**Free to RUSI of  
NSW Members**

RUSI-NSW seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888.

**View Page 1**

# ***Gliding off to war: the use of gliders as weapons in World War II***

an address<sup>1</sup> to the Institute on 26 August 2010 by  
**James Oglethorpe**



*As an unforeseen legacy of the Versailles Treaty, the prohibitions imposed on German air-power gave the Luftwaffe impetus to develop combat gliders which provided Germany with a potent weapon at the outbreak of World War II. Subsequent extraordinarily rapid research and development undertaken by the Allies, coupled with their increasing control of the skies, permitted the Allies to dominate glider-borne warfare later in the war. By 1945, the combat life of the silent aerial cargo transporter came to an end, to be replaced by the newly developing helicopter platforms.*

This paper outlines the development of glider warfare during World War II. It details the most notable instances of the operational use of gliders and the reason they quickly disappeared from military inventories after the war.

Only in World War II were gliders used as assault weapons – neither before nor after. Nonetheless, during their time, military gliders were quite an important weapon. For instance, nearly 14,000 gliders of the standard American design (the “Waco” CG-4A) were produced between 1941 and 1944. The Waco featured a wood and steel-tubing structure, with canvas exterior skin. It had two pilots and a flip-up nose section, allowing rapid unloading. It provided seating for up to 13 troops, or equipment loads such as a jeep or small howitzer.

Gliders were cheaply mass-produced from non-strategic materials. Many different businesses, such as piano factories, successfully adapted to manufacturing gliders during the War. A glider could effectively double the load-carrying capacity of its towing aircraft, at a small fraction of the cost. In military operations, gliders

could be landed on a wide range of unprepared field surfaces behind enemy lines, which allowed enormous tactical flexibility. Compared with parachute troops, glider (or “air-landing”) troops arrived into battle already organised, accompanied by their heavy equipment. Air-landing troops also required less training than paratroopers and the chance of injury (especially in training) was lessened (although still significant). Gliders also arrived silently, parting their tow-planes up to 20 kilometres away, which provided a crucial surprise factor in several assaults.

## **Advent of the Military Glider**

In the 1920s and early 30s, the *Treaty of Versailles* had placed very onerous terms on Germany prohibiting German military aircraft manufacture. In response, Germany instituted extensive pilot-training on gliders instead. This encouraged a nationalistic youth “gliding” culture, and Germany became the world leader in glider technology-development and record-setting.

A young woman named Hanna Reitsch, a naturally-gifted glider pilot, rose through the German glider-training organisation at the end of the 1920s. She attained prominence in German sports-gliding from 1931, when she achieved her first world record. Amazingly, Hanna was to go on setting world gliding records up until 1979.

She later played a key role in the acceptance of troop-carrying gliders into the Luftwaffe inventory. As a result of her connections with top-ranking Luftwaffe officials, Hanna was recruited as a test pilot. In 1937, she flew a major demonstration of the prototype DFS-230 troop-carrying glider and successfully delivered eight personnel armed with machine-pistols at the feet of senior Luftwaffe observers who were key decision-makers. This resulted in an immediate mass-production order for the DFS Company and the DFS-230 went on to feature in all of Germany’s glider assaults in World War II.



Cut-away of a United States ‘WACO’ CG-4A standard glider, which had two pilots and carried up to 13 personnel  
[Photo: Cradle of Aviation Museum, Garden City NY]

<sup>1</sup>Attended by 56 members and guests

**Pay Here**



**Free to RUSI of  
NSW Members**

The article with the first page of which you have read is reprinted with permission from United Service (the Journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales, a non-profit body).

The price of \$10, helps us to defray the costs of bringing this popular article to you.

Please pay for this single article using PayPal or Credit Card, or consider applying for Annual RUSI-NSW Membership to receive quarterly printed copies of United Service, gain free access to all online resources plus other significant benefits.

[www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership](http://www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership)

**Pay Here**

**Free to RUSI of  
NSW Members**

RUSI-NSW seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888.