



For birthday, man reprises pilot role

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For a birthday present to himself, Len Gumley of Sarasota went to a field in Zephyrhills, boarded a plane without an engine and was towed into flight.

Why would a 90-year-old man pick a glider ride to mark the occasion?

It goes back to World War II, when Gumley was part of a new air force in the U.S. military that used gliders to perform silent sneak attacks. Though he did not see combat in a glider, Gumley is still attached to the planes and what they represent.

He is executive director of the World War II Glider Pilots Association, which will have a reunion in Texas at the Glider Museum in October.

When his birthday flight earlier this month ended, Gumley beamed with excitement and appreciation for his pilot, Ron Sutton, on an exciting yet safe ride.

The glider ride came more than 60 years after Gumley was a student at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where he earned a private pilot's license and had flying on his mind when he joined the military. On a wall at the enlistment center was a large poster that read, "Soar to victory on the wings of a glider."

Then and there, Gumley was bitten by the glider bug, and he began training to become part of a new branch of the Army Air Force. The problem was that they had no gliders.

What followed was a dizzying stretch of base-hopping in those early war years, from Randolph Field in Texas, then off to a base in Albuquerque, New Mexico, before going to 29 Palms in California, back again to New Mexico and then to Wichita Falls, Texas. At each new base, they underwent 30-hour courses -- without gliders. Gumley and his colleagues were dumbfounded.

The Army, however, did have a plan. They reached out to American builders of light aircraft -- Piper, Aeronca and Taylorcraft -- and had them build regular planes with the engines removed. In their place, a forward seat to create a two-seater training glider was fashioned. The Army Air Force had a good supply of the venerable C-47 to use as tow planes. The military grabbed every one of the planes they could and gradually Gumley and friends learned to be glider pilots.

In October 1943, Gumley and his friends graduated from their flight school as second lieutenant flight officers. Training continued as the real gliders started to arrive.

But the gliders were dangerous. Like many other glider pilots, Gumley was in a crash that ended any chance he would see combat in Europe. The attrition rate involving the canvas covered pipe-framed gliders continued to pile up at an alarming rate.

Come 1945, the war in Europe was over, and Gumley moved to Hollywood to pursue another passion: acting.

He found an agent and landed small parts in a number of films, including "Sands of Iwo Jima" with a guy named John Wayne. Gumley was cast as a Jewish Marine PFC named Sid Stein and boasts that he "got it," as in being shot in combat, even before The Duke met his end on the silver screen.

Later, Gumley was a staff manager for three years in the 1950s for CBS television and the Walter Cronkite news team that included Edward R. Morrow and Eric Sevareid.

Gumley's apartment overlooking Sarasota Bay holds shelves full of trophies. They include six Cine Golden Eagle trophies for documentaries he produced for pharmaceutical giant Hoffman-LaRoche and a half-dozen more from Pfizer. There are dozens more he does not have enough shelf space to display. For Pfizer, he added, he turned out 20 films for the United Way during a tenure that went on for 18 years and brought in about \$60 million in pledges.

He sits on the board of directors of the Asolo Repertory Theatre, served on the board of the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe and is frequently involved with meetings and committees.

Add in a daily routine of laps in the apartment complex pool, and the 90-year-old retains a youthful look and the bravery to go for glider rides.