

Sergeant Leonard Thomas Lovelock, 7911024, Glider Pilot Regiment, ex Royal Armoured Corps

Direct information held by the Museum of Army Flying

Born 14.11.1915, Battersea, Surrey, died 18.1.2002, Berkshire

Leonard Lovelock joined the Glider Pilot Regiment from the Royal Armoured Corps on the 16th of September 1944. He was most likely promoted to the rank of Sergeant upon completing his Pilot training. On the 21st of April 1946 Sgt Lovelock transferred to Z/T reserve and left active service.

Background to Glider Pilot Service

The Glider Pilot Regiment (GPR) was formed in 1942. It was the result of a directive given in June 1940 by Winston Churchill to raise a force of parachute and glider-borne troops in England. Churchill had been greatly impressed by the German parachute and airborne landings and was keen to establish an equally effective and highly trained force.

Training

There were many reasons for individuals to transfer to the Glider Pilot Regiment (GPR). Numerous Army personnel had applied to transfer to the Royal Air Force (RAF), but suffered delays or refusal; the GPR offered another route into flying. Boredom also played a part, with volunteer numbers for the GPR remaining high throughout the Second World War.

The GPR was highly unique in recruiting mainly other ranks as pilots. Soldiers could start their training as Corporals and within a year could be in charge of an aircraft.

Prospective British glider pilots could only apply from within the ranks of the British Army. Unlike their American counterparts, British Glider Pilots were required to be fully trained soldiers who had to keep their fighting skills up to date.

GPR pilots were fully trained pilots and soldiers. On operations their duty was to fly their load to the battlefield and once landed, join the troops they had transported in the battle. When flying gun crews they were often employed as extra defensive personnel around the gun and when transporting infantry, the pilots became part of the troop.

The initial selection stage for the GPR was identical to the RAF, followed by a similar medical examination. Successful applicants were then sent to the GPR Depot at Tilshead, on Salisbury Plain, for a three-to-six week probationary period before acceptance into the Regiment.

The process of becoming a glider pilot involved different stages of training in order to master the unique requirements of the role. It began with the basics of flight, before moving onto learning to fly training gliders and finally mastering operational glider types.

Prospective pilots learnt to fly on powered aircraft at Elementary Flying Training Schools (EFTS). The first of these was Burnaston, near Derby, which took on its first glider pilot course on 1 January 1942.

The second part of flying training took place at Glider Training Schools (GTS). Initially, training on basic gliders such as the Kirby Kite was followed by conversion onto Hotspur gliders at Glider

Operational Training Units. In August, these two phases were combined at GTS sites, and only Hotspurs were used for training after this point.

Heavy Glider Conversion Units (HGCU), the final stage of training, first opened on 29 June 1942 following the introduction of the Horsa glider. Here individuals learnt to fly the gliders they would use on operations.

All flying training courses were run by the Royal Air Force, and classroom-based subjects were taught alongside practical flying. However, only limited and fragmented flying training could take place during 1942, due to the restricted availability of tug aircraft.

Recruitment and operations in 1944 and 1945

The airborne operations at Sicily in July 1943 were the first large scale allied glider operations. After these operations senior pilots were promoted to 'first pilots', would captain the aircraft and received the rank of Staff Sergeant. Junior pilots were 'second pilots' and were in most cases at least Sergeants in name.

In 1944 the Glider Pilot Regiment took part in two major operations: D-Day and Arnhem. The need for trained pilots was large and throughout the year the GPR recruited many new members. Initial GPR training was at a high level and the pass-rate was relatively low.

After Operation Market the Glider Pilot Regiment was dangerously understaffed. Many glider pilots had been injured, killed or taken prisoner. In preparation for a future operation in North-West Europe and possible operations in the Far East, the Glider Pilot Regiment recruited RAF members to their ranks.

By the start of 1945, the River Rhine was the last major obstacle to an advance into Germany. Operation VARSITY was planned in order to cross the Rhine, allowing Allied forces to press forward into the industrial heartland of Germany, the Ruhr Valley.

Due to the sheer size of the river, it was decided that a large-scale daylight airborne assault was necessary. This was planned for 24 March 1945. The airborne element would link up with land forces, which would begin the advance the night before. VARSITY was the biggest single-lift airborne operation of the war, and the troops delivered by the Glider Pilot Regiment (GPR) were tasked with seizing the high ground to the north of the landing zones, as well as the town of Hamminkeln and bridges over the River Issel.