



028

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
WASHINGTON DC
Bolling AFB DC 20332-6098

19 November 1990

Mr. George T. Chandler
President
Second Yamamoto Mission Association
Drawer N
223 South Main
Pratt KS 67124

Dear Mr. Chandler

This letter responds to yours of 2 February 1990 and the request to convene another Victory Credit Board to review the award of shared credit for the shooting down of the Japanese Betty Bomber carrying Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto on 18 April 1943. As you remember, I agreed to convene a new Victory Credit Board if there appeared new credible evidence to call into question the award of shared credit.

I. WHO REVIEWED THE EVIDENCE.

In order to help address the problem, I submitted your letter, the documents enclosed with it, and other materials to an Independent Advisory Panel for evaluation. The chairman was a retired Lieutenant General of the United States Air Force, a triple ace from World War II who held many positions of high responsibility and command, including a tour as Air Force Inspector General responsible for flying safety and crash investigations. The other two members were senior active-duty colonels, both United States Air Force Academy graduates, both command pilots, both with command experience at the squadron or wing level, both with substantial combat experience in Southeast Asia (one in OV-10s, the other in F-4s), one of whom holds the Ph.D. in history and the other the recipient of the Richard Bong history award while at the Academy. At the time the Board met, one man chaired the Strategy Department at the National War College, the other headed the Strategy Division of the Joint Staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Having worked personally with all three of these officers over the years, I can attest to their experience, independence, intelligence, fair-mindedness, and integrity. They studied the materials, met at my office together for nearly three hours, and provided a written report in response to my request to "advise me whether Mr. Chandler has indeed furnished credible new evidence that calls into question the awarding of a shared aerial credit" for this victory.

In addition, I submitted the same materials to the senior leadership of the Air Force History Program: Colonel John F. Shiner, until June 1990 the Deputy Chief of Air Force History, a command pilot with over 3,100 hours of flying time (over a thousand of combat), and an historian with a Ph.D. who has authored Foulois and U.S. Army Air Corps and taught at our Academy for a decade before joining me here over six years ago; Colonel Elliott V. Converse, Commander of the USAF Historical Research Center, an intelligence officer with experience

in Southeast Asia who has the M.A. and Ph.D. in history and who taught history for nearly a decade at the Academy; Mr. Herman S. Wolk, my Deputy Chief Historian for Publications, Chairman of our Publications Committee, and Chief of our Histories Branch, an Air Force historian for over 35 years and author of Planning and Organizing the Post-War Air Force, 1943-1947; and Mr. R. Cargill Hall, formerly Deputy Director and Chief of the Research Division at the Center, now Chief of Contract Histories in this office, a distinguished historian of science and technology who served as historian at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, at the Strategic Air Command and Military Airlift Command History Offices, author of A History of Project Ranger for NASA, and many other works in the history of rocketry, aeronautics, and space exploration, and who edited the proceedings of the 1988 Yamamoto Mission Retrospective which will soon be published by the Smithsonian Institution Press.

I asked Mr. Hall to evaluate the materials you sent recently concerning the flight tests, and he did so, using the expertise of Dr. Vance O. Mitchell, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF, Retired, formerly an historian in this office, a master navigator who flew 108 combat missions in Southeast Asia aboard gunships and who has over 8,500 hours of flying time, and who served over four years as an instructor navigator.

Having worked with these men for over nine years, I have enormous confidence in, and respect for, their professionalism, integrity, and judgment.

Finally, I carefully reviewed the documents and arguments myself. In addition to the documents you furnished, I studied a variety of materials, including: (1) the 13 June 1990 memorandum from "Lefty" Gardner to you ("Yamamoto Shoot-Down Maneuvers Re-enactment"); (2) portions of the 1943 diary of Yamamoto's Chief of Staff, Admiral Ugaki, who was also shot down on this mission, sent to me at your request by R. Y. Nishiyama on 12 July 1990 and translated by Mr. Nishiyama; (3) an interview of Mr. Hiroshi Hayashi, the pilot of the bomber accompanying Admiral Yamamoto's aircraft, done in June 1990 by Professor Hisashi Takahashi, a senior historian in the Japanese Self Defense Forces, and by Jay E. Hines, 5th Air Force Historian, USAF; (4) and a letter from Professor Takahashi to Mr. Hayashi containing Mr. Hayashi's clarifying replies, dated 3 October 1990.

The latter two documents, which you have not seen, are attached for your information. The translation of the 22 June 1990 tape was done at my request by Mr. Makoto Shinagaura; it matches the English translation of the tape itself, and an oral translation on 18 July 1990 by Colonel Yoshishige Horii, Japanese Air Attaché to the United States.

This review has been painstakingly thorough, combining the viewpoints of experienced professional aviators, pilots with combat experience in two wars in a variety of aircraft, and professional historians from a multitude of specialties relating to military and Air Force history. The combined total of flying time is in the many thousands of hours and in professional historical experience, many decades. I began my own analysis of the evidence in June, but suspended it upon learning of the Hayashi interview, awaiting a reliable translation so that this new -- and potentially significant -- evidence could be integrated with the other evidence.

II. ANALYSIS OF THE EVIDENCE.

The first document you submitted is the signed statement of 10 August 1989 by Kenji Yanagiya, one of the Japanese Zero pilots escorting Admiral Yamamoto's airplane on 18 April 1943. Mr. Yanagiya's statement indicates a short interval of time between the first attack on the Admiral's airplane and its crash into the jungle. This point is critical because analysis by the 1985 Victory Credit Board, confirming the earlier finding by Air Force historians which led to shared credit, concluded that the Admiral's airplane remained aloft long enough after Rex Barber's attack for Thomas Lanphier to have turned from the attack on the bomber, climbed to meet the attacking fighter escort, rolled over at 6,000 feet, dove, and then attacked a bomber, firing into it and witnessing its crash into the jungle. This was Lanphier's recollection immediately after the mission, and subsequently.

The new statement by Mr. Yanagiya is not credible.

First of all, it is at substantial variance with his recollections of 1975 and 1988, the first of which is very general and the second of which contains the admission that the event "happened forty some odd years ago, memory is fading." In that 1988 interview, in response to a question about the first attack on the bombers, Mr. Yanagiya repeated that "he was on the farthest right-hand rear from the attack, . . . so therefore he does not recall and he did not see, and probably he didn't have the opportunity, if in fact one of the P-38s did that [split, flying up to meet the Zeros, while the other attacked the bomber], he didn't see. He couldn't see."

Second, the signed statement was originally drafted by you and not by Mr. Yanagiya. The documents you furnished at my request indicate that you sent a draft statement to Mr. Yanagiya on 5 June 1989, through Mr. R. Cutler, who had Mr. R. Nishiyama give it to Mr. Yanagiya. Mr. Nishiyama wrote in a fax to Mr. Cutler on 22 June 1989 that he "spent . . . 3 hours with Mr. Yanagiya, but that . . . unfortunately, in spite of my efforts to clarify the ambiguities of his quoted statements, without being too pressing, I was unable to get any definite clarification from Mr. Yanagiya."

On 10 July 1989, you sent another draft statement through Messrs. Cutler and Nishiyama to pin down Mr. Yanagiya as to the time elapsed between his seeing the Admiral's aircraft come under attack and its crash. As you wrote to Mr. Cutler, "You can see Ron that these statements would almost certainly prove that the Admiral's airplane went down from Rex Barber's attack." You then prefaced the new draft statement with the notation, "It would be best if this letter to George Chandler could be written in Japanese and signed by Ken Gi Yanagiya. Then an English translation made affirmed correct by Bob Nishiyama."

Last, Mr. Yanagiya insisted on changing that second draft statement to indicate not that the Admiral's aircraft crashed in 20 to 30 seconds after first being attacked, but began to "descend toward the jungle in an attitude of forced landing." (Fax message, 9 August 1989, R. Nishiyama to R. Cutler.) The Yanagiya affidavit allows as much as two minutes to have elapsed between his sighting of the American fighters and the crash, enough time for Captain Lanphier to have executed his turn, climb, roll-over, dive, and attack as re-enacted by "Lefty" Gardner in 1990. Mr. Yanagiya thus directly contradicts the statements in paragraph 1, page 2, and paragraph 6, page 3 of your 2 February letter to me,

that less than 30 seconds elapsed between the time Mr. Yanagiya first saw the American fighters and his seeing the crash of the bomber into the jungle.

The second evidence you submit concerns the wreckage of the bomber as witnessed by Charles Darby in 1972 and 1988, and Al Kauslick several times in 1977-1978 and 1987. Dr. Darby, in his 2 February 1990 letter to you, concludes that the left "wing had been removed by impact with a tree," not bullet damage, and that he found no bullet damage to the right engine. Mr. Kauslick, in his 1 February 1990 letter to you, also found no bullet damage to the right engine. Both statements attempt to call into question Lanphier's account of firing into the bomber from the 3 or 4 o'clock position, seeing the right engine burn and the bomber crash into the jungle, losing at that moment what Lanphier believed to be the right wing.

Neither the Independent Advisory Panel, nor the Air Force historians, nor I, think these descriptions of the wreckage call into question the veracity of Lanphier's statement overall. The wreckage lay in the jungle for 29 years before Dr. Darby saw it and over 47 years from today, subject to the deterioration of nature and the depredations of tourists and souvenir hunters. Mr. Kauslick, by his own account, removed two items from the site. Thus, no amount of examination can prove a negative: that Lanphier's bullets did not hit the aircraft on 18 April 1943. As the Independent Advisory Panel concluded:

Even if all bullet holes were found to have come from the 6 o'clock position, it does not mean they all came from Mr. Barber's aircraft; Mr. Lanphier also claims to have maneuvered behind the bomber. Furthermore, not finding any bullet holes in the 3 or 4 o'clock position is not at all the same as concluding that there were no bullets entering these positions -- a conclusion which can never be drawn, given the results of the crash and fire and the present condition of the wing and fuselage.

When one steps back from the details and analyzes the whole body of surviving evidence, it is obvious that some of the recollections in various accounts are probably mistaken -- including which wing separated and from what cause. After the mission, both men thought there had been three bombers. Long experience tells us that aerial combat often occurs suddenly at great speeds, and at varying attitudes of flight; that pilots often experience sudden changes of height and direction and significant G-forces, and that they are under considerable tension and stress in combat. Witnesses to the same event often vary widely in their recollection. Memories change over time. Important and inconsequential details are often misperceived or garbled. Pilots in good faith on both sides of this engagement claimed victories which turned out to be false, a frequent occurrence during aerial combat in all theaters, on all sides, during World War II.

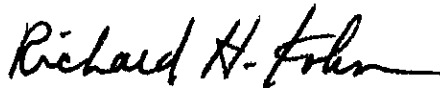
In other theaters during the war, American forces required gun-camera film or corroborating witnesses to confirm any aerial victory. But due to the uniqueness of this mission and the need for the utmost security to preserve the intelligence source for Admiral Yamamoto's itinerary, credit for the victory was not officially awarded at the time by the Thirteenth Air Force. However, let us remember that the rules for victory credits varied with time and place. In the words of the Independent Advisory Panel:

Having now devoted substantial time and effort to studying the Yamamoto mission, it is the unanimous judgment of the Independent Advisory Panel and the senior leadership of the USAF History Program that the matter of the victory credit should be closed. The Panel, in its own words,

agreed with all the [1985 Victory Credit] Board's major conclusions. Furthermore, because of the time since the event, the particular circumstance involved, and the state of the evidence, the panel recommends that the Air Force not attempt to reopen this case. This recommendation is not meant to discourage further historical inquiry, but to avoid making determinations on a case based on fragmentary information or on additional recollections of those involved. . . . Many aspects of the Yamamoto shoot-down are far from clear and can never be. There was no gun-camera film. There was an inadequate post-mission report. There were misconceptions of how many aircraft crashed and how many aircraft were involved -- misconceptions that delayed any reconciliation of events until years later. Both Barber and Lanphier claimed to have hit the bomber carrying Admiral Yamamoto, and without proof that either man lied, those statements must be accepted; the panel's judgment is that each man could have been in position to hit the bomber at different times. In these circumstances, the shared credit appears appropriate. . . .

This letter, with its assessment of the available evidence, puts the matter of the victory credit to rest. Further investigation by the Air Force is not appropriate. In the last few years, the controversy has served to arouse antagonisms and needlessly divide the retired Air Force community. Both pilots served their country honorably and successfully, and the passage of time has served only to enhance the importance of their effort and service. As the 50th anniversary of American participation in World War II approaches, I believe we should act to honor the sacrifice and heroism of our veterans and not to reawaken or perpetuate old jealousies. Thomas Lanphier has now passed away. Perhaps we should heed the advice of Rex Barber, who in September 1984, in a letter to Lanphier, a copy of which was recently donated to the Air Force, wrote, "For the dignity of the Aces Association and the credibility of all fighter pilots, I have wanted to leave this historic event alone. I am satisfied with the fact that under the brilliant leadership of Colonel John W. Mitchell, the mission was successfully completed." At the end, Colonel Barber concluded, "I for one, after 40 years, would suggest that we let this matter rest, each of us with our own memories of a mission brilliantly planned and executed."

Sincerely yours



RICHARD H. KOHN
Senior Executive Service,
Department of the Air Force
Chief, Office of Air Force History

2 Attachments

1. Hiroshi Hayashi 22 Jun 1990 Interview
2. Letter, Hisashi Takahashi to Hiroshi Hayashi, 3 Oct 1990

cc: Mr. Joseph G. Linebarger, Deputy, Air Force Review Boards
Mr. Howard E. VanderClute, Jr., Adjutant General, Veterans of Foreign Wars
of the United States
Mr. John L. Sublett, President, American Fighter Aces Association
Mr. Tom Carter, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Senate Affairs)
Honorable Ike Skelton, Member of Congress