7-17-89 Copy of letter (not attachments) to GTC/SR Barber Mitchell

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES AIR FORCE HISTORICAL RESEARCH CENTER
MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA 36112-6678

11

10 July 1989

Mr George Chandler
Drawer N
223 South Main
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Dear Mr Chandler

Colonel Mitchell asked that we send you copies of the documents bearing directly on the deliberations of the 1985 Victory Credit Board of Review (VCBR).

As you know, the VCBR resulted from the dispute between Thomas Lanphier and Rex Barber made public in press accounts of the May 1984 American Fighter Aces Association annual convention. In early March 1985, Brigadier General Michael Jackson, USAF (Ret), Executive Vice President of the Fighter Aces Association, representing the interests of Thomas Lanphier, asked Dr Richard Kohn, Chief, Office of Air Force History, to resolve the dispute if possible by forming a board to reevaluate the evidence. Dr Kohn subsequently formed a board at the USAF Historical Research Center for that purpose.

Board members based their evaluation on the primary sources believed used in the original award of a shared credit in the 1960s (Atch 1). Those consisted of the Ugaki diary as reprinted in Zero, and the XIII Fighter Command debriefing report (Atch 2). Board members, of course, also consulted other related sources available in the Center (also identified in Atch 1 and enclosed at Atch 3), although these added little additional information to the primary accounts.

More recently, while pursuing research for the proceedings of the Yamamoto Mission Retrospective Symposium, Cargill Hall uncovered a synopsis of the Yamamoto mission contained in a 339th FS narrative history. I have included a copy of this synopsis for your information (Atch 4).

The third Record of Proceedings was furnished to George Chandler by Colonel Elliott V. Converse III, USAF, Commander, on 10 July 1989 at the request of Colonel John Mitchell.

Finally, although I understand you already have it, I am enclosing a copy of the Report of the 1985 VCBR (Atch 5). To my knowledge, there are no notes or any other documents that remain from the Board's deliberation.

Please let me know if what I have provided meets your needs, and, if not, how else I may be able to assist.

Sincerely

Elliott V. Converse III

ELLIOTT V. CONVERSE III
Colonel, USAF
Commander

4 Atch
1. Excerpts From Report of 1985 VCBR, "References"
2. Primary Sources
3. Other Sources
4. Synopsis of Y-Mission, 339th FS Narrative History
5. Report of 1985 VCBR

cc: Colonel John Mitchell
Dr Richard H. Kohn (w/o Atch)

USAFHRC Victory Credit Board of Review

22 March 1985

Members

Chairman: Lt Col Frederick E. Zoes, Commander, USAFHRC

Recorder: Mr. R. Cargill Hall, Chief, Research Division

Major Lester A. Sliter, Chief, Inquiries Branch

Dr. Benjamin B. Williams, Col, USAFR (Ret)

Dr. Donald B. Dodd, Lt Col, USAFR

Dr. Daniel L. Haulman, Historian

Version #3

USAFHRC VICTORY CREDIT
BOARD OF REVIEW, 22 MARCH 1985
RECORD OF PROCEEDINGS

Board members convened at 1330 hours on 22 March at the USAF Historical Research Center, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. With all members present, Lt Col Frederick E. Zoes, Board Chairman, charged the board to reconsider the awarding of victory credits for the destruction of Admiral Yamamoto's aircraft on 18 April 1943.

Background

The Victory Credit Board of Review convened in response to an official request from Dr. Richard H. Kohn, Chief, Office of Air Force History, to review the credit awarded in the 18 April 1943 mission that destroyed the Betty Bomber carrying Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto on a flight from Rabaul to Ballale Island. Verifying this particular victory credit was made more difficult because of the scarcity of primary source materials, the conflicting accounts of the engagement in a key source, and the large amount of publicity that occurred in the years following the mission. For the purposes of this review and determination, the board considered only primary sources: The mission planning documents, the post-engagement intelligence debriefing, and the eyewitness account of a Japanese survivor, Vice-Admiral Matome Ugaki, Chief of Staff of the Combined Fleet, who recorded an account of the engagement in his diary. Secondary sources such as newspaper

articles and citations for awards, were excluded from consideration. Personal recollections of the participants offered over 40 years later, were also excluded because of the passage of time.

The board convened for the purpose of reconsidering the award of original victory credits made by the USAF Historical Division (predecessor of the USAF Historical Research Center) in the late 1960s and published in the official listing of USAF World War II victory credits in 1978.[1] At that time, historians assigned to the original victory credit team judged that the destruction of Admiral Yamamoto's Betty bomber resulted from the gunfire of two P-38s piloted by Capt Thomas C. Lanphier and 1st Lt Rex T. Barber. The victory credit was thus shared under the XIII Fighter Command practice for awarding fractional aerial victory credits; that is, if two or more fighter pilots fired on and hit the same aircraft, which crashed, the credit was equally shared. (In the same engagement, for example, 1st Lt Barber and 1st Lt Besby T. Holmes both fired on and destroyed another Betty bomber, and that victory credit is likewise shared.)

Findings

Because of the security surrounding this particular World War II mission, XIII Fighter Command did not assay claims and issue general orders officially confirming these singular victory credits. Historians are thus left with only two primary sources: The eyewitness account of a Japanese survivor, and the post-mission intelligence debriefing that appears to have helped generate the dispute in question. The crux of the dispute hinges on the true number of Betty

bombers involved in the engagement. Were there only two bombers, a determination made by the original victory credit team, or actually three bombers, as implied in the narrative of the Army intelligence debriefing after the mission?

The three-page Army intelligence debriefing of 18 April 1943 is flawed on two counts: First, it did not identify statements contained in the narrative with any particular pilot (though identities can be inferred), and second, it presented conflicting evidence regarding the number of bombers involved. In the excitement and elation of the moment, what appears as an obvious discrepancy was not identified and addressed, at least not until many years later. Meantime, the debriefing precipitated disparate accounts of the action in Air Force histories and the open literature. Accounts from the available primary sources appear below:

According to Japanese sources, on the morning of 18 April 1943, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto left Rabaul, New Britain Island, on a flight to Ballale Island, with a final destination of Buin, on Bougainville Island. The flight, consisting of two Type 1 Betty bombers with an escort of nine fighter aircraft, proceeded directly on a southeasterly heading. "Our bombers flew a tight formation, their wings almost touching, and my plane [Betty] remained slightly behind and to the left of the lead ship." (Diary of Vice-Admiral Matome Ugaki)[2]

Having broken the Japanese code sometime earlier, a flight of 16 P-38s led by Major John W. Mitchell was dispatched from Henderson Field, on Guadalcanal, to intercept the Japanese Admiral as his

airplane proceeded along the southwestern coast of Bougainville Island, 15 minutes before his scheduled arrival at Ballale Island. Four P-38s piloted by Lanphier, Barber, Holmes, and 1st Lt Raymond K. Hine, were designated the attacking section, while the remainder were to fly cover at altitude.

Proceeding on an easterly course, the P-38s approached the coast of Bougainville at the designated time of 0935 (Guadalcanal local time) and made a right quartering intercept of the Japanese formation. "The picture was this: The Lightnings [P-38s] were at 30 feet [above the ocean], heading in toward the coast, and just about to begin to get their altitude for the presumed attack. The enemy was sighted in a 'V,' about 3 miles distant, proceeding down the southern coastline toward Kihili. The two bombers were together, flying at 4500 feet, with two sections--3 Zeros each--1500 feet above them and slightly to the rear." (U.S. Army Intelligence Debriefing)[3]

In the words of the intelligence debriefing, "when Lanphier and Barber were within one mile of contact, their attack was observed by the enemy. The bombers nosed down, one started a 360° turn dive, the other going [turning] out and away toward the shoreline; the Zeros dropped their belly tanks and three peeled down in a string to intercept Lanphier. When he saw that he could not reach the bomber he turned up and into the Zeros, exploding the first, and firing into the others as they passed . . . ." Barber, meantime, "went for one of the bombers but its maneuvers caused him to overshoot a little. He whipped back, however, and although pursued by Zeros, caught the bomber and

destroyed it. When he fired, the tail section flew off, the bomber turned over on its back and plummeted to earth . . . ." "By this time he [Lanphier] had reached 6000 feet, so he nosed over and went down to the tree tops after his escaping objective. He came into it broadside--fired his bursts--a wing flew off and the plane went flaming to earth. Zeros were now pursuing him and had the benefit of altitude. His mission accomplished, he [Lanphier] hedgehopped the tree tops and made desperate maneuvers to escape."[4]

Holmes, Hine, and Barber, meantime, were engaged in a dogfight with the pursuing Zeros, and "many shots were exchanged, but results were not observed. The flight was on its way out of the combat area . . . when Holmes noticed a stray bomber near Moila Point flying low over the water. He dove on it, his bursts setting it smoking in the left engine; Hine also shot at it, and Barber polished it off with a burst in the fuselage. The bomber exploded 'right in my face'; a piece of the plane flew off, cut through his left wing and knocked out his left inner cooler and other chunks left paint streaks on his wing, so close was his attack driven home."[5]

The intelligence debriefing thus counted the Japanese losses at three Type 1 M/B Betty bombers and, after more dogfights on the way out, three Type 0 SSF Zeke fighters. But these results are at variance with Vice-Admiral Ugaki's eyewitness account.

"Without warning the motors roared and the bomber plunged toward the jungle, close behind the lead plane, leveling off at less than two hundred feet . . . . For a few moments I lost sight of Yamamoto's plane and finally located the Betty far to the right. I was horrified

to see the airplane flying slowly just above the jungle, headed to the south, with bright orange flames rapidly enveloping the wings and fuselage. About four miles away from us, the bomber trailed thick, black smoke, dropping lower and lower . . . . Tracers flashed by our wings, and the pilot desperately maneuvered to evade the pursuing fighter plane . . . . As our plane snapped out of its turn I scanned the jungle. Yamamoto's plane was no longer in sight. Black smoke boiled from the dense jungle into the air."[6]

Still proceeding southeasterly at full speed in a vain attempt to reach Ballale, Vice-Admiral Ugaki's aircraft reached Moila Point where it was raked repeatedly by machine gun and cannon fire, killing most of the crew and passengers. "Another cannon shell suddenly tore open the right wing. The chief pilot, directly in front of me, pushed the control column forward. Our only chance of survival was to make a crash landing at sea . . . . Almost to the water, the pilot pulled back on the controls to bring the airplane out of its dive, but he could no longer control the aircraft. Enemy bullets had shattered the cables. . . . At full speed the bomber smashed into the water . . . ."[7]

Conclusions

Based on the available evidence, including the maps attached, board members reached the following conclusions:

1. Clearly, only two Betty bombers were involved in this six- to ten-minute engagement, not three as at first supposed by Army intelligence.
2. Capt Lanphier and 1st Lt Barber therefore did not destroy one bomber each over the jungle.

3. The evidence points to 1st Lt Barber as the first to fire on Admiral Yamamoto's lead bomber, setting it afire and causing a portion of the tail empennage to fly off. But the burning bomber, in the words of Admiral Ugaki, continued to fly under power just above the jungle, losing altitude. Barber's wingman, Capt Lanphier, once disengaged from the Zeros, next struck Yamamoto's bomber broadside, severing a wing. The bomber turned over on its back and plummetted to earth. Barber, on looking back after his pass, saw the airplane fall and understandably presumed it to be the result of his attack.

4. During the heat of ensuing dogfights, 1st Lt Holmes observed Admiral Ugaki's Betty proceeding southeasterly near Moila Point. Holmes attacked the second bomber "setting it smoking in the left engine." Barber "polished it off," pieces of the bomber exploding outward from the impact of the 20mm cannon shells, some of them striking his fighter. Admiral Ugaki's bomber, however, did not explode in the air as Barber supposed, but rather dove out of control into the sea.

5. Based on the guidelines established by XIII Fighter Command for the awarding of victory credits (cited above at page 2), credit for the destruction of both bombers is properly shared; the findings of the original USAF Historical Division victory credit team are judged to be accurate and confirmed; the official USAF shared credits will remain unaltered for this engagement.

Having considered and debated the evidence, members of the Board agreed unanimously in these findings and conclusions. It was noted that <u>any speculation</u> about the ability of Admiral Yamamoto's crippled bomber to

continue another ten minutes in flight just above the jungle to its destination on Ballale, if Lanphier had not attacked, had no bearing whatsoever on these deliberations and must remain always--speculation.

There being neither dissenting opinion expressed nor minority reports proposed, at 1510 hours the Chairman dismissed the Board.

R. CARGILL HALL
Recorder

Certified True and Complete

FREDERICK E. ZOES, LtCol, USAF
Chairman

References

1. Office of Air Force History, USAF Credits for the Destruction of Enemy Aircraft, World War II, USGPO, 1978, p. 17 (Barber) and p. 111 (Lanphier).

2. Ugaki Diary as reprinted in Masatake Okumiya and Jiro Horikoshi, with Martin Caidin, Zero! (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1956), pp. 246-247.

3. U.S. Army Intelligence Debriefing, 13th Fighter Command Detachment APO 709, to Commanding General, USAFISPA, Subject: Fighter Interception, 18 Apr 1943, p. 2.

4. Ibid., p. 2.

5. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

6. Ugaki diary, as reprinted in Zero!, pp. 247-248.

7. Ibid., pp. 249-250.

Other Sources Consulted

1. Daily Mission Reports, XIII Fighter Command, April-June 1943.

2. Extract from Air Command Solomon Islands Intelligence Bulletin, 18 April 1943.

3. Cpl Tommie Moore, Story of 339th Fighter Squadron, Public Relations Office, 13th AAF. Report of Action, 18 April 1943 (Mar or Apr 1944), pp. 14-15.

4. 70th Fighter Squadron, History, 1 Jan-30 Jun 1943.

5. Operations Letters, Ltr, Harmon to Arnold, 1 May 1943.

6. History of the Thirteenth Air Force, March-October 1943, AAFRH-20, AAF Historical Office, Sep 1946.

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4. Ibid., p. 2.

5. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

6. Ugaki diary, as reprinted in Zero!, pp. 247-248.

7. Ibid., pp. 249-250.

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