

4 February 1949

Re: AGPO-CR 704 (24 Nov 48)

Major General Edward F. Witsell
The Adjutant General of the Army

Dear General Witsell:

Regarding your letter of 24 November 1948 as to the circumstances surrounding the loss of 1st Lt William W. Clifford and crew during a mission over Vegesack, Germany, on 8 October 1943 I have uncovered some information which I hope will be of value to you. Lt Clifford was a personal friend of mine and anything that I can do to assist in this matter I shall be only too glad to oblige.

The information for which you asked: I shall answer in as much detail as possible based on a personal diary which I kept from day to day in England and from memory.

a. General statement of action leading up to the loss of the plane.

On the mission to Vegesack, Germany, 8 October 1943 I was leading the low squadron (579th) of the group (392nd). Lt Clifford led the 2nd element of our squadron and, therefore, was just below and very slightly to the right and behind our plane. Our course took us up the North Sea approximately 40 miles north of the Frisian Islands. Our approach to Vegesack was along a course running roughly between the island of Norderney and Vegesack. We crossed the German coast at 22,000 ft, which was also our bombing altitude. Light to moderate flak was encountered from the coast to within 10 miles or so of the Bremen-Vegesack area where it became very intense. The enemy fighter opposition was not too strong until we entered the outer defenses of the target area. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that a wing (or more) of B-17s had preceded us to either Bremen or Vegesack and were on their way out as we approached. The time was between 1400 and 1500 o'clock. Our flight plan was to make a single run on Vegesack from the approach course, then to drop to approximately 20,000 ft and take up a withdrawal course roughly along a line extended through the island of Helgoland and Wesermunde. However, due to the fact that the bombardier of the group lead ship was seriously wounded and the loss of radio communication of the lead ship while on the initial bomb run we were forced to circle the target area and line up on course for a second run. The flak during this maneuver was highly intense. Several Me 110's, however, entered the barrage to fire at the group from inside our turning radius. The second run was

made good and we then made a descending left turn to take up our aforementioned course toward the North Sea. During this turn and subsequently to within sight of Helgoland we were under constant attack by Me 110's and FW 190's. The flak, however, was practically negligible once we had left the target area. It was on this leg of the mission and approximately 30 miles NNE of Vegesack that Lt Clifford's plane was hit in such a manner as to render it unable to continue the mission.

b. Direction of flight. Approaching or leaving target?

This information has been covered in the above paragraph.

c. Statement of weather conditions, your distance from the plane and any other factors affecting your observation of the actual fate of plane and crew.

The weather during the mission was generally good. The ground was visible from the time we left England until our return. The winds aloft were, I should say, around 40 to 50 mph at 22,000 ft. There was evidently a fairly good ground wind judging from the manner and speed with which the main part of the target area at Vegesack was covered by smoke screens. I would estimate the visibility to have been 60 to 80 miles at our altitude. What cloud formations there were were at a much lower altitude, say 5000 to 8000 ft, and would be described as scattered. No icing was encountered, either carburetor ice or visible icing on the airfoils or propellers. In summary I would say that the weather was excellent.

Regarding my distance from the plane (Lt Clifford's) as stated previously, their plane was just below and slightly to the right behind ours. Since Lt Clifford was leading the second element of our squadron this would put him roughly 50 ft below, 60 ft to the right and 50 ft behind us. I was to repeat leading the low squadron of the group. However, I have reason to believe that Lt Clifford was almost directly underneath my ship at the time he was hit. My reason for saying this is because at that time our ball turret gunner gave a sharp cry over the inter-plane communications phone to the effect that their plane had suddenly gained altitude and had very nearly collided with us. Of course, the question arises as to whether they gained altitude suddenly or if we had lost altitude. As to the latter I can say positively that we did not drop, as the air was not turbulent and our Bomb Wing Doctrine was not to use violent or sudden evasive action. Therefore, I feel certain that this was when Lt Clifford's plane was hit. At the time we were being attacked from the rear by FW 190's and Me 110's, which were firing 30 calibers, 20 mm's and aerial rockets.

Naturally I personally was in no position to see their plane when it was hit. I did, however, keep in contact with my ball gunner, waist gunners and tail gunner regarding their position as soon as I learned that they were in trouble. My gunners reported that their plane regained its position in formation soon after almost colliding with us. However,

my gunners reported that after a few minutes (2 or 3 at most) Clifford's plane appeared unable to keep in formation and had dropped back several hundred yards. At this time he was reported to have lost his No. 4 engine which was trailing smoke. Whether or not the propeller was feathered I do not know. I attempted to contact Lt Clifford on the radio but was unable to receive any reply. I called the No. 3 ship of the second element to take over the lead of that element in Lt Clifford's place. Due to policy of our Bomb Wing Doctrine we were unable to reduce our power settings and speed in order to remain with a crippled ship, because of jeopardizing the fire power of our group and wing.

When I first saw their plane it was approximately 1000 to 1500 ft below us and perhaps 400 yards to our left. The plane was banking to the left, which would be proper with the No. 4 engine inoperative. That engine was trailing a long column of smoke. An Me 110 made a pass at them and then broke away. I did not see any parachutes open from their plane. My observations were curtailed: first, because I had to keep a rather close eye on my position in formation with regard to the lead squadron and, secondly, because my No. 2 engine nacelle and the left wing blocked out much of the downward rear view to the left. Also at this time we were hit by flak which destroyed the top turret gunners oxygen tank and this took most of my attention for a short period of time. I do not believe that I saw Lt Clifford's plane again after our oxygen tank was hit. The last I saw of them they were under control and letting down in a left bank. I positively did not see the plane explode.

d. Your own opinion as to their fate with reasons therefore.

First of all, I do not believe that it was Clifford's plane which exploded. This is not because I saw them crash land or even bail out, for I did not. However, my records show that our group lost two planes on the Vegesack raid of 8 October 1943. Also that Lt Bushman's plane was seen to explode in mid-air as he attempted to return to the coast of Germany after being hit by either fighters or flak in the proximity of Helgoland, over which we flew on our return. It would be hard to presume that this plane could in any way have been Clifford's since it is approximately 70 miles from where Clifford was last seen to Helgoland. Also with one engine inoperative and having lost at least 1000 to 1500 ft I cannot see how it would be possible for Clifford to have made Helgoland at the same time as our group, or even close enough to have been confused with Lt Bushman. Here again I did not see Lt Bushman's plane explode. It was reported as such by my rear gunner and other gunners in the group at the interrogation following the mission. Perhaps an investigation of Lt Bushman's combat records will give the information as to the fate of him and his crew. This should determine whose plane exploded. That Lt John E Slowik and myself stated that we were eye-witnesses to Clifford's plane's exploding, I believe, is a misunderstanding. Lt Slowik was my navigator at that time. We were very good friends, having trained as crew members and flown together since May 1943. We were in the habit of discussing the missions together along with the co-pilot and bombardier as well as the non-

commissioned officers upon our return. This was aside from the regular interrogation. If Lt Slowik had thought in any way that Clifford had exploded I would certainly not have entered in my log book that "We all feel sure that 'Cliff' is ok 'somewhere in Germany'". This entry along with a general description of the mission was made on the evening of 8 October 1943. We (my crew) felt sure that Clifford and his crew were Prisoners of War or wandering around in Germany that night.

Naturally, I now feel certain that Lt Clifford and all of his crew are dead, since nothing has ever been heard of them since 8 October 1943. There are several possibilities in my mind as to what might have been the manner in which they met with death.

1. Their plane could have exploded after we last saw them. Though, even so, I doubt if all of the crew would have been lost. However, the possibility is always there.
2. A crash landing could have been attempted, resulting in the death of the crew either from impact and/or fire.
3. The crew could have been captured by either enraged German civilians or fanatical Gestapo or SS troupes. In this case their deaths would naturally go unreported. Also, their graves would probably be a common one and unmarked. Having been a Prisoner of War myself for 18 months I feel certain that had they been captured by the Luftwaffe or the Wehrmacht in the fall of 1943 they would have received fairly good treatment.
4. An attempt to return to England may have been made after we last saw them and the crew perished as the result of or following an attempt to "ditch" the plane in the Baltic Sea or the North Sea.

This, however, is merely speculation on my part. I am afraid that I have been unable to prove anything which would definitely fix the manner of the loss of this crew. However, if any of this information will be of any assistance to you I shall indeed be gratified.

Sincerely yours,

WILLIAM P. NICHOLSON
1st Lieutenant
Air-Reserve