

March 7, 1946

Rev. Carl N. Wahlen

Dear Father:

First, I want to thank you for your very kind letter. As I told you in my last letter at first I was delayed in writing by censorship then I had to obtain your address through the Adjutant General. George B. Shaw once - and probably truthfully - said that there are two reasons a man does anything, first a good reason then a real reason. The above reasons are good reasons but what would be a little closer to the true and the real reason for not writing sooner was the fact that I was in a rather awkward position. Since I was unable to go in person to talk to Sam's (I would like to call him Sam as that was his nickname and this makes him seem more real than perhaps his proper name would) parents I had no way of gauging their reactions. Sam told me for example that his father had been in ill health recently and I had no way of telling what the effects of a candid letter would be. I am, therefore, very glad of this opportunity to write to another member of his family and leave the disposition of the contents of this letter entirely to your discretion.

When I speak of Sam I am speaking not only of a member of my crew but also a friend and tho I would like to be able to say other things there are the facts to consider. Perhaps it would be easier to describe the happenings of the August 1st mission and conclude with my own personal opinion.

The facts are pretty much the same as the War Department has already given you. We made an early morning take-off for a strike against Macassar town in the southern Celebes. Our flight to the target and half way back home was normal. At this time the engineer informed me that we were low on gasoline. This was rather bad as we were still 3 hours away from our base at Morotai and all the islands between us and our base were then held by the Japanese. Since their supply lines were cut by Allied control of the air and sea these Japs had a hard time feeding themselves and it was their policy to kill all prisoners taken. As pilot, I, therefore, decided to try to fly to Morotai, our closest friendly base. Just why we were short on gasoline has never been determined to my satisfaction. It could have been a mechanical failure, actually no one will ever know. The engineer checked our auxiliary tanks three times and all our gasoline was in the main tanks, accessible to the engines. At this time I informed the crew of our condition and told them to get their emergency equipment together and stand by to bail out. I also informed another ship in our Group of our position and had him stand by for further radio calls. When we arrived 30 miles south of Cape Flesko (Celebes) one engine quit, followed in rapid succession by two others.

We started to descend from 8,000 ft. The gasoline gauges indicated our tanks empty and the fuel pressure gauges were at zero. I ordered the crew to bail out and informed another ship in the formation what we were doing, I, then, bailed out myself. When I left everyone had gone. Lt. Frederick Taucher, our bombardier, was with Sam in the nose compartment and later in the hospital told me substantially the following:

"Sam and I helped each other get our equipment on and were ready to go when the bail out alarm bell rang. We planned on jumping together and thus staying in contact later on the sea. We argued a short time about who should leave the ship first and finally at Sam's insistence I went first. This was the last time I saw him."

From this point on I can no longer give you facts and only tell what I found out from other crew members. My parachute tore out four complete panels and my descent was very rapid and in an uncontrollable spin, therefore, I cannot say that I counted the number of chutes in the air personally. Two gunners, close together, making normal descents, said that they counted the chutes twice and all crew members were clear of the ship, with their chutes open. Later in the night we managed to get together, seven men in five one-man life rafts. Taucher was picked up separately after spending an uncomfortable nite by himself. A shark (or some form of fish) bit a large square from his raft and it was only through the greatest presence of mind that he managed to keep afloat until he was rescued 25 hours later, along with us, by an Air Sea Rescue Catalina. (The pilot of this Catalina was killed making a very similar open sea rescue about three months later off Pannay.)

So, Father, that is the whole story, three men were missing - Sam, the upper gunner McNamara and the radio operator Batten. Frankly, I agree with the War Department and believe that they are dead. I would not desire to arouse any hopes in Sam's family. As the navigator he knew where he was and could have made it to the Celebes. If he did and the Japs got him he would have turned up as a P.O.W. or was killed by them. If he made it into the mountains away from the Coast and Japs the natives would know of his presence and by now he would have been found by searching parties of the Allies. (I understand all these islands have been searched.) My opinion is (tho I don't like to say it) that any of the above is highly improbable and I personally feel that he was drowned. I, myself, lost my life raft when I hit the water and know I would have drowned had I not landed near the cameraman who had a raft. A very thorough search was made of the area (I believe standard practice is a 90 mile square) and if he had been in his raft I am sure he would have been picked up.

These statements are my opinions alone and anything in this letter does not necessarily reflect the views of the War Department. Their source of information has been from us, the crew members. There is no one who actually saw your brother after he left the ship. All the evidence is circumstantial from that point on.

As I said before Sam was my friend and his loss is deeply felt by all of us. He was a good soldier and a fine man.

You may want to get other opinions from the remainder of the crew - I would think it a good idea. The two men, both Catholics, that were close to Sam are Taucher the bombardier and Eckstein the co-pilot. I am sure they would be glad to give you any information they possess.

Frederick Taucher
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Erwin J. Eckstein
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Cincinnati 24,
Ohio

As I have said earlier I would like to narrate the above in person to Sam's parents. Since this is impossible I would be indebted to you if you would act as a liaison, withholding any of the above as you see fit.

Thank you again for your very kind letter.

Sincerely,

Erwin W. Taucher

P.S. The scotty dogs was the insignia of the 372nd Sqdn.