

Letter from Sergeant John Gaffney to Mr. & Mrs. Swarner, December 29, 1943

376th Bomb Group Veterans Association

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Swarner:

I have just been reading over your letters to my mother. I realize how anxious you are to have definite news of our skipper. To begin with, Roberto and myself have Lt. Swarner to thank for our lives. His thoughts were forever with the rest of the crew. More so than any pilot I ever flew with. I think you had better understand the whole story.

I started to fly with Lt. Swarner as his tail gunner and armorer, when he escaped from Turkey. Sgt. Paul & I always flew together. Huska & Romero always flew together. Ruska, Romero, Paul & myself had all flown together before, along with Lt. Longstreth and Lt. Deffner. After the second mission with Lt. Swarner as skipper and Lt. Bley as co-pilot, we were marked up as number two crew. Later we were number one and flying every mission by popular agreement.

Lt. Swarner made a point to get Sgt. Paul and myself out of all our troubles. He used to come to our tent and talk with us, meet us at the mess line to talk, swim with us in Benghazi harbor and inquire after any default in the ships equipment. He was closer to us than any pilot in the outfit was to his crew. We were all out for him. No pilot had a more devoted crew I can assure you. We called him skipper. He could joke and talk with us on our missions to help us out. So many pilots don't think it's necessary, but that's why we were the squadron's first crew.

We took off for Messina with three 2,000 lb. bombs aboard. We made the usual fine takeoff and headed out to sea. Things ran smoothly. I went to the cockpit, then pulled the pins out of the bombs, and went back and climbed in my turret to prevent any surprise attack and report on the formation to the skipper. Lt. Longstreth called in directions, we had our altitude and were near the target. Lt. Deffner opened the bomb bay doors, we made our run and dropped our load. Immediately we got our first anti-aircraft hit. It knocked off our bomb bay door. The second burst in the rear of the fuselage, the third burst in the bomb bay, and the fourth hit our left wing, setting number 3 engine afire and number 4 started to stutter. They threw us far out of formation. Lt. Swarner called in and asked each one separately if we had been hit, everyone said no, but those in the fuselage had been hit by that second ack-ack shell. I was not hit yet. We lost altitude fast and three fighters jumped our tail. Two passed on me and by luck one went down in smoke. One passed on the nose. Longstreth called in "They got Ted this time." Skipper said, "They got Morgan, too." (Ted was Lt. Deffner, bombardier; Morgan new co-pilot) We went into a steep nose dive. The skipper was fighting the controls. I was firing at a fighter at the tail while the remaining one was straffing us repeatedly from nose to tail, using cannon and machine guns. The nose guns were not firing and top-turret was shot out of order. We were helpless, as my guns can only fire from tail to the rear.

Letter from Sergeant John Gaffney to Mr. & Mrs. Swarner, December 29, 1943, cont.

376th Bomb Group Veterans Association

By a superhuman effort, the skipper pulled the ship out of a nose dive that was almost vertical – a thing hitherto thought to be nearly physically impossible. A few seconds later we hit the water, still firing at those fighters. The ship broke up into several pieces. When I got out of the turret and to the surface I saw Romero, then Huska, then Lt. Swarner. The only floating things were oxygen bottles. I swam towards the rest of them and came to Longstreth's body. He had been in the nose of the ship. Romero found Sgt. Paul nearly decapitated. I went over to the skipper who asked if we had been hit or hurt. Everyone said 'No.' Skipper said that he was OK. The waves kept washing over our heads. Huska was out of his head. Time dragged. We were drowning slowly. I don't know how long the skipper had been gone, but he had drowned. I could not get my stiffened fingers opened to release his hair. We (Romero & I) got them opened and removed his life vest in an effort to save Huska. Romero got it on Huska, giving him two but an hour and a half later, Huska was dead. Just a few minutes later the Red Cross plane came and pulled me in. I was unconscious. Huska was buried in Sicily.

I know how you folks feel. I feel so miserable myself, after the skipper watched over us, he had to go himself. If he had to go he wanted to go down fighting and none ever put up a more gallant fight.

There's only two of us left who really knew him over there and we will never forget him. I'll be flying over there again and the skipper will always fly with me in spirit. He's in Heaven now in a place where all good soldiers go. He'll have smooth flying now.

I'll always remember him as he was, as I have pictured him here. They can praise MacArthur to the skies, but MacArthur will never be what our skipper was.

If there's any more information I can give you or help whatsoever, please call on me. I'd like to feel I was doing something to help. Please forgive me if I haven't been tactful, I've really tried. I sincerely hope I've helped some.

Very Sincerely

Johnny Gaffney