



SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE  
WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AIR FORCE BOARD  
FOR CORRECTION OF MILITARY RECORDS

SUBJECT: AFBCMR Case of Colonel Rex T. Barber (Ret.)

I have carefully reviewed the extensive record compiled by the the Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records concerning the question of credit for the shootdown of the Japanese aircraft carrying Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto. Colonel Barber's application has its origins in one of the most extraordinary aerial exploits of World War II—from the breaking of the Japanese code to the interception and shootdown of the Betty Bomber whose passenger was the Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet and chief planner of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Because of the historic nature of the operation and the sensitive question of credit for the kill, I would like to expand on the sequence of events leading to a decision, and on the Board's findings.

At present, credit is shared by Colonel Rex T. Barber and Lieutenant Colonel Thomas G. Lanphier, who died in 1987. Colonel Barber applied to the Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records on June 24, 1991, requesting sole credit for the shootdown. He believes he is the only pilot who fired on and hit the plane carrying Admiral Yamamoto on April 18, 1943. At the time, under XIII Fighter Command guidelines, credit for an aircraft kill was shared equally if more more than one pilot fired on and hit an enemy plane which then crashed. Combat reports in the field at the time indicated the Yamamoto bomber was hit by two pilots in sequential attacks before it crashed on a jungle island near New Guinea.

The claims of then-Lieutenant Barber and then-Captain Lanphier that they both hit the plane were generally accepted at the time. But no official award of credit was made when the shootdown occurred. To do so would have revealed to the Japanese that their code had been broken. Formal credit was not given until 1978, when the official listing of World War II victory credits was published.

The question was reexamined by a Victory Credit Board of Review convened at the USAF Historical Research Center in 1985. The Victory Credit Board of Review, working from the existing historical record, found that credit for destroying Admiral Yamamoto's aircraft was properly shared by Colonel Barber and Lieutenant Colonel Lanphier, adding that all those who flew the mission shared in the credit for its successful outcome.

The Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records held a hearing in 1991 to consider Colonel Barber's request for sole credit. His evidence, and that of his colleagues of the Second Yamamoto Mission Association, significantly enriched the historical record of this mission and developed a body of previously unrecorded evidence, both physical and testimonial.

The five voting members of the Correction Board panel were in disagreement as to the effect of this evidence. Two concluded that the record supported Colonel Barber's claim for sole credit, and should be corrected; or, if not corrected, referred to a Victory Credit Board for review. Two were of the view that the existing award of shared credit should stand. The fifth member recommended that a new Victory Credit Board be convened to reconsider the amplified record. The application failed to receive a majority vote for correction. As a result, the entire record comes to me for resolution.

In arriving at a resolution, several points were critical to my deliberations. First, the magnificent accomplishments of Colonel Barber remain undiminished. His contributions in World War II have inspired a generation, and will inspire all who follow in his footsteps. For their sake, it would be desirable to bring to a close the continuing debate surrounding this case. I share the Board's view that such debate is not an appropriate memorial to heroes.

Second, the evidence concerning Lieutenant Colonel Lanphier's part in this mission remains equivocal; but there is substantial evidence that he did fire upon and hit Admiral Yamamoto's aircraft.

Third, contemporaneous combat records and the later decisions of the Victory Credit Board and the Victory Credit Review Board are entitled to considerable weight, especially after the passage of half a century.

Fourth, we no longer have the opportunity to hear Lieutenant Colonel Lanphier's recollections. Although we have his writings, he is no longer here to make his case.

A final, overarching, point is the role of teamwork in the Yamamoto mission. The entire operation was a triumph of intelligence and airmanship in terms of planning and execution. Glory should go to the team. Foremost are the two pilots credited--men of iron nerve, discipline and courage. Individual scoring is important; it is an irrefutable tribute to combat skill. Yet it is less important than the overall accomplishment. 14 other pilots flew those P-38s on April 18, 1943. They covered, supported, and protected each other. As every lead pilot knows, his life may depend on his wingman; so does his success.

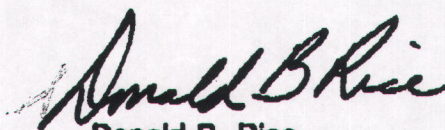
Unsung heroes include the code-breakers whose talents and perseverance broke the Japanese code, and the interceptors who pinpointed the exact time and route of the aircraft carrying Admiral Yamamoto. There was the brilliant mission planner, Colonel John Mitchell, whose remarkable feat of navigation planning enabled a flight of P-38s to fly a 435 mile circuitous route between islands to their target at the appointed time--all the while eluding Japanese radar and coast-watchers.

And there were others. As legendary World War II Ace, Group Captain Douglas Bader, wrote, "The Battle was not won only by us in the sky. It was won by every man and woman in this country. We were their representatives in the air...We could fight back. We had the good job." His sentiment captures the spirit of all air combat triumphs. It is also a reminder that the time has come to lay to rest the controversy surrounding this case.

After careful examination of the record, and consideration of the panel's recommendations, I am not convinced that the award of shared credit for the Yamamoto shootdown is either in error or unjust. Accordingly, Colonel Barber's application is denied.

In closing, I would note that historians, fighter pilots, and all of us who have studied the record of this extraordinary mission will forever speculate as to the exact events of that day in 1943.

Colonel Barber's painstaking efforts to recreate those events for us have greatly enhanced our understanding of what happened in the skies over Bougainville 50 years ago. He has enriched the legacy of airmen past, present and future. I wish for him serenity in the knowledge of this achievement and in the glow of his accomplishments on April 18, 1943.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Donald B. Rice". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Donald" and last name "Rice" clearly legible.

Donald B. Rice