



**Date of event:** 20 December 1944

**Date written:** Various dates from 21 December 1944 to April and November 1995

**Written by:** Robert Moss, John Elliott, Harry Changnon, Royal Klaver plus British pilot's account written in *WINGS* magazine, 1973

**Editor's Introduction:** On 19 December, a crew made up of members of four different crews with Bob Moss as A/C, flew mission #8 to Omura in aircraft #738. Upon return to Hsinching from that mission, they received instructions to fly aircraft #331 from Hsinching to Chakulia the following day. At 5:15 p.m., they took off for India. At night, over Burma, they were shot down by a British Beaufighter. All on board except navigator David Lustig survived the shoot down. This is an account of that event.

### Beaufighter Shoots Down B-29 #331 over Burma

Crew members of #331, 20 December 1944

Maj. Robert Moss – A/C  
1 Lt. John R. Elliott- CP  
1 Lt. Charles E. Biehle - B (deceased)  
1 Lt. David Lustig -N (deceased\*)  
FO Joe D. Herbert - FE (not on roster)  
T/Sgt Royal Klaver - Radio  
1 Lt. Robert C. Helfrich - Radar  
S/Sgt. Joseph Duemig -RG (deceased)  
S/Sgt. Charles E. Austin - LG  
S/Sgt. Leo F. Gainey - CFC (not on roster)  
1 Lt. J.T. Dillehay - passenger (deceased)

\*David Lusting was the only crew member lost in this accident.

Tail Gunner on the flight not known. (Edward Cox identified in records and accounts of the mission, has advised the editor that he was not on the crew of this flight.)

**Bob Moss tells the story as he experienced it (from his diary):** On 20 December, #331 landed at A-1 at 3:00 p.m. Col. Blanchard told me to ferry it back to Chakulia. At 5:15 p.m. we took off with crew plus Lt. Dillehay (45th armament officer). About 10:00 p.m. near Chittagong, crew reported an antiaircraft burst in the area. At 10:10 p.m. we were flying at 14,000 feet in gradual descent over India with navigation lights on, along with cabin and cockpit lights and IFF on and in bright moonlit night. Gunfire was sudden and unexpected---#3 engine caught fire, and an explosion damaged the radio compartment. Feathered #3 engine and pulled CO<sub>2</sub>, but gunners reported flames shooting back from wing on right side past escape hatch and as far as horizontal stabilizer. Ordered wheels down. Fire continued. Ordered crew to bail out. Everybody out in rear. Helfrich reported he was last to go. Biehle, Herbert, Dillehay, Lusting, Klaver, and Moss all bailed out of front lower hatch. Floated down in parachute watching the plane, a ball of fire streaking through the sky. Landed heavily in small trees--unhurt. Bailout at about 10:30 p.m.

Found Klaver at 12:30 a.m. He was injured. Gave him morphine. We stayed in a shack overnight. Natives found another man (Dillehay) with bad ankle. Used oxcart for both Klaver and Dillehay. Elliott and Helfrich joined by 10:30 a.m. A PBY (Air Force OA-10: Ed.) sighted us on the river. Put Klaver, Dillehay, Elliott, and Helfrich on PBY. Kept some rations, and the pilot promised to return the next morning for me and other survivors. The PBY took off and immediately spotted other crew members and landed again. Others were Herbert, Gainey, Duemig, Cox (?), Austin, and Biehle. Sent all but Herbert aboard plane for evacuation. Herbert and I remained to search for Dave Lustig, the only one still missing. Natives assisting in search. By next day still no sign of Lustig. PBY returned for Herbert and Moss. Crew of PBY said a British Beaufighter reported attacking us. Body of Lustig later found drowned in river with parachute.

**From WINGS Magazine, October, 1973:** On moving to the Arakan Coast, the squadron's first "score" was a B-29 due to a comedy-tragedy SNAFU. At the time, the B-29s in India were controlled from Washington involving minimum coordination with either British or American Operations Control. Preparation of the Burma invasion force was in progress in the Dacca-Fenny area, and a wide corridor was set up from Chittagong to Calcutta through which aircraft had to fly within specific altitudes to avoid the staging area. The unheralded B-29, returning from Saigon (Wrong, of course: Ed.) reconnaissance with most of the crew asleep in the forward area, was in a long dive towards its base near Calcutta without IFF and in total ignorance of the corridor. The pilot of the Beaufighter that scrambled to intercept could see four engine exhausts but could not visibly identify the B-29. By coincidence, information on the first 4-engine Japanese bomber had just been released to Operations Control. In addition, the Army, short of air-raid sirens, had decided, on its own, that a good substitute would be to fire some artillery pieces at night. The guns went off, lit up the sky, and a report went to Operations that bombs were being dropped near Fenny. Our pilot reported that he could not identify the bogie, and the controller ordered "Shoot him down." A few cannon shells later, the wing of the B-29 burst into flames, and our pilot then saw the U.S. insignia and crewmen bailing out. With the exception of one man whose chute didn't open, the B-29 crew miraculously landed down the length of Sandwip Island which parallels the Arakan Coast. On being picked up the next day by a PBY, the B-29 pilot said, "I just can't understand it--we were talking about a big steak, and the left wing suddenly blew up." He never knew that he had been shot down.

**Editor's Note:** Except for the one observation about Saigon in the text, no effort is made here to correct the author. The magazine story, written for publication in 1973, is recorded as it appeared.

**Harry Changnon writes of the event:** The first leg of the trip was from Hsinching and then to Yunnanyi. Cloud coverage and darkness forced the use of dead reckoning navigation and the use of weather data given to them at A-1. The radio compass was oscillating badly so it could not be used. At a position they thought was YY, the course was altered to Halikandi, Burma. When the aircraft crossed the Chindwin River, a fix was obtained with radar which indicated they were somewhat south of course, which they corrected to take them about 30 miles north of Chittagong. The IFF had been checked several times and, according to Moss and Helfrich, the radar operator, it was operating.

The bombardier reported possible antiaircraft bursts some distance below their altitude of 10,000 ft. Again the IFF was checked in #1 position. A few minutes later, bullets began ripping through the fuselage, and fire was seen to break out in the right inboard wing section next to Joe Herbert's position. The crew believed they had been attacked by an enemy night fighter. When they bailed out, all crew members landed in the river or on Sandwip Island west of Chittagong. T/Sgt. Royal Klaver was wounded by shell fragments which pierced a lung. A passenger, J.T. Dillehay, suffered a broken ankle. All were found the next day and flown to Calcutta by PBY except for Lt. David Lustig, the navigator, who drowned and whose body was found several days later.

**John Elliott broadens the scope of the story with his account:** We flew to China to be a part of a schedule of three missions flown in rapid succession. The first mission was against the railroad marshaling yards at Hankow. We got back to Hsinching early in the evening. Very early the next morning, December 19, we took off on a mission to Omura. Over the target we were attacked by fighters who attempted to lob bombs into the formation. It wasn't effective. We could see bombs burst but no planes were hit.

En route home somewhere northwest of Shanghai when we were spread out in "road formation," we were attacked by fighters. One fighter came at us, and Chuck Biehle fired back. None of our planes were damaged, and we did not see any damage to the fighter which we could report as a claim. We returned to Hsinching in the evening.

We had flown two combat missions in close succession, the first was about 7½ hours, the second about 14¾ hours. We had been able to get only about four hours sleep between these missions. After our return from the Omura mission and after debriefing and some chow, we went to bed. That night the Japs staged an air raid on A-1 that I slept right through, in spite of the sirens and the anti-aircraft noise and the bombs detonating.

While we were on the second mission, one of our "war weary" planes arrived from Chakulia with a load of gas in the bomb bay tanks. December 20, Maj. Moss was informed that the crew that just arrived from India would fly our airplane on the next day's mission to Mukden. We, in turn, would fly the "war weary" back to Chakulia. There was some urgency to getting the plane out of Hsinching in order to avoid possible damage should the Japs stage another air raid. The newly arrived crew, not expecting to fly a combat mission, had not brought along their Mae Wests so we gave them ours. Since we were flying over land en route home, we wouldn't need them, it was thought, and such gear was required for every crew member flying a combat mission.

We took off for Chakulia in the evening of 20 December. At the time the sky was overcast and there was a radio blackout because of the Jap air raids, so we could not receive any weather broadcasts. We were given meteorological data prior to takeoff, but we could not confirm it with celestial navigation due to the overcast. Our flight plan was to take us south to Ipin and then southwest to Assam Valley which we would follow to Calcutta and then west about 100 miles to Chakulia.

We followed the flight plan using the weather information we had. Along the way we encountered clear skies allowing Dave Lustig to get a celestial fix, and we found our position was some 90 miles south and flying parallel to our intended course. Instead of being over the Assam Valley, we were over northern Burma.

We were not carrying any bombs nor were our guns loaded since we did not believe we were in any danger. Some crew members, not essential to the operation of the plane, were relaxing. We were equipped with IFF. It was operating properly and was set on the designated code channel for that day. At the time we were flying at approximately 10,000 ft. The full moon was about halfway down in the west.

The first indication that anything was amiss was the rat-tat-tat of bullets hitting the plane. I looked out the right side of cockpit and saw our #3 engine on fire. I told Bob, and he told me to feather the engine. After feathering and activating the fire extinguishers, heavy flames continued to trail from the engine. With the danger of the plane exploding, Bob gave the order over the intercom to bail out and, at the same time, rang the alarm bell. I lowered the landing gear so that the crew in the forward compartment could go out through the nose wheel well.

I'm not certain, but I believe Chuck Biehle was the first one out. I followed him, and when I hit the airstream feet first, I began to tumble head over heels. I pulled the ripcord, and my chute opened, stopping my tumbling. I looked down and saw that I was over the large estuary of the Ganges River, about a half mile in width. It was quite difficult to judge distance in the light of the moon, which was about 30 degrees above the western horizon. Coming down from 10,000 ft., I drifted over Sandwip Island. In landing, I sort of slid down the side of a springy tree which slowed my speed, and I landed with little jarring.

Since I was not certain of our location, I rolled up in my parachute and spent the night where I had landed. After daylight the next day, some local people gathered around, and they escorted me to the headquarters of their island. Some of the other crew members were at the island headquarters, and I learned that a message had been sent to Chakulia informing authorities of our location. An OA-10 (Air Force PBY) was sent to pick up our crew. The rescue plane dropped a message telling us to meet them at the river estuary. We got there at the appointed time and were taken out to the plane in native canoes. Some of the crew members had not arrived at the headquarters of the island when we left so the OA-10 circled the island until we spotted the other crew members. They were given the same instructions we received, and we flew back to the rendezvous point and waited for them until they joined us. Dave Lustig, our navigator, was missing. We learned later that he landed in the river and drowned, probably because he had no Mae West. His body was recovered a few days later.

The seaplane crew advised us that we had been shot down by a Beaufighter. There was an interesting aftermath to this episode. Four nights later, on Christmas Eve, the Japanese staged a six-plane raid on our base at Chakulia. The same British pilot who shot us down, shot down four of the six Japanese aircraft involved in the raid.

There were 11 people aboard the OA-10--ten of our eleven-man crew plus our passenger, J.T. Dillehay, who was hitching a ride back to Chakulia with us. Of the survivors, only three of us were not injured. Dillehay was wearing an ill-fitting parachute. The chest strap came up under his chin as he was coming down, and he could not see below. He lit with one foot on the dike of a rice paddy and the other foot off the dike. He suffered a broken ankle. Other crew members had a collection of sprained ankles, sprained knees, and wrenched backs.

As a sidelight, I had a rather interesting experience after the war. I was a senior at Colorado A&M (now Colorado State University) in 1950. Just at that time, Dr. William E. Morgan was appointed president of the University. One of my professors, knowing that I had been shot down in Burma, for some reason mentioned this to Dr. Morgan. Morgan had been assigned to assist in solving the resulting difficulties. Dr. Morgan asked that I come visit him. At our meeting, he told me of the grave difficulties encountered in clearing up the incident.

**Royal Klaver had some experiences to remember:** When I bailed out, I was all alone. I had taken a piece of flak (actually a bullet fragment or piece of the plane; no AA hit the plane: Ed.) through the chest, and my lung was collapsed. Bob Moss was the first to find me. Crew members made a stretcher out of my chute to carry me aboard the plane. I was a month and a half in the hospital after we were rescued.

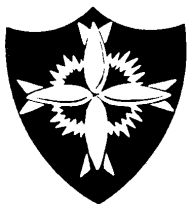
It was apparent to me that we were way off course. I had argued with Dave Lustig about our position. I had just given him a new radio fix, and we were making a course correction when we were hit. The heat in the plane was so great that when the crew members in the back got on the ground, they found pieces of melted aluminum in their clothes.

**Two wrap-up notes from John Elliott:** Our bombardier, Charles Biehle (deceased), saved his parachute and sent it home. It was used to make dresses for his daughters, and the dresses were used by his granddaughters.

A few days after the episode, Charles Biehle, Robert Helfrich, and I, the only ones not injured, were called upon to accompany some of our ranking staff officers on a trip to Chittagong to meet with some British military officials regarding the shoot down. While at Chittagong, we met with some members of a USAF P-38 outfit who were assigned there to fly cover for Allied shipping convoys plying the Burma coast. All of these pilots were interested in our escape from the burning plane. To commiserate with us, they told us, "Don't worry, boys, we shot down two Beaufighters in the past month." They had a strict "no fly" zone over the convoys with orders to shoot down anyone who flew into this zone.

**Editor's Note:** John Child has taken issue with some references to him and his crew that were expressed in a narrative that opened Issue #56. The story says that Child's crew was given a plane with many defects, to fly to Tinian. When they found the many defects, the crew told base operations at Herrington, Kansas, that they would not take the plane into combat. Base operations told the crew that they would fly the plane to Tinian or they would be court martialed. John wishes to point out that they were never threatened with court martial. He says the aircraft, #42-63462, had numerous serious wing fuel leaks, and Bill Fussell (flight engineer) and he agreed that the leaks were unsafe and unacceptable. He says he told Herrington operations "Either fix the damn leaks or give us another aircraft." It took about a week, but they finally got sealant in to the wing tanks and reduced leakage to an acceptable level. Says Child, "At no time was there any talk or any threat of a court martial."

Childs also wishes it made clear that when #462 was assigned to another crew upon meeting with Bill Kingsbury and Woody Swancutt, he regarded it as an operational decision and accepted it as such. The crew did not profess indifference (because of its many defects) to surrendering the plane upon arrival on Tinian.



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