

1841 Squadron,  
c/o British Fleet Mail,  
Sydney, N.S.W.

16th August 1945

Dear Mrs. Gray,

I find it terribly hard to write to you and express the feelings of all of us on the loss of 'Hammie' a few days ago. I don't think it would ever be possible to do so in words so I won't try and hope you will understand.

I am sure you would want to know something of what has happened and of the final action on August 9<sup>th</sup> which cost him his life. As you probably know he has been a very dear friend and my right hand man ever since those days over Norway a year ago. There couldn't have been a happier squadron and he was so largely responsible for making it so and also working it up into the grand team we were able to put into the field on these operations which, though we little knew, were to be the last naval air battles of the war.

We started our strikes with the Americans on Japan on the 17th of July. The targets were airfields and aircraft on the ground in a belt across Northern Honshu on the first day and in the well defended area of Tokyo plain on the second.

From there we moved down for a series of operations in the Inland Sea area where the remainder of the enemy fleet was based. Targets were warships, merchantmen and again airfields. On the 28th Hammie led a flight of eight on an armed reconnaissance sortie and himself scored a direct hit on a destroyer which went on fire and was later reported to be sunk. This was apart from numerous aircraft destroyed on the ground and merchant shipping sunk or damaged. Admiral Vian sent us a signal, it said "Well Done Gray's Strike." It was for these actions that he was given the immediate award of the D.S.C. though he never knew of it.

During the first days of August we waited ready to strike again but the weather was against us and eventually we went back to our original area in N. Honshu on the ninth.

Our targets were mainly airfields and it was known that the Japs were concentrating a very large force of bombers there ready for an all out assault.

Hammie went off just after 8 o'clock that morning leading seven others as before. The proposed landfall was Kinkasan point - a small island on the end of a promontory which sticks out well from the mainland and is some 30 miles N.E. of the large town of Sendai.

The weather was not too good but after a flight of some 150 miles they hit the coast some five or ten miles north flying over a craggy inlet surrounded by hills called Onagawa Wan. Here he saw two destroyers, two destroyer escorts and some other shipping, As the main target was aircraft he flew on for some miles only to find that the airfield allotted him had already been attacked and almost all planes and installations destroyed.

So he decided to go all out for the big game and returned to Onagawa. He must have known that it would be heavily defended- in actual fact they had A.A. guns all round on the hill tops apart from a very heavy concentration from the warships themselves. Nothing opened up on them until they started down in their attack and then it all came. Undaunted by this Hammie went right down and dropped his bombs at very low altitude, getting a direct hit. Almost immediately afterwards he was hit in one wing, which was seen to be on fire. His speed at this time was very high and this may have had the effect of turning the aircraft on its back for it was seen to hit the water upsidedown.

This display of cool courage and determination in the face of heavy odds and the loss of their leader inspired the others who pressed on in two further attacks, putting paid to the first destroyer which rolled over and sank. The two destroyer escorts were hit and badly damaged. Later that day we sent another strike there to sink the remainder and on the 10th I flew over but could find nothing afloat.

That is the story - it hurts very much to write about. The bottom fell out of life on board after it happened and the victory, when it came, seemed so hollow somehow. He was so well loved by us all and simply radiated happiness wherever he went.

I hope one day in my travels I may have the pleasure of meeting you all - I have heard so much about you. I can only send you my deepest sympathy. I wish I could do more.

Yours sincerely,

'Dick Bigg-Wither'