

DECEASED - LTJG David Marion CHRISTIAN, USNR, 674340/1315
attached to ATKRON 23 on bd USS MIDWAY (CVA-41)

3 June 1965

Mr. and Mrs. Jess M. Christian
9642 Los Coches Road
Lakeside, California

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Christian,

It is with a deep sense of personal loss that I write to you today. I know, of course, that my feelings in no way compare with the grief you both are suffering at the loss of your son. Please accept the heartfelt sympathy and condolences of all the officers and men of Attack Squadron TWENTY-THREE. To answer some of the questions I am sure you must have, I would like to explain the circumstances as best I can.

Dave was flying his aircraft and accompanying me on an armed reconnaissance flight over North Vietnam. We departed the USS MIDWAY, in the South China Sea, early on Wednesday morning, 2 June 1965. We had been briefed to deliver our weapons against military targets in the coastal area between Vinh and Thanh Hoa in North Vietnam. About ten miles south of Thanh Hoa we discovered a complex radar installation entrenched on top of a hill. We began attacking with rockets. Dave, on his first run, got a direct hit on an extremely difficult target in a narrow, deep revetment, effectively destroying that portion of the installation.

At this time we noticed that the target was being defended by automatic weapons and Dave wisely made his second run on an easterly heading toward the coast, the shortest direction to the "friendly" environment of the sea. I was rolling in for my third run and had Dave in sight pulling out of his second attack when he called that he had been hit by ground fire and his engine had "flamed-out". His aircraft began trailing flames as Dave used his speed to gain altitude and began a glide for the coast five miles away. The bullet had apparently severed the main fuel line cutting off fuel to the engine and causing the flames beneath his aircraft.

Dave stuck with his plane, handling the glide beautifully. Trailing closely behind him, I momentarily lost sight of him as he passed through a cloud at the coast line but picked him up again on the otherside as he "stretched" his glide out to sea. At this time he was very low and I called for him to eject, but I am sure he had already lost use of his radio. We were under low dark clouds, and in the reduced visibility I believe I did see his ejection seat leave the aircraft moments before his plane hit the water. However, no parachute was sighted.

C.O.'s ltr to parents
at time of loss

A propeller driven A-1 Skyraider aircraft with four crewmen aboard had been on the scene while we were attacking the radar sight and aided me in searching the area and retracing Dave's flight path for any sign that he might possibly have survived. Shortly we were joined by an amphibious search and rescue aircraft and other A-1's but it became painfully obvious that Dave had not survived. Our A-1 Skyraider that had been with us from the beginning was making a low, searching pass along the beach when he too was struck by ground fire, crashed and exploded, killing all four crewmen aboard.

Your son was extremely well liked and admired by both the officers and men of his squadron. He was highly regarded for his ability as an officer and as a combat aviator. He may have mentioned his assignment as the Line Division Officer, a critical and demanding function in the operation of jet aircraft aboard an attack carrier. His performance in that position was truly outstanding. It was a great reassurance to myself and the other pilots to know that through Dave's leadership and dependability our aircraft were always properly serviced and ready before each flight.

Only last week CDR King, the squadron executive officer, and I were discussing how fortunate we had been to have Dave assigned to this squadron. We have continually mentioned this with regard to his ability as an aviator, but on this particular occasion we were reviewing the evaluation reports on all enlisted personnel which had been prepared by the squadron division officers. Dave's keen sense of perception, mature judgement, and ability to express himself in writing were reflected in the manifestly superior quality of his reports. This was just another example of Dave's innate ability and tremendous potential.

Dave played a vital part as an attack pilot here in the Vietnam area. The responsibilities he had and his ability to shoulder these responsibilities contributed directly to maintaining the freedom our country supports throughout the world. You can be justly proud of the way Dave served his country.

We will hold a memorial service for your son and our shipmate on Sunday, 6 June 1965, on board USS MIDWAY while steaming in the South China Sea. The service, following the customs and traditions of the naval service, will allow the 3,600 men aboard USS MIDWAY and, more specifically, the officers and men of Attack Squadron TWENTY-THREE to offer their respects for Dave.

As your son's Commanding Officer I wish to ensure all your questions regarding this tragedy are answered. If there are any details you wish to have amplified please contact me by letter. Unfortunately, being here at sea did not allow me to telephone nor to personally talk with you.

I have received a message from Vice Admiral Paul P. BLACKBURN, Jr.,
Commander Seventh Fleet, requesting that his condolences be passed to
you and Dave's shipmates. Once again may I also express my heartfelt
sympathy for your great loss.

Sincerely,

John R. DEWENTER, Jr.
Commander, U. S. Navy
Commanding Officer
Attack Squadron TWENTY-THREE

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