

Hon
Col

USAF Ret

10 November, 1980

Dear Betty, *Nicholson*
Bellwood OHIO

Your shocking news awaited us upon our return from the reunion. We left by air 1 October and returned 21 October. Agnes and I both want you to know our sincerest thoughts have been of you and the five boys (only wish we had gotten to meet all of them).

You have been through very trying times. You will be in our prayers, Betty, and please write to us when you can and feel like it.

As you know, "Nick" was one of my very best friends over there. I kept a diary and I refer to it often in connection with getting the men back together again. When so doing, I run across many references to "Nick" and our times together. I wonder if you recall that I feel he saved my life one time especially?

It was a cold and rainy evening in the winter of '43-'44. For some reason, we were late for "chow". "Nick" said, "Let's go down to the Pub in Great Yeldham instead of tramping across that middy field?" I replied that it would suit me, but that I had no required slotted bike headlight cover. "Nick" shrugged that excuse off with "Oh, I can fix that. Wait a minute." He proceeded to cut out a suitable cover, got some tape (he was always resourceful) and soon my bike was "up to specs"!!

When we got settled in at the Inn, "Nick" heard some guys from the base talking quite loudly about the losses the group had sustained-especially the bomb explosion 21 June, '43 when some 23 men lost their lives on the base while loading bombs on the planes. After a second warning, "Nick" said "I'm going to court-martial those guys" and went over to their table and informed them.

Weeks later, on 22 Feb, 1944, I woke up and heard the planes climbing, in formation, over the base. They were already at about four or five thousand feet alt-

itude. I threw on some clothes and rode my bike as fast as I could to Captain Tansey's Nissen Hut - he was the 535th's Adjutant - and asked him why I wasn't flying on the mission. He answered that this was the day I had to witness in the court martial of those men "Nick" and I had heard talking too much that night.

After the court martial I waited very anxiously for my crew of Lee W. Smith, (Battleground, Indiana), to return. The target was Oeschersleben, a town that contained the large FW-190 factory. Recently acquired Lt Col Fitzgerald, from Coastal Command B-24s - as was Leber and Halsey - led the mission. They took off with 30 B-17s. Due to high, thick overcast Fitzgerald had eighteen (18) planes "abort" (return) the mission. With only twelve, he made the tragic error of proceeding on to the heavily defended target by tacking on to another group. German fighters saw the discrepancy at once and shot down half of the twelve crews, including the Lee Smith crew which I had taken on their first mission to "break them in" as was my job. I had flown with fifteen or more new crews as such, but "Smitty" was a great favorite. I had gone to the "Rest Home" in Salisbury, SE England just the prior week with them for our weeks rest after some fifteen missions.

Thus, for the third time, I had been scheduled to fly with a crew, was changed at the last minute and the crew had perished. This crew of Smitty's was no exception. Only one gunner, a man from Altoona, PA, Sgt Bulsok, also survived as I did, by having been scheduled to go with another crew. Truly, I am alive because of "Nick" ^{his} decision that night!

At our reunion in the Queen Mary 10-12 Oct this year, an English couple from Ridgewell just happened to be touring the QM! What a coincidence! Even more so, when I talked to them I found they knew the Stokers who lived just above the base. "Nick" used to take our laundry to Mrs. Stoker. She often had eggs to sell to us also! No, as long as those 6 of us who knew him are alive, "Nick" will be alive in our memories!

Please relay my thoughts to your boys. Perhaps we can get to see you again. If you are ever this way, don't fail to call and stop to see us.

Most sincerely,

Pax & Agnes