

David W Christofferson

Compiled by Judy Hansen
July 2020

David Wallace Christofferson was born in Lehi, Utah on May 5, 1922 to

Alexander D and Louisa Vickery Christofferson. He was the 5th child of ten children.

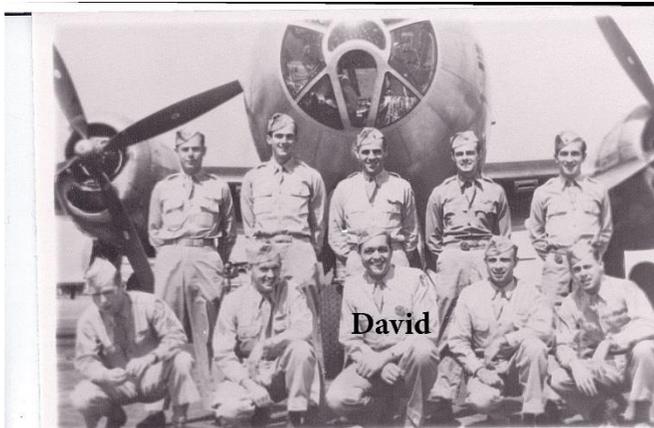
Ruth Christofferson Wilcox, Barbara Christofferson, Eva Christofferson Sherwood, Paul Vickery Christofferson, Betty Louise Christofferson, Beth Christofferson, Erma Christofferson Christofferson, Richard Dan Christofferson, and Mary Christofferson.

David's mother died in 1929 and his father remarried Sarah Ellen Gaisford from which resulted in three more half-siblings for David; Baby Christofferson, Leo John Christofferson, and George Albert Christofferson.



He graduated Lehi High School and joined the military 5 November 1942 in Salt Lake City, Utah. He trained at Lowry Field in Denver Colorado, Canute Field Illinois, Covis New Mexico, Goldsboro North Carolina, and Miami Beach, Florida. David was of large stature standing at 6' 1 1/2" and weighing 200 lbs.

Sgt. Christofferson #39-901-651 left to go overseas October 1944 and was assigned as a waist-gunner in the Army Air Force Regiment 770th bomber squadron 462 bomb group very heavy. Sgt. Christofferson went missing in action on Feb 24, 1945. The co-pilot, James E. Mills of the Boeing B-29 Superfortress (one of the largest planes flown during WWII) that they had been assigned to wrote a letter to David's parents so they would know what happened to their son. The letter is as follows:



*“Dear Mr. and Mrs. Christofferson,
There is an understandable feeling of unsureness in my mind about writing to you, a feeling that perhaps a letter from one of your son's former crew mates will bring an unnecessary sorrow to you. Since my return, I have felt more and more that someone should tell you, David's parents, the facts surrounding his death, and that the information be first hand and the truth.*

Since I was the co-pilot on the crew and the one most in contact with the members in the aft of the ship, perhaps my story would be the most clear.

February the 23rd, 1945 our crew took off for Singapore with a strike force of about forty other B29s. The mission was scheduled for slightly over 18 hours flying time, about 3,200 miles down and back. We carried eight 500 pound bombs, a full crew, and a full load of gas. The route of the flight was all over water except for about 300 miles and seven tenths of the flying over enemy waters at that. With no exception it was agreed that the mission was one of the toughest from the standpoint of fuel and endurance the B29s had been making. Certainly the longest en mass flight ever attempted.

So that we might be landing before dark, we had to take off before midnight and for 1,500 miles we fought headwinds and electrical storms of maximum intensity (so bad that some of the crews were forced to return to base when their planes were almost overturned in the turbulence). Over the Straits of Jahore, above the tiny peninsula on which Singapore stands with the sky all about us polka-dotted with bursts of flak, we had to make two runs onto the target before the scattering clouds, thousands of feet below us, had obscured the aiming point on the first run. Having to fly off course to circumnavigate those thunderstorms, having to use excessive power against the headwinds in order to make good a fixed ground speed, and the two runs on the target are the three factors which caused our plan to fail us. Contributing factors of course, could run those three facts into hundreds. For one of them would be that it was a brand new plane and the fuel gages were inaccurate. These eventualities which none can foresee and certainly no one could expect one crew to get them all on one mission caused our misfortune.

So we dropped our bombs, and James Underwood, from his vantage point in the rear, reported heavy black smoke rising from the target area . . . a clear indication that our bombs were among those which destroyed the plant. Shortly afterwards we broke up the formation and settled back in our chairs for the long, long, trip home, quite unconscious that the last of our precious fuel was already less than the minimum necessary to reach our home field. Three quarters of the way back, Lyon, our engineer began to suspect something was amiss.

Captain Ebbeler turned the controls over to me and went back to Lyon and together they looked over the fuel situation and discussed with Lt. O'Sullivan the possibility of landing at Akyab, the alternate base. They found to their dismay that we had come too far, and now it was as far to the alternate as it would be to continue to the coast. Immediately I notified the crew of the situation that we might run out of gas, and that if we were over water we might have to ditch (land the plane in the sea).

Alerted, and as may be expected, very nervous, we kept heading for Calcutta the nearest possible landing field.

As we came in over land number four engine backfired and Chris reported a large puff of black smoke issuing from the cowling of the engine. We feathered it immediately. The fuel from that engine was too low to hold pressure. Lyon transferred the fuel remaining to another engine. Suddenly, and without warning, both engines on the left side began to cough, and frantically Lyon transferred back and forth across the wings, disparately trying to hold the engines. Fifteen minutes previous to this we had notified the men in the rear of the plan to be prepared to jettison everything movable to lighten the ship in the event we had to feather an engine. Now, with three

engines out, they had tossed out all but their parachutes. Knowing that the ship would not maintain altitude on one engine, and that it was but a minute before this too would have to be feathered, your son and the rest of the crew with him, went to their ditching stations, the spot heretofore assumed to be the safest in the event of a water landing. With 7,000 feet of altitude and the mouths of the Ganges river below us, no towns, or civilization within forty miles, nothing but trees, dense and uncharted underbrush interwoven with muddy rivers it seemed and still does seem logical to make a water landing in the widest, longest stretch of water within gliding distance.

In a wide, slow circle we approached a stretch of open river which miraculously opened ahead of us. In the rear the men, in their stations, huddled against the aft pressurized bulkhead, waiting for the word to "brace yourselves." Committed to the landing, the anxiety of waiting for something to happen was gone. I can remember saying something like "hold tight, we're going to hit," and then came the impact.

Decelerating with a shuddering, shaking violence, we slid into the water, and as the nose began to sink into the water I felt that no landing in the water could have been made more perfectly. Up front we scrambled out like mad men, expecting the ship to sink immediately. The river all around was scattered with debris, and looking aft from the wing we saw the tail upended and sinking. With consternation we realized what that meant . . . that the crew in the rear were no longer in the ship but adrift.

While O'Sullivan and Olszewisky were rescuing Sagan and Mumma our Radar Operator, and Lyon was inflating by hand a faulty life raft, I swam around to the rear of the still floating plane and climbed into the gaping hole. The current was extremely strong and the remains of the insides of the plane which the men had been unable to tear from the walls and jettison, were floating down and away. Inside the half-submerged plane there were signs of the most intense impact imaginable, far worse than we had felt up forward. With great care I searched through every inch of the compartments and found nothing. Sagan and Mamma were too shocked to tell us anything; they too had been knocked unconscious by the crash, but somehow their safety vests had become inflated and though unconscious had managed to stay afloat. Jim, Jack, and Chris could not be found. We searched until darkness of night had hidden even the nearby shore from view. The plane had sunk in about forty minutes and the wreckage was scattered over five miles of swiftly flowing, deep water. We examined each bit of floating material minutely, not one piece escaped (sic) us.

As our plane started to sink, a powerboat came up and took us from our life rafts and it was with this boat and another one that we were able to make the search. We have been assured that the shore line in that section of the river and below it were searched periodically by navy patrol and rescue planes. There were no report of life or wreckage from their crews.

Since Sagan and Mumma both needed medical attention and though a veterinarian on board one of the boats had done his best, there was urgent need that they be taken to a hospital. Whether to wait for rescue (the radio operator had sent our position and the rescue agencies in the vicinity had acknowledged receipt of the message) or make for the nearest port two days away was a serious consideration. We decided on the latter course, hoping to signal with a portable search

light any planes overhead. That night, as we headed up the river a patrol plane sighted our emergency signal, and by moonlight the pilot risked a landing. Unable to board the flying boat in the night because of the current, we waited until morning, hove to, with the patrol plane anchored just off our stern.

The next morning we managed with some difficulty to get the wounded aboard the plane and took off for Calcutta hospital and from there the rest of us flew to Piadoba our home field. Several months later Mumma, whose head injury was only slight was sent home on rotation; Sagan whose wrist had been broken and had suffered bruises all over his body was in the hospital for about six weeks and had to be taken off the crew.

The last of May 1945, we enplaned for Tinian. We flew 19 missions from there and then the war ended. Tragedy still dogged our old crew. Rudolph Sagan our left gunner, and Snapp, the radio operator were killed when their ship crashed on take off from Kwajalein on a ferrying trip to the States.

I am sincerely hoping that you wanted to know this story and naturally welcome any questions you may have. Please feel free to write anytime, anywhere . . . I would appreciate hearing from you.

Your friend always James E Mills."

According to James E Mills three men lost their lives that night, Jack D Middleton, James J Underwood, and David W Christofferson. Page 11 in the March 29, 1945 edition of the IBT Roundup-China-Burma-India Theater of World War II printed an article about the men that rescued the survivors on the plane. Facts from that article coincide exactly to Mills account to the Christofferson family.

Survived were

Capt. Harold Ebbeler of San Antonio, Texas,
Lt. James E. Mills of Waterloo, New York
Lt. James R. Lyons of San Antonio, Texas
Lt. William S. O'Sullivan of Narberth, Pennsylvania
Lt. Leonard T. Olszewski of Shenandoah, Pennsylvania
Sgt. Rudolph E. Sagan of Detroit, Michigan and
Corporal George A. Snapp Jr., of Detroit, Michigan
Lt. Robert E. Mumma of Lancaster, Pennsylvania

David W Christofferson MIA died 24 Feb 1945 in the Bay of Bengal, 17 miles south of the Matla River, India during a plane crash. He received the Air Medal, and Purple Heart. His name is on Tablets of the missing at Manila American Cemetery, Philippines. His name is also on the Veteran's Memorial Wall in the Lehi City Cemetery and he has a military headstone placed in the Lehi Cemetery. I was unable to find any proof that his body was found and brought back for burial.

This story is a combined effort of the Lehi Historical Society and the Stories Behind the Stars project, a national effort of volunteers to write the stories of all 400,000+ of the US WW2 fallen on Fold3. Related to this, there will be a smart phone app that will allow people to visit any war memorial or cemetery, scan the fallen's name and read his/her story.

Sources

Utah Draft cards https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2238/images/44041_04_00020-01239?treeid=&personid=&hintid=&queryId=df197498b881a87e2a876fd0143d8372&usePUB=true&_phsrc=htD178&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&_ga=2.80061141.372032476.1595116982-1004001888.1591474577&pid=10946857&backurl=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.ancestry.com%2Fcgi-bin%2Fsse.dll%3Findiv%3D1%26dbid%3D2238%26h%3D10946857%26tid%3D%26pid%3D%26queryId%3Ddf197498b881a87e2a876fd0143d8372%26usePUB%3Dtrue%26_phsrc%3DhtD178%26_phstart%3DsuccessSource

Daily Herald March 8, 1944

Letter printed in the Lehi Sun 7 March 1946 page 4 to the Christofferson family

U.S. Military Headstone applications https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=2375&h=811627&tid=&pid=&queryId=df197498b881a87e2a876fd0143d8372&usePUB=true&_phsrc=htD179&_phstart=successSource

My heritage website <https://www.myheritage.com/research/record-1-652006451-2-500955/david-wallace-christofferson-in-myheritage-family-trees?s=258067151>

Aviation Safety Network <https://aviation-safety.net/wikibase/98477>

<http://www.cbi-theater.com/roundup/roundup032945.html>