

## Funeral held for David Thatcher, World War II Doolittle Raider

Kim Briggeman, *The Missoulian* via AP 12:29 p.m. EDT June 28, 2016



Dawn Thatcher, right, widow of David Thatcher, and Lt. Col. Dick Cole, now the last living Doolittle Raider, react with a hand on the heart and a salute June 27, 2016, as David Thatcher's flag-draped casket is placed for burial at Sunset Memorial Garden Cemetery in Missoula, Mont. Thatcher, 94, died June 22 from complications following a stroke. He was one of the last Doolittle Raiders of World War II. (Photo: Kurt Wilson/ *The Missoulian* via AP)

MISSOULA, Mont. — Missoula and America said goodbye Monday to a quiet hero in ground-shaking fashion.

First a B-1 Bomber from Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota thundered northwest to southeast over Sunset Memorial Cemetery and the crowded grave site of David Thatcher, the penultimate Doolittle Raider from World War II.

A B-25 from Seattle, of the same vintage as the one on which a 20-year-old Thatcher served as tail gunner/engineer in the famed bombing raid over Tokyo on April 18, 1942, rumbled in from the northeast. It flew over twice, then circled the cemetery and Missoula in ever-higher spirals into the deep blue summer sky.

The flyovers were a rare honor for an enlisted man in the United States Air Force, but Staff Sgt. Thatcher, 94, was a rare man. His death in Missoula on Wednesday prompted a nation's salute and obituaries in the New York Times and Washington Post.

Gov. Steve Bullock, a day after his first debate of the gubernatorial campaign with Greg Gianforte at Big Sky, attended funeral services and ordered flags in Montana be flown at half-staff.

"Dave signed thousands of posters and photos over the years," son-in-law Jeff Miller of Missoula said at a memorial service at Garden City Funeral Home that drew more than 300 people. "People from all over the world sought his autograph. They wanted a part of his history, a piece of him."



**A B-1 Lancer from the 28th Bomb Wing at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D., performs a slow-speed flyover in honor of Staff Sgt. David J. Thatcher, June 27, 2016, in Missoula, Mont. (Photo: 2nd Lt. Annabel Monroe/Air Force)**

Thatcher's death left just one of the 80 aviators who unmasked Japan's vulnerability to aerial attacks four months after it attacked Pearl Harbor.

Lt. Col. Dick Cole, who turned 100 last September, was in attendance at the memorial and military services. Cole has remained active in Doolittle Raiders affairs, even after the final reunion in 2013.

Cole was 26 and co-pilot alongside Lt. Col. James H. Doolittle in airplane No. 1 of the famous raid. Thatcher, who flew on the seventh aircraft to take off, joined Cole in April 2015 at the National Museum of the United States Air Force in Ohio to accept the Congressional Gold Medal on behalf of the Raiders. The third remaining Raider, Dick Hite, had died the month before.

"Mathematically, it shouldn't have worked out this way," Cole said after Monday's services. "I was quite a bit older, six years older, than David. Figuring the way gamblers figure, he would have been the last man."

Also in attendance were sons and grandsons of at least four other Raiders - Bill Bower of Ohio and Colorado, the last surviving pilot of the raid before his death in 2011; Jim Parker of Texas, a co-pilot who died in 1991; pilot Dick Joyce of Nebraska (1983), and co-pilot Ross Wilder of Texas (1964).

"You get to know the Raider family and everybody else, more than you can remember," said Cole.

Thatcher's family was part of the Raider family. Son Jeff, daughters Sandy Miller of Missoula and Becky Thatcher-Keller of North Dakota, spoke of their father's commitment to church, community and family; his love of wild things and the flower beds he and Dawn, his wife of 70 years, nurtured at their home on Dearborn Avenue.

"He is known by thousands for his heroism during World War II, but the reason he is our hero is because he was such a wonderful husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather," said daughter Becky.

At his graveside, Dawn was presented a U.S. flag meticulously folded by eight men and women from Malmstrom Air Force Base.

Born in Bridger, the sixth of 12 children, Thatcher's most lasting memory of boyhood came in the "dryland rattlesnake country southwest of Rapelje," son Jeff said.

A single-engine airplane that flew over the family ranch sparked a lifelong passion in aviation. The Thatchers raised their family in Missoula, where David moved after the war to attend forestry school. In a career as a postman, his route included the Lewis and Clark Elementary and Sentinel High School area where they lived. That allowed him to share lunch with his kids and Dawn at home, meals that sparked deep memories for his children, who mentioned the lunch-time discussions and the Paul Harvey radio show a couple of times Monday.

Two of Thatcher's children preceded him in death. Son Gary died in a U.S. Army Medvac helicopter crash in Vietnam in 1970. Daughter Debbie Gilcrest died in 2009 from complications of brain cancer.

"He suffered so many losses in nearly a century of life, enough grief to make any man bitter and unhappy," granddaughter Abbey Gilcrest said. "But my grandpa was one of the kindest people I have ever known. The love and gentleness that he radiated touched every person in this room."



**U.S. Army Air Corps Staff Sgt. David Thatcher (fifth from left) with the crew of the Ruptured Duck, one of 16 B-25 Mitchell bombers that launched off the deck of the aircraft carrier the U.S.S. Hornet and headed to the coast of Japan to wreak havoc on the Japanese empire April 18, 1942. (Photo: Doolittle Tokyo Raiders official website via Air Force)**

Like all the Raiders, Thatcher volunteered for the daring bombing attack on Japan before he knew what the mission was.

After his aircraft — piloted by Lt. Ted Lawson and nicknamed the "Ruptured Duck" — dropped four bombs on Tokyo, it crash-landed in Japanese-held territory off an island on China's eastern coast. Lawson and the three other crewmembers were seriously injured. In the rain and dark, Thatcher collected them on the shore and enlisted local villagers and guerrillas to guide them to safety.

"For the next five days Dad, who was the only crew member able to walk, joined the Chinese in taking the four injured airmen by land and boat to a small hospital on the mainland," son Jeff recounted at the memorial service. "The injured crew members were carried on stretchers and sedan chairs. The entourage repeatedly barely managed to evade capture by Japanese troops searching furiously for them."

A logistics officer debriefed the surviving uncaptured Raiders, and Jeff Thatcher read excerpts from Merian C. Cooper's report.

Thatcher kept his crewmates alive and "kept the party going," it said. "No sleep for the corporal and what little rain water he could catch he gave to his officers. The agony of that journey and the steadfastness and courage which Cpl. Thatcher demonstrated in saving his four wounded officers, I do not know how to express.

"Medal of Honor? Pin it on him. He earned it."

"Dad was not awarded the Medal of Honor," said Jeff Thatcher, president of the Children of the Doolittle Raiders. "That was reserved for Jimmy Doolittle. But Dad was one of three Raiders, and the only enlisted man on the raid, to receive the Silver Star for his gallantry and his courage."

Thatcher went on to survive 26 bombing missions over North Africa and Europe before hepatitis and malaria ended his military career. Part of the first bombing of Japan in 1942, he was also in on the first bombing of Rome in 1943.

In lieu of the annual Doolittle Raider reunion, commemorative toasts were held this April 18 at air bases around the nation. Thatcher flew with family to Fairchild Air Force Base near Spokane.

"The Doolittle Raid showed what we could accomplish when we work together to achieve a common goal, Dad said during the ceremony," son Jeff reported. "I hope that airmen will continue to honor the raid and remember what was done."

In 1959, the city of Tucson, Arizona, presented the Raiders with 80 silver goblets, engraved with the names of each of them. At subsequent reunions, those of the deceased from the past year were turned upside down.

The Air Force Museum in Ohio is already gearing up for a final Doolittle Raiders ceremony next April, according to Tom Casey, the Raiders' business manager.

"We'll do the ceremony, and Col. Cole will be turning David's cup over," Casey said

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