

David Thatcher, one of last survivors of World War II's Doolittle Raid, dies at 94

By **Harrison Smith** June 23

Growing up during the Depression, one of 10 children born to a dairy farmer in southern Montana, David Thatcher dreamed of leaving home and seeing the Pacific Northwest. After seeing a plane fly high overhead one day, he decided that aviation was his ticket out of town.

Mr. Thatcher joined the Army Air Corps in 1940, fresh out of high school, and one year later, after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and pushed the United States into World War II, he volunteered for a top-secret mission that sent him far past the Northwest — on an aircraft carrier, the USS Hornet, headed straight for the coast of Japan.

On April 18, 1942, then-Cpl. Thatcher was one of 80 aviators who participated in a daring daylight air raid on Tokyo and other cities, bombing factories, munitions depots and other targets in an effort to retaliate for Japan's Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor. Led by Lt. Col. James H. Doolittle, a former test pilot and engineer, the so-called Doolittle Raid

brought Americans back from the brink of despair following four months of bitter defeats in Hawaii, Guam, Wake Island and the Philippines.

Mr. Thatcher, a gunner who was awarded the Silver Star for helping his four crewmates survive after their plane crash-landed off the coast of China following the Tokyo bombing run, died June 22 at a hospital in Missoula, Mont. He was 94.

The cause was complications from a stroke, said a son, Jeff Thatcher. Mr. Thatcher's death leaves Richard Cole, 100, who served as Doolittle's co-pilot, as the sole surviving member of the raid.

James Scott, a journalist and the author of "Target Tokyo" (2015), a history of the operation over Japan, said the 16 B-25 bombers that Doolittle commanded that day carried out what was primarily a morale-boosting attack that did only a "pinprick" of damage to the enemy's war capabilities.

However, it spurred Japanese commanders to go on the offensive against U.S. forces. The result, when the Japanese navy attacked at the Battle of Midway two months later, was a decisive American victory that "shifted the balance of power in the war back to the United States," Scott said.

Mr. Thatcher and his crewmates on the Ruptured Duck, as they nicknamed their plane, were supposed to drop their bombs on Tokyo and continue on to China, where they would land on a gravel runway in the mountains before regrouping with American forces. The Doolittle Raiders were forced to take off 650 nautical miles off the coast of Japan — and about 170 miles farther than planned — because the Hornet was spotted by Japanese boats that reported the carrier's position over the radio.

Led by pilot Ted Lawson, the Ruptured Duck struck a steel mill and other factories before continuing on to China. Low on fuel, flying through rain and darkness, Lawson attempted an emergency beach landing on a Japanese-

occupied island just off the Chinese coast.

The plane clipped a wave on its way down and flipped, throwing Mr. Thatcher's crewmates through the nose of the plane and onto the beach. All four were severely injured; Mr. Thatcher, stationed in the plane's rear, was briefly knocked unconscious and escaped with little more than a bump on the head.

"If they hadn't been thrown out, they would have been killed, as the whole front end of the plane was smashed," he later told the Billings Gazette. "There was no medical help whatever, and I was the only one able to walk."

The 20-year-old Mr. Thatcher gathered the crew and, assisted at times by local fishermen and villagers who discovered the crew shortly after the crash, bandaged their wounds, including a deep gash on Lawson's left leg.

Pursued by Japanese soldiers, Mr. Thatcher and some of the Chinese villagers used improvised stretchers and chairs to ferry the wounded airmen across the island and by boat to the mainland. A group of Chinese guerrillas helped them reach a hospital, where Lawson's leg was amputated.

In 1943, Lawson wrote a best-selling account of the raid and crash-landing, "Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo," that was made into a popular film of the same name one year later. Mr. Thatcher was portrayed by Robert Walker, with Van Johnson playing Lawson and Spencer Tracy starring as Doolittle.

Mr. Thatcher later flew 26 bombing missions over North Africa and Europe before retiring at the rank of staff sergeant in 1945. In addition to the Silver Star, his decorations included the Distinguished Flying Cross and five awards of the Air Medal.

David Jonathan Thatcher was born in Rapelje, Mont., on July 31, 1921, and grew up on a ranch near the town of Absarokee. His father distributed dairy products in Billings, Mont.

Mr. Thatcher moved to Missoula after retiring from the military, working as a clerk and then a letter carrier for the Postal Service until his retirement in 1980.

In addition to his wife of 70 years, the former Margaret Dawn Goddard, survivors include three children; two sisters; one brother; seven grandchildren; and one great-granddaughter.

Doolittle was awarded the Medal of Honor, the military's highest award for valor, for leading the Tokyo raid. He died in 1993.

Although Mr. Thatcher and the rest of his crew survived the raid, the operation came at a cost. All 16 bombers were lost. One airman was killed while bailing out over China, and two others drowned while trying to escape capture by the Japanese. Of eight aviators captured in China, three were executed and five were given life sentences. One died of starvation.

And in retaliation for assisting U.S. forces, the Japanese killed an estimated 250,000 civilians in eastern China following the raid.

Mr. Thatcher participated in reunions for the surviving members of the Raiders nearly every year, and in 2015 he and Cole, the other surviving Raider, were recognized with the Congressional Gold Medal.

In 2011, Mr. Thatcher told Nebraska's Lincoln Journal Star that he never expected the bombing run to acquire the recognition it did. "We didn't think it was important then," he said. "We thought it was just another mission."