

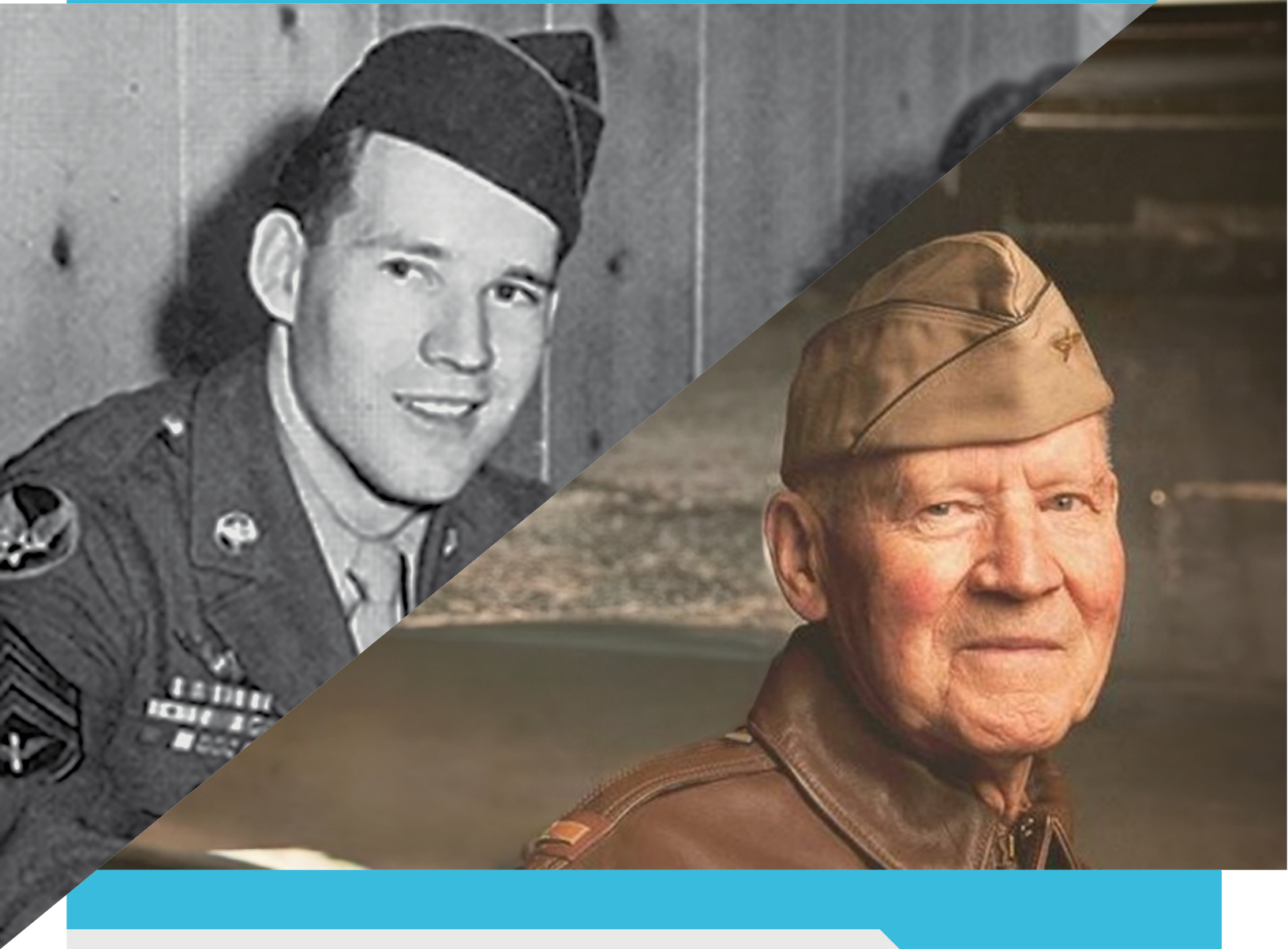
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U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

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Veteran Biography of
David J. Thatcher

VISN 19 - VA Rocky Mountain Network • History

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David J. Thatcher: A Doolittle Raiders Legacy

Growing up on the family farm, David Thatcher had a dream of taking flight, a lofty ambition for a boy coming of age in rural Montana during the Great Depression. Yet, Thatcher aimed high and remained resolute in chasing his goals. When flight school proved financially unattainable, he found another way to carve his path. At the start of World War II, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps, embarking on a history-making military career as a Doolittle Raider and returning a hometown hero.



Mitchell B-25 Medium Bombers on the deck of the U.S.S. Hornet

David Jonathan Thatcher, born July 31, 1921, in Bridger, Montana, was the sixth child of Joseph Holland and Dorthea Steinmiller Thatcher. Raised in Stillwater County, Thatcher attended high school in Absarokee. After graduating in 1939, he continued farm work as a truck driver in Billings yet still dreamed of taking to the sky. Though flight school was out of reach, he remained undeterred and opted for an aviation correspondence course.

World War II broke out the same year young Thatcher graduated from high school. His older brothers joined the war effort in various capacities and Thatcher followed suit. After his correspondence course, he made the decision to join the Army Air Corps as a private on December 3, 1940. The following year, he underwent military training, specializing as an airplane mechanic and technician. Although Thatcher's color vision deficiency prevented him from becoming a pilot, his aptitude and attitude proved indispensable during the war and beyond.

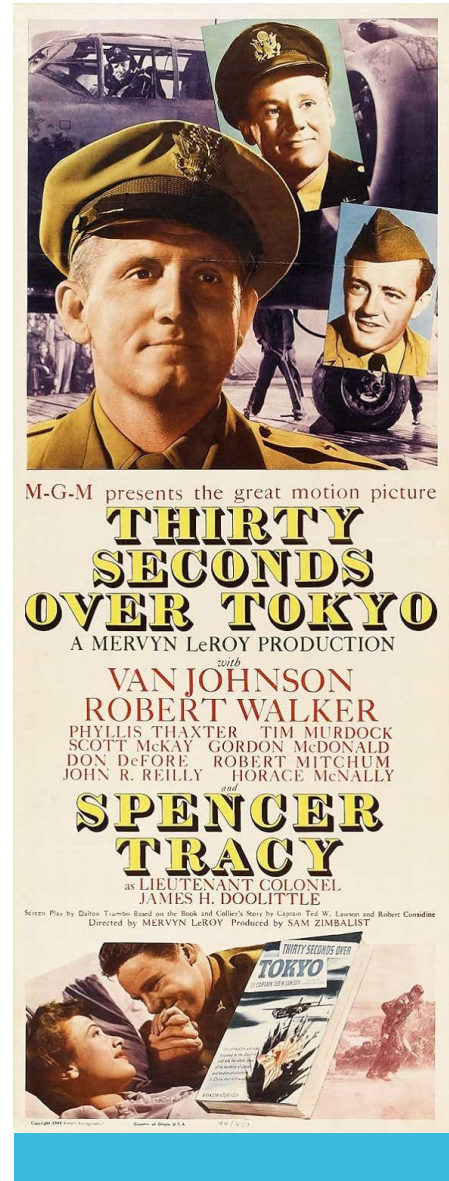
On December 7, 1941, Japanese forces bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The following day, the United States declared war on Japan. Two days later, Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S. In a matter of days, our country was mobilizing troops. Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Thatcher was stationed with the 95th bomb squadron at Pendleton, Oregon. Here, he volunteered in February 1942 for a secret mission under Lieutenant Colonel James "Jimmy" Doolittle. This marked Thatcher's first mission and, since he had not yet flown, it afforded him the opportunity to do so.

Thatcher and the other 79 volunteers knew nothing about the mission when they arrived at Eglin Air Corps Proving Ground in Florida for training in the spring of 1942. Speculation was not allowed among the troops due to the sensitive nature of the secret mission, yet they all had their independent hunches. During their weeks of training, the volunteers learned only that U.S. pilots and crews would fly their B-25 bombers at altitudes below radar after a very short takeoff.

Details finally became clear when the volunteers were enroute to the mission aboard the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier, USS Hornet (CV-8). Once the volunteers arrived in Alameda, California, to board the ship, the training clicked. They were training to launch their planes from the deck of an aircraft carrier for the first bombing raid on mainland Japan. The attack, while retaliatory and a boost to U.S. morale, was also meant to prove that Japan had vulnerabilities. A success on both fronts.

Thatcher, now a corporal, served as part of crew number seven on The Ruptured Duck, the B-25 bomber piloted by First Lieutenant Ted Lawson. Their target was the Nippon Steel Machinery Works and other industrial factories in downtown Tokyo. On the morning of April 18, 1942, the Ruptured Duck and 15 other B-25 bombers put their training to use. All bombers launched successfully off the USS Hornet, 400 miles from the coast of Japan and flying so low that salt water splashed the planes. The crews had separate missions, carrying enough fuel to get them to their intended targets, and hopefully to safety in China.

Off the coast of China, after a successful raid over Tokyo, The Ruptured Duck ran out of fuel and crash-landed just shy of a remote beach. Of the five crewmen aboard, only Thatcher, who was positioned in the back of the plane as the engineer and gunner, escaped unscathed. His crewmates were ejected from the plane upon impact, sustaining serious injuries. Thatcher assisted his crewmates by tending to their wounds the best he could and convinced friendly Chinese guerrillas to assist. Traversing rugged terrain on foot with guerrillas carrying the men on makeshift stretchers, they reached a hospital 40 miles away four days after the crash landing. First Lieutenant Lawson wrote of his crew's experience during the raid in his memoir-turned-Hollywood motion picture, *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944).



**Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo
Movie Poster**



Group of Doolittle Raiders on new mission in North Africa

Thatcher was a central figure to the story for his valor and commitment to saving the lives of his crewmates. On June 22, 1942, Thatcher was honored with the Distinguished Flying Cross, followed by the Silver Star on July 10 for his gallantry and leadership. Only three Raiders received the Silver Star for their heroics that day, Thatcher being the only enlisted member. Thatcher was also awarded the Order of the Celestial Cloud by China and a Four Oak Leaf Cluster by the U.S. Army Air Corps. The Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded to every member of the Doolittle Raiders in 2015.

Thatcher's service took him across continents, from the first bombing raid over Rome on July 19, 1943, to North Africa, where he battled German General Erwin Rommel's forces until January 1944, plus an additional 26 raids throughout the Mediterranean. However, illness cut short his flying career when he contracted hepatitis after the North African missions. He was honorably discharged as a staff sergeant on July 11, 1945.

With his military career behind him, Thatcher returned home at the age of 24. He entered the forestry program at the University of Montana in the fall of 1945 and, a few months later, on December 22, married Dawn Goddard, the love of his life. After two years of school, the Thatchers started a family with the birth of their first of five children. Thatcher ultimately left the forestry program to focus on family and embark on a career with the US Postal Service (USPS). He began in 1951 as a substitute clerk, and three years later, he started his 26-year career as a USPS letter carrier in Missoula.

Life brought both joy and sorrow to Thatcher. He experienced the loss of his son, Gary, in the Vietnam War in 1970 and his daughter, Debbie, to brain cancer in 2009. Yet, his spirit endured, reflected in his active involvement in organizations such as the Independent Order of Odd Fellows and his recognition in various Veterans' groups and aviation circles. After Thatcher retired from the USPS in 1980, he made public appearances and was asked to lecture about his war experiences at the University of Montana during the 1990s and early 2000s. In January 2016, at the age of 94, he was inducted into the Living Legends of Aviation only months before passing away from complications after a stroke.

Throughout the decades, Thatcher and his fellow Raiders stayed in touch. Beginning in 1946, the Doolittle Raiders had an annual reunion and Thatcher made it to nearly every gathering. At the first reunion, held in Florida on Jimmy Doolittle's birthday, the men drank Cognac and reminisced. At the 1959 reunion, the city of Tucson, Arizona, presented the Raiders 80 silver goblets, each one with a member's name inscribed right-side up and upside down. For the next six decades, the surviving Raiders continued the reunions and drank Cognac from their silver goblets. For those they had lost the previous year, that member's goblet was turned upside down. The final reunion occurred in 2013, with only Thatcher and the other surviving Raider, Lieutenant Colonel Richard "Dick" Cole, in attendance.

Thatcher's remarkable journey ended on June 22, 2016. To honor his life of service, Congress approved and signed into law the renaming of the Missoula VA Clinic in August 2017. The David J. Thatcher VA Clinic opened January 28, 2022, and stands as a testament to this great man's enduring commitment to country, service and community.



Doolittle Tokyo Raiders, Crew Number 7, Ruptured Duck. Lieutenant Ted W. Lawson, pilot; Lieutenant Dean Davenport, copilot; Lieutenant Charles L. McClure, navigator, Lieutenant Robert S. Clever, bombardier; Sergeant David J. Thatcher, flight engineer/gunner.

The Service of David J. Thatcher

Born: 31 July 1921 – Bridger, MT

Died: 22 June 2016 – Missoula, MT

Burial Place: Sunset Memorial Gardens, Missoula

Service History ([Source: LOC](#)):

- Branch of Service: Army Air Force/Corps
- Unit of Service: 95th Bomb Squadron, 17th Bomb Group; 441st Bomb Squadron, 320th Bomb Group
- Locations of Service: McChord Field, WA; Lincoln, NE; MacDill Field, FL; Eglin Field, FL; March Field, CA; Japan; Algeria; Tunisia; North Africa; European Theater; Pacific Theater
- Highest Rank: Staff Sergeant
- Dates of Service: 1940-1945
- Entrance into Service: Enlisted (Private)
- Military Status: Veteran
- Service History Note: The Veteran served as an engineer and gunner on B-25 and B-26 bombers. He participated in the first bombing raid on Tokyo and Rome.





1921

July 31: David Jonathan Thatcher is born to Joseph Holland and Dorthea Steinmiller Thatcher in Bridger, MT. He is their 6th child.

1930

Living in Stillwater County, MT with parents and siblings on a dairy farm.

1939

Graduates from high school in Absarokee, MT.

1940

Living with parents and siblings in Billings, MT. He is a truck driver on a farm.

December 3:

Enlists in Army Air Corps.

1941

Trains as an airplane mechanic and tech in Lincoln, NE.

1942

February: Volunteers for secret mission under Lieutenant Colonel Jimmy Doolittle while stationed at Pendleton, Oregon with the 95th bomb squadron.

March 1:

Arrives at Eglin AFB near Tampa for mission training.

March 27:

Thatcher and his crew head to Alameda, CA on their plane, the Ruptured Duck, a Mitchell B-25 medium bomber.

April 1:

In California, they on-board the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS Hornet, along with the other planes and crews. Totalling 80 raiders and sixteen B-25 medium bombers, they head to the Pacific Theatre where they finally learn about the mission.

April 18:

First bombing raid on Japan in response to Pearl Harbor. Thatcher is part of plane crew number seven as a gunner and engineer. They are tasked with bombing Nippon Machinery Steel Works and steel factories in downtown Tokyo. Plane goes down on China coast due to low fuel and all crew are seriously injured except Thatcher who, with the help of friendly guerillas, transport the four injured men to a hospital in Linghai.

April 22:

Thatcher and his crewmates finally arrive at the hospital after four days and 40 miles of rugged terrain. Injured men are carried on makeshift stretchers and sedans.

June 22:

He is awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

July 10:

He is awarded the Silver Star for "gallantry and daring in action," the only enlisted raider to be given this award. Only 2 others – officers – were awarded.

		October: Deployed to North Africa, still under (now) Brigadier General Doolittle's command, to fight German General Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps. Travels from training at Eglin to New York to board a refitted Queen Mary. From there, he lands in England before going to North Africa. He contracts malaria and remains in England until healthy.
	1943	July 19: Participates in first bombing raid over Rome.
	1944	January: End of North African missions and heads back to California for next assignment. As of February, he had participated in 26 bombing raids in the Mediterranean theatre. In addition to the Distinguished Flying Cross and Silver Star, he also has been awarded Four Oak Leaf Clusters and Order of the Celestial Cloud. Comes down with "yellow jaundice" (hepatitis) after North Africa missions, which ends his flying career.
	1945	July 11: Honorably discharged from the Army Air Corp as a staff sergeant. Enters forestry school at University of Montana that fall.
		December 22: Marries Dawn Goddard of Reedpoint, MT.
	1946	December 14: First Doolittle Raiders reunion occurs in Florida on Doolittle's birthday. Thatcher is in attendance.
	1951	Begins career with US Post Service (USPS) as a substitute clerk.
	1954	Begins career as USPS letter carrier in Missoula, MT.
	1966	Installed as "Noble Grand" of his local International Order of Odd Fellows chapter. He serves this post for one year but is a lifelong member.
	1970	Son Gary, a helicopter pilot, is killed in Vietnam War.
	1980	Retires from USPS.

2009

Daughter Debbie dies due to brain cancer.

2013

November 9: Final Doolittle Raiders Reunion and toast. Only Thatcher and Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Richard "Dick" Cole, the last two survivors, were in attendance.

2016

January: Inducted into Living Legends of Aviation in Beverly Hills.

February: Becomes member of Sons of American Revolution.

June 22: Dies due to complications following a stroke.

2022

January 28: David J. Thatcher VA Clinic in Missoula has grand opening.



Staff Sergeant David J. Thatcher(left) and Lieutenant Colonel Richard Cole(right) with the Congressional Medal of Honor

David J. Thatcher

Image List



Mitchell B-25 Medium Bombers on the Deck of the USS Hornet, April 1942. ([U.S. Air Force Photo](#))



Doolittle Tokyo Raiders, Crew Number 7, Ruptured Duck. Lieutenant Ted W. Lawson, pilot; Lieutenant Dean Davenport, copilot; Lieutenant Charles L. McClure, navigator, Lieutenant Robert S. Clever, bombardier; Sergeant David J. Thatcher, flight engineer/gunner. ([U.S. Air Force Photo](#))

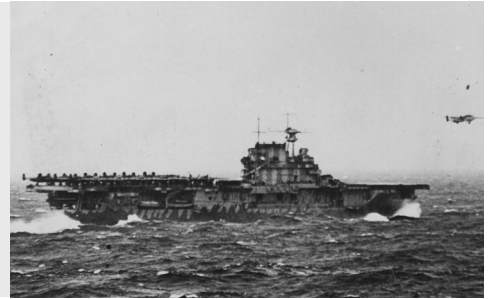


Bomber crews load ammunition in preparation for take-off. The Ruptured Duck (plane number 7) is in the foreground. ([U.S. Air Force Photo](#))



Ruptured Duck (foreground) and Green Hornet on deck of USS Hornet, April 1942. ([U.S. Air Force Photo](#))

One of the sixteen B-25 bombers takes off from the USS Hornet enroute to Japan, April 18, 1942. ([U.S. Navy Photo](#))



Group of Doolittle Raiders on new mission in North Africa, May 1943. Veterans from left to right: Captain Jack A. Sims, Captain Charles J. Ozuk, Technical Sergeant David J. Thatcher, Captain James H. Macia, Jr. and Major William M. Bower. Seated: Staff Sergeant V. Bain. ([U.S. Air Force Photo](#))



Actor Robert Walker and Staff Sergeant David J. Thatcher on the set of *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, 1944. (MGM Studios)



On the set of *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944), left to right: Van Johnson, Robert Walker, Staff Sergeant David J. Thatcher, Spencer Tracy and Major Dean Davenport. (MGM Studios)



Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo Movie Poster, 1944.





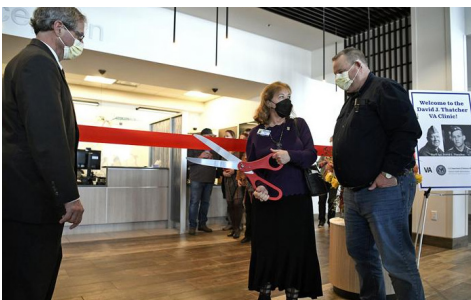
Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Richard E. Cole, last surviving Doolittle Raider, retires the goblet of Staff Sergeant David J. Thatcher in a private ceremony at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, April 18, 2017. ([U.S. Air Force Photo by Ken LaRock](#))



Staff Sergeant David J. Thatcher and Lieutenant Colonel Richard Cole with the Congressional Medal of Honor, 2015. ([U.S. Air Force Photo](#))



The Doolittle Tokyo Raiders Congressional Medal of Honor. ([U.S. Air Force Photo by Tech. Sgt. Anthony Nelson](#))



David J. Thatcher VA Clinic Ribbon Cutting, 2022.



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