

Lieutenant-Colonel Robert E Cole obituary

Bomber pilot who was the last survivor of the ‘Doolittle Raid’ on Tokyo in 1942 when the Americans hit back after Pearl Harbor

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Robert E Cole in 2013 in front of a B-25 in Florida NICK TOMECEK/AP

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When Robert Cole baled out of his twin-engine bomber after one of the most daring raids of the Second World War, he pulled the ripcord so hard that he gave himself a black eye. It was the only injury he suffered on the mission.

He had been the co-pilot flying with Lieutenant-Colonel James Doolittle on what became known as the “Doolittle Raid”; 16 US army air corps B-25 “Mitchell” bombers attacked Tokyo in retaliation for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Cole was the last survivor.

The raid was less damaging than the attack on Pearl Harbor, where 2,403 people died and 1,178 were wounded, with the destruction of three cruisers, three destroyers and 188 American aircraft. Coming just four months afterwards, however, the raid provided a huge boost for American morale and shattered the Japanese belief that the country was invulnerable to air attack.

On April 18, 1942 Doolittle, the commander of the mission, and Cole sat in the cockpit of their B-25 — No 40-2344 — going over a pre-flight checklist with the engines running. They were on the deck of the aircraft carrier USS *Hornet*, 650 miles off Japan; the bomber was loaded with high explosive and incendiary bombs. “I was setting the engine cowl flaps and watching to make sure the engines didn’t overheat,” Cole recalled later. The raid had been brought forward by 12 hours

because the *Hornet* was spotted by Japanese vessels, which turned the operation from a night raid to a daytime mission.

The bombers were not designed to be launched from carriers and none had previously done so. Doolittle revved his engines hard, released the brakes and became airborne just a few feet from the edge of the carrier. "Everyone prayed, but in an inward way," Cole recalled in an account for the US air force in 1957. "If anyone was scared, it didn't show."



Cole, second right, in 1942 with James Doolittle, second left AVALON

The tune of the folk song *Wabash Cannonball* kept running through his mind, making him sing and stomp so vigorously that Doolittle looked at him quizzically, "like he thought I was going batty", Cole said.

As they approached western Tokyo, the five-man crew of the B-25 spotted more than 80 Japanese aircraft. No fighters attacked them, but anti-aircraft fire made several holes in the bomber's tail. The 16 American aircraft attacked five cities. Japanese children waved to them as they flew low over trees, thinking they were part of an exercise, which was exactly the same mistake as the Americans had made in Hawaii before the Japanese hit Pearl Harbor. The lack of a formidable Japanese response evidently resulted from their belief that an American air attack was improbable, while the relatively few bombers involved lowered the defenders' guard.

Doolittle's bombers hit oil stores and military installations, then dropped to treetop level to avoid flak. "We could see the moat, the Imperial Palace and downtown Tokyo," Cole said

Problems for the attacking force started when they flew on to China, where nationalist airstrips had been prepared for them behind enemy lines because it was not possible to return to the *Hornet*. By the time they reached the Chinese coast, a storm broke, darkness had fallen and fuel was low. The airfield controllers heard the engines, assumed they were Japanese and turned off the lights. None reached the airstrips. All but one crash-landed in Japanese-occupied territory or ditched in the sea. Three airmen were killed. Eight more were captured by the Japanese; four were put into solitary confinement, three were executed and one starved to death. The other aircraft flew to the Soviet Union.

The crew of Cole's plane baled out as the aircraft was travelling at 166mph, leaving the plane in strict order: gunner, bombardier, navigator, co-pilot, pilot. His parachute snagged on pine trees, trapping him 10ft off the ground. He cut the seat out of his canopy and made a hammock, but hardly slept. "I had a flashlight, but in the fog and heavy rain it was practically useless," he said. "At daybreak I was able to see that the terrain was very rough and, had I tried to look around at night, I would probably have fallen down a very steep hill."

That morning Cole ate a chocolate bar and walked westwards over the hills, away from Japanese-held territory. A woodcutter ignored him.

"At about four o'clock the next day I came out into a type of clearing at the top of a high bluff which overlooked a housing compound with the Chinese nationalist flag flying over it," he said. Guerrillas took him to an outpost, where Doolittle and the other three members of the crew had arrived. After a few days' rest they set off by "foot, horse, bus and seating chair" until they reached a river. They were smuggled aboard a boat and survived several Japanese inspections before reaching the town of Hang Yang. An American aircraft flew in and took them to the provincial capital, Chungking.

One survivor, Edward Lawson, a pilot who lost a leg while bailing out over China, wrote a book, *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, which was turned into a film starring Spencer Tracy as Doolittle, but Cole's character was cut. Doolittle died in 1993 (obituary, September 29).

After the raid Cole flew transport planes over the Himalayas between China, Burma and India, on a route known as "the Hump". He then joined the 1st Air Commando Group. "We invaded Burma with gliders, built a couple of airfields behind Japanese lines," Cole said. "That was the beginning of the march from northeastern India by ground forces to retake Burma, which they did."



The Hornet on the day of the raidALAMY

By the time Cole retired from the US air force in 1967, he had flown more than 5,000 hours in 30 different aircraft, logging 500 hours on more than 250 combat missions. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross with two Oak Leaf Clusters, the Air Medal with one Oak Leaf Cluster, the Bronze Star Medal, Air Force Commendation Medal, and Chinese Army, Navy, Air Corps Medal, Class A, 1st Grade. In 2014 President Obama awarded Cole and three other living Doolittle Raiders the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest US civilian award, in a ceremony at the White House. Cole gave his medal to the National Museum of the US Air Force.

Richard Eugene Cole was born in September 1915 in Dayton, Ohio, where he attended Steele High School. He became enthralled with flying as a teenager in the 1930s when he watched Doolittle, who was a trophy-winning pilot nearly 20 years older than him, making test flights from a local airfield.

Cole spent two years at Ohio University before enlisting in November 1940. He completed pilot training and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in July 1941. At first he flew aircraft hunting Japanese submarines off the west coast. He was later the co-pilot on a training flight in Florida when the pilot became ill and his place was taken by Doolittle, who was impressed with the crew. Cole was on a training flight in Oregon when word came of the attack on Pearl Harbor. In early 1942 he volunteered for Special Mission Number 1, as the Doolittle project was codenamed. "Everyone wanted to go on that mission," Cole said. He was selected after receiving support from Doolittle.

Relieved from active duty in January 1947, he resumed flying duties in August that year. He became operations adviser to the Venezuelan air force from 1959 to 1962

and ended with peacetime service in Ohio, North Carolina and California. After leaving the military, Cole settled in Comfort, Texas, 45 miles northwest of San Antonio, and bought a citrus farm. He and another air force veteran set up a company that grew oranges, grapefruit and avocados.

A 2015 book, *Dick Cole's War: Doolittle Raider, Hump Pilot, Air Commando*, by Dennis Okerstrom, chronicled Cole's story. "Dick was friendly, but taciturn," Okerstrom said. "I learnt he had strong opinions on service, duty and sacrifice. He always downplayed his role in the war."

Cole had married Lucia Martha Harrell, known as Marty, before the end of the war. They were married for 59 years; she died in 2003. They are survived by two of their children: Cindy Cole Chal, who was born in 1945; and Richard.

After the war Doolittle kept a promise he had made before the raid that they would have a party if the attack succeeded, which led to an annual reunion that continued until 2013. A feature of every event was the drinking of cognac in silver goblets with the names of each of the 80 airmen engraved right-side up and upside-down. If a raider had died that year, the goblet would be turned upside down.

By 2013 there were only four raiders left alive. Cole gave the final toast after the others agreed that their age and inability to travel would make this the last reunion. Cole raised his glass before a large audience at Wright-Patterson air force base in Dayton and said: "I propose a toast to those who were lost on the mission and to those who have passed away since," adding: "May they rest in peace."

In June 2016 David Thatcher, a tail gunner, died, leaving Cole as the last surviving Doolittle Raider.

Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Eugene Cole, bomber pilot and citrus farmer, was born on September 7, 1915. He died on April 9, 2019, aged 103