

Drinking Alone

The Doolittle Raiders were once among the most universally admired and revered men in the United States. There were 80 of the Raiders in April 1942, when they carried out one of the most courageous and heart-stirring military operations in this nation's history. The mere mention of their unit's name, in those years, would bring tears to the eyes of grateful Americans. After Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, with the United States reeling and wounded, something dramatic was needed to turn the war effort around. Since there were no friendly airfields close enough to Japan for the United States to launch a retaliation, a daring plan was devised. Sixteen B-25s were modified so that they could take off from the deck of an aircraft carrier. This had never before been tried -- sending such big, heavy bombers from a carrier.

The 16 five-man crews, under the command of Lt. Col. James Doolittle, who himself flew the lead plane off the USS Hornet, knew that they would not be able to return to the carrier. The plan was to hit Japan and then hope to make it to China for a safe landing.

But on the day of the raid, the Japanese military caught wind of the plan. The Raiders were told that they would have to take off from much farther out in the Pacific Ocean than they had counted on. This meant that they would not have enough fuel to make it to safety. They went anyway.

They bombed Tokyo and then flew as far as they could. Four planes crash-landed; 11 more crews bailed out, and three of the Raiders died. Eight more were captured; three were executed. Another died of starvation in a Japanese prison camp. One crew made it to Russia.

Of the 80 Raiders, 62 survived the war. They were celebrated as national heroes, models of bravery. Hollywood produced the movie "Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo" based on the raid.

Beginning in 1946, the surviving Raiders have held a reunion each April, to commemorate the mission. The reunion is in a different city each year. In 1959, the city of Tucson, Arizona, as a gesture of respect and gratitude, presented the Doolittle Raiders with a set of 80 silver goblets. Each goblet was engraved with the name of a Raider. Every year, a wooden display case bearing all 80 goblets is transported to the reunion city. Each time a Raider passes away, his goblet is turned upside down in the case at the next reunion, as his old friends bear solemn witness. Also, in the wooden case is a bottle of 1896 Hennessy Very Special cognac. The year is not happenstance: 1896 was when Jimmy Doolittle was born.

There has always been a plan: When there are only two surviving Raiders, they would open the bottle at last, drink from it and toast their comrades who preceded them in death.

As 2013 began, there were five surviving Raiders; then, in February, Tom Griffin passed away at age 96. What a man he was. After bailing out of his plane over a mountainous Chinese forest after the Tokyo raid, he became ill with malaria, and almost died. When he recovered, he was sent to Europe to fly more combat missions. He was shot down, captured, and spent 22 months in a German

prisoner of war camp. There is no question that these men were heroes but they were also so human! This was a passage in the Cincinnati Enquirer obituary for Mr. Griffin:

"When his wife became ill and needed to go into a nursing home, he visited her every day. He walked from his house to the nursing home, fed his wife and at the end of the day brought home her clothes. At night, he washed and ironed her clothes. Then he walked them up to her room the next morning. He did that for three years until her death in 2005."

So then, out of the original 80, only four Raiders remained: Dick Cole (Doolittle's co-pilot on the Tokyo raid), Robert Hite, Edward Saylor and David Thatcher. All are in their 90s. They decided that there were too few of them for the public reunions to continue. After that final public reunion they gathered only once more – later that year in 2013. Of the four remaining raiders, only three were in good enough health to attend that gathering. And that's when they opened the bottle of brandy. They filled the four remaining upturned goblets. And raised them in a toast to those who were gone. They decided not to wait until there are only two of them.

I've tried to imagine what must have been in their minds at that final gathering? For all those years, they came together and the faces of the other men immediately brought them back to one harrowing day that had taken place years earlier. The course of those 80 lives had been irreversibly changed by the sheer chance that they were assigned to the mission. But, from that day on, though the mission was a part of their story, it was not the sum total of their

identity. Like any of us, they were each a tapestry of experiences, memories, relationships and accomplishments.

Every year, they brought out that bottle of cognac and wondered if they'd taste it. It became a challenge posed to each surviving raider. And, as the number of competitors for the privilege dwindled – how they must have faced their own mortality – knowing that none was worthier of outliving the others. At the end of each annual reunion, they must have looked around and wondered, who would live and who would die. Who would return next year and whose goblet would be overturned.

Each goblet was engraved with a man's name twice – once and then again but upside down so it could be read when the goblet was overturned in the case. Each man, looking at his own cup, could see that there was an engraving waiting to be turned upside-down meaning he'd died. It made me think of those who have a double headstone for their partner and for themselves – they see that space waiting to mark their own end and there is a decision they must make: will they simply sit down on that grave and wait for their turn to join their beloved or will they go about life, making new memories, albeit without their loved ones?

We cannot know what conversation ensued and what decision making happened that led to the remaining four raiders cracking that bottle open but, from my vantage point, it sure looked like they'd had enough of sitting back and waiting for their time to die. They chose to create a new memory before it was too late and it would not surprise me to hear one of them tell me it was uncomfortable to violate the pact he'd made with the dead. If that Raider was spiritual, he might have even reached out to the Universe to try to consult the

spirits of his dead comrades. If I had to take a guess about what their mates would have said about the decision, I think they'd wonder, "what had taken you so long?"

Yizkor provides us a moment to come back together and to enter into an imaginary conversation with our dead fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, sons, daughters and partners. We project an idea of what they'd think of us and our choices if they could sit next to us today. We might ask them the questions we can't ask anyone else and we might seek the advice that only they could give us.

As our prayer book reminds us, memory can only tell us what we were in the company of those we loved. It cannot tell us what each of us alone must now become.

This summer, David Thatcher died. He was 94 and his death left Robert Cole as the sole remaining raider at the age of 100. Lt. Col. Cole is surprised that he was the last. There were guys quite a bit younger than he in the last years. There were guys quite a bit healthier than he, too. But, we all know there is no reliable nor published plan for how lives will play out. We are charged with living today in a way that would reflect honor on the memories of our dear ones and to do otherwise would leave them frustrated with us. May their memories be blessings as we use those memories to urge ourselves towards living the highest and best life within reach.