

“I THOUGHT I’D MISSED THE EARTH”

Howard L. Tomb, III

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Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember, with advantages,
What feats he did that day.

--William Shakespeare

Henry V, act IV, scene 3

“Parachuting for the first time in my life, in a raging thunderstorm over China, not knowing where down was, I seemed to be suspended in a blank, silent void, with no feeling of movement. I was told I would be going at 180 mph, but it just didn’t seem possible. The wind currents were violent, because I remember just being able to see my chute. It had a life of its own. It would descend to a level with me and start to collapse. I was afraid it would spill all its air. But then it would fill and swing overhead and descend to the other side, where it would once again nearly collapse. Was I going up, or down, or sideways? I had no idea. Time had stopped. It seemed eternal. I thought I’d missed the earth.”

That’s Major Thomas Carson Griffin, age 25, member of the Doolittle Raiders and navigator of the Whirling Dervish, a B-25 Mitchell, speaking about having to jump over occupied *or* unoccupied China. (It would make a difference.)

“Occupied China was overrun by Japanese. If my jump had put me there, torture and an agonizing death would have been my fate. Even unoccupied China offered a slim chance of getting out with your skin intact. But you had no option. The plane was bone dry. So I had to jump or die with the plane.” Jump he did—to land in a land he knew not of.

The raid took place on April 18, 1942. They had bombed Tokyo, Yokohama, Kobe and Nagoya. Not one plane was shot down by the enemy—not one. It was a success beyond imagination. But Jimmy Doolittle didn’t think so.

The Whirling Dervish was the ninth plane out of sixteen to take off from the carrier USS Hornet. Each plane had a crew of five men: pilot, co-pilot, bombardier, gunner and navigator. For Tom Griffin’s plane those were: Harold “Doc” Watson, Jim Parker, Wayne Bissell, Eldred Scott and

Tom. All 16 planes made the take-off successfully, but it was tight. The wingspan of a B-25 is 67 feet, 6 inches, leaving only 6 feet of clearance on each side. They had to get airborne quickly, since their runway was only 400 feet long. The B-25 is a land plane, so there would be no coming back.

Never before had a fully loaded land plane—particularly one that was overweight—taken off from a Navy carrier. Doolittle had analyzed the problem and figured the B-25 was the only aircraft that could do the job. Loaded with four 500-pound bombs, plus the crew, plus the ten 5-gallon tanks of extra fuel, each plane exceeded the maximum flying weight by somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000 pounds. Fortunately, the wind was blowing at 25 to 30 knots. The gale, combined with the speed of the Hornet, gave them the needed lift of 60 knots. That's almost typhoon strength.

Without that lift it's doubtful they all could have survived the take-off. To left was the sea, and to the right was the bridge. A line painted on the deck indicated where the left wheel was to go. The least deviation would have spelled disaster. The Hornet was pitching and yawing, making the take-off that much more perilous. As it was, after they became airborne the planes dipped below the level of the flight deck until they finally gained altitude.

They had planned to take off 400 miles from their target, but early that morning Navy fighter planes had spotted two Japanese fishing boats, which they were sure had radioed back their location. Hence, it was decided to send the planes immediately, even though they were some 650 miles from their targets, more than 200 miles further away than their original plan. Their landing fields in China would be difficult to reach even under the most favorable conditions. Additional miles seemed to make it almost impossible. The Navy planes from their escort ship, the USS Enterprise

[captained by Admiral “Bull” Halsey] sank the fishing boats, but it was too late.

The weather was abysmal—rain and fog—when the first plane, with Doolittle at the controls, took off at 8:20 a.m. The Whirling Dervish became airborne at approximately 9:00. The B-25s flew at no more than 50 feet above the waves, avoiding enemy radar and saving fuel. They had not ever planned to fly in formation. So, when they reached their destination the planes came in from all directions, making the Japanese think that the Americans had a much larger force. (The next day the Japanese papers reported that they had been bombed by 55 planes.) It started to clear as they neared the coast of Japan about 12:30 p.m. Tom said, “I thought it was much too beautiful a day to be flying on a mission of destruction such as ours.

“As we came over the city [Tokyo] we saw little, innocent black puffs of smoke. We were quite surprised when it dawned on us that this was flak, and they were shooting at us. Our target was a tank factory, but, instead, we bombed the Tokyo Gas & Electric Works next door. It was an innocent mistake, but it did as much damage as if we had hit our original target. Our plane was the only one that flew over Emperor Hirohito’s palace. Doolittle told us in no uncertain terms not to bomb the palace, since the Japanese considered the emperor as a god. If he had been wounded or killed, the Allies would have faced an even more determined enemy. As it was, we showed them that they were not invincible. Far from it. They, too, could be bombed, just like they did to us at Pearl.

“We were flying over rooftops as we came in. You see, we were the ninth plane, and they now knew we were American—and their enemy. When we did drop our bombs we went up to 1,500 feet to avoid the

concussion. They had anti-aircraft towers with guns firing at us continuously. Much of the destruction of the city was caused by their AA guns firing into their own buildings.” Also contributing to the mayhem were the two incendiary bombs on Doolittle’s plane. The homes, made of balsa wood and paper, became infernos. The city was in flames.

“A pursuit Zero started after us but quickly flew away when he spotted the bristling guns at the back of our plane. In fact, they were not guns; they were black broom handles. They were put there by Doolittle to replace the guns, because we needed the room for the extra fuel tanks.

“Then we were off to China and presumed safety. Three hours out of Tokyo we spotted three enemy cruisers. The boats split up, and the middle one started firing directly at us. We heard the shells go whizzing by, and when they hit the water great geysers shot up. If we had run into one of them, it would be like hitting a brick wall. Remember, we were low—perhaps only 20 feet above the ocean. If we had gone up, we would have been a better target. Doc Watson was zigzagging frantically. I thought the wings would fall off. But we flew right over the cruiser, gained altitude and resumed our getaway. This was the first time in the whole raid that I was really scared.

“Being our pilot, Doc Watson was the ranking officer. He had a plan if we had to ditch: He’d find a fishing boat, and crash into the sea beside it. Then we’d commandeer the boat and sail to safety. The crew agreed this was a good plan, since it seemed clear that we would not make it to land. We never got to try it out, because suddenly the wind changed. By my figures our fuel would hold out until we were 150 miles short of the coast. The prevailing winds in this part of the world blow west to east. For reasons only God can fathom, the wind turned and blew east to west, giving us a tail

wind rather than a head wind. If this had not happened, we surely would have been in the drink. The Dervish got further inland than any of our planes before we had to jump. We had been in the air 15½ hours.”

As Bob Hope would say, “It’s not the fall; it’s the sudden stop that hurts.” Tom recalls, “A bamboo tree grabbed my chute, so my toes just touched the ground. Therefore, I could easily slip out of my harness and start moving around.” Tom had no idea where he was, or where his crewmates were, and it was raining hard. He found his co-pilot, Jim Parker, the next morning, and together they discovered the gunner, Eldred Scott. All were unhurt, but so tired, so hungry and so wet. They eventually came upon a farmhouse whose owner let them take off their soaked clothing and dry out by the fire. While undressing they put their 45s on a nearby table. Tom looked up and into the barrel of a gun pointed between his eyes. This was a Chinese officer who had a scroll. Tom figured it was a warrant for their arrest. “We turned, only to see our guns gone and other Chinese peasants pointing rifles at us from every open window. It was probably good that they took our weapons, because there could have been a tragic incident if one of us had decided to shoot his way out.

“The farmhouse was a prison for the three of us. But the next day more good luck happened. Two Catholic missionaries who were bilingual happened on the scene. We told them what we had done. They then explained to the villagers that we were the Americans who had bombed the ‘land of the dwarfs’. Our guns were returned, and we were taken to the next town.

“We became reunited with Doc Watson, whose right shoulder had been caught in his chute’s lines. It was dislocated, and he was in a great deal of pain. The next day, Wayne Bissell, our bombardier, showed up. He had

been held hostage by Chinese bandits. But he was able to escape—the old fashioned way. When they weren't looking, he just ran away.

“We went back to see our plane. It hadn't burned; it was just wrecked beyond recognition. I rooted around and was able to find my duffle bag, which had in it my dress uniform. No one else could find his; therefore, I was the best dressed crew member in the bunch. I brought it back with me after the war and gave it to my friend who operates an air museum in Lexington, Kentucky. But I bet it still fits.”

After three weeks Tom and the rest of his crew finally made it to Chungking. One morning they received a call inviting six of them to lunch with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and Madame Chiang. After the meal [Tom can't remember what they ate] they were awarded the Order of the Cloud medals for their heroism. Tom was amazed at Madame Chiang's English. She had gone to one of those “eastern women's colleges.” (In fact, she had graduated from Wellesley with highest honors in English Literature. She died in the United States in October 2003 at age 105.)

In the aftermath of the raid, Jimmy Doolittle thought he might be court-martialed for losing the entire fleet. (Fifteen planes were destroyed and one had been commandeered by the Russians.) Also, they had done only minor damage to the home islands, so the mission could well be considered a failure. Wrong conclusion. The raid so raised American morale, that Doolittle was promoted two grades (to Brigadier General) and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by President Roosevelt in a ceremony at the White House. All the other Raiders, including Tom Griffin, received the Distinguished Flying Cross for their feats.

The Raiders' planes had come in approximately four minutes apart. Eleven bombed Tokyo; five did damage to the other cities. The destruction

was relatively slight when compared with the strategic bombing of Germany by the Eighth Army Air Force in 1943 and the firebombing of Japan in the spring of 1945. Doolittle said the greatest result of the raid was the psychological damage they inflicted on the enemy.

Significantly, the raid forced the Japanese to analyze Tokyo's defenses and to station four army pursuit groups in the home islands during 1942-43, when they were desperately needed for the Solomon's campaign. This put the Japanese into a defensive position for the first time. After the attack, victory came in the Coral Sea, then Midway and the landings on Guadalcanal. There would be no more major victories for the Japanese. Unbeknownst to the Doolittle Raiders, April 18, 1942 was the turning point of the war in the Pacific.

The Japanese exacted terrific vengeance for the Doolittle Raid. Emperor Hirohito signed an order to destroy the air bases from which the enemy might conduct air raids on the Japanese homeland. The Japanese went far beyond that. They demolished American mission churches, desecrated Christian graveyards, strafed the region with more than 600 bombing runs, and ultimately slaughtered an estimated 250,000 Chinese peasants.

All the crews weren't as lucky as Griffin's. Two planes crashed into the sea, and two of the crew lost their lives. The remaining eight were captured by the Japanese and tried in a kangaroo court. The aviators had no defense counsel, no witnesses, no charges, no interpreters, no chance to plead their case—all in violation of the 1929 Geneva Conventions. The Japanese cited evidence of indiscriminate bombing in which innocent people were killed. Therefore, the attacks were deemed to be against military law. The court was instructed to hand down the death penalty. Emperor Hirohito

commuted the sentences of five to life in prison. The other three were executed by firing squad. The furor in America was palpable.

But, back to Tom. Why do men volunteer for a mission that seems not only impossible to accomplish, but offers nothing but almost certain death? When Tom was asked that question, he got a little testy. “We were in a war, and I was qualified. It seemed that our reason for being in the Army Air Force was to take part in such an operation. We were just doing our job.” That’s the standard line heroes use. The fire fighters at the World Trade Center said that. Sergeant York said that. George Washington said that. And Morse Johnson said that. Tom Griffin really wasn’t sure what the mission was. If he had known, he wouldn’t have changed his mind.

America desperately needed a victory. The Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. We had lost 18 Navy vessels, including seven battleships, sunk or severely damaged. Over 210 planes were destroyed, and almost 2,500 military personnel were killed. The situation was dire and getting worse. The U.S. fleet in the Pacific was non-existent, although, fortunately, three aircraft carriers that were based at Pearl Harbor were out to sea when the Japanese attacked. We were forced from the Philippines into the Dutch East Indies; MacArthur was trapped in Bataan and Corregidor. Burma was invaded while the British were surrendering at Hong Kong. Thailand was being occupied and used as a jumping off spot to Rangoon and Singapore. Australia and New Zealand were next. The American public, particularly on the west coast, was in a panic bordering on hysteria. A Hawaiian dog was reported barking in Morse code to Japanese subs offshore.

Anyone who looked Asian was suspect. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her newspaper column that not every person of Japanese descent living in

the United States was a traitor or a spy. The Los Angeles Times replied, “When she starts bemoaning the plight of the treacherous snakes we call Japanese, with apologies to all snakes, she has reached the point where she should be forced to retire from public life.”

Was there anyone with the leadership ability and the daring to relieve the anguish? Yes, and his name was Doolittle. Tom Griffin had never seen Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle, only heard about his exploits. Doolittle was the finest aviator between the wars, save for Lindbergh. He was the first man to fly with instruments only—he literally blindfolded himself by cloaking his cockpit with a black shroud. This was not a barnstorming act; it was to give pilots more flexibility. The problem with visual sighting is that it becomes ineffective for landing in the fog or for clearing mountain tops in the dark. In 1929, for 15 minutes, he flew only by dials and audio instruments. From this effort would come a directional gyroscope, the artificial horizon and the first altimeter that could be called useful.

In his spare time Doolittle went to MIT and got the first doctorate in aeronautical engineering. One could say without too much hyperbole that he advanced aviation science second only to the Wright brothers. He was a living legend. There is absolutely no way a young man could refuse Doolittle’s offer. It would be like Babe Ruth asking you to play shortstop for the ’27 Yankees.

Here he is talking to the volunteers: “My name is Doolittle. I’ve been put in charge of the project that you men have volunteered for. This is the toughest training you’ll ever have. It will be the most dangerous thing any of you have ever done. It is inevitable that some of your planes will fall into the hands of the enemy. Don’t talk about it with your wives. Don’t even discuss it among yourselves. If you think you’ve guessed this mission,

you're wrong. But, even so, don't share your guesses. If anybody outside this project gets nosy, get his name and give it to me. The FBI will find out all about him.

“If you have any doubts, drop out now. Any man can drop out, and nothing will ever be said about it. In fact, if there's any worry at all, if you've got a wife or some kids, it would be your *duty* to drop out. No one will ask any questions; no one will think less of you.”

As Tom recalls, “Doolittle was 5'4” and weighed 140 pounds. But in every other way he was larger than life. After his stirring address we were all ready to follow him into hell. As it turned out, we did.” He never asked a subordinate to do anything that he wouldn't do himself. After all, he was the pilot of the first plane off the USS Hornet.

A digression: I remember seeing “Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo.” I was eight. It was the most patriotic and awe-inspiring movie I had ever seen. (Granted, my universe was pretty limited at the time.) America really *did* have such heroes, and we showed the hated Japanese what we were made of. That was 62 years ago. I recently picked up a copy of the film from the public library. It was maudlin and jingoistic. Nevertheless, the highlight was Doolittle's speech to the volunteers. Who played Doolittle? Spencer Tracy.

We know that Tom wanted to be part of the raid, but why did Doolittle want him? His unit was the only crew flying B-25's at the time, and that happened to be the plane that was needed. Tom's skills were apparent to Doolittle, because he picked him and Davy Jones to go to Washington, D.C. to study the maps of Japan and China. Tom and Davy spent two weeks in a locked room poring over the maps. They couldn't tell

a soul—and, of course, they never did. Their work was invaluable to the other navigators in locating enemy targets and then getting to China.

Tom returned to the States in late May of 1942 and was shipped to England in October, awaiting orders to transfer to North Africa—where he would again be under the command of Brigadier General Doolittle. Tom really wasn't following Doolittle around the world, but that's the way it seemed.

Doolittle had arrived in early January 1943 as commander of the Eighth Army Air Force, stationed northeast of London near Cambridge. His action would reverse the course of the air war over Germany. Previously, the fighter escorts stayed in close range with the bombers—in a defensive position—until the enemy attacked. But Doolittle wanted them to engage the enemy fighters *before* they reached the bombers and to strafe the fighter fields both on their way to the target and on their way home.

Doolittle said, "If it moved, could fly, or supported the German war effort, I told my pilots to kill it." Americans lost fewer men than they had before, and the Luftwaffe casualties increased. As Don Miller says in his magnificent book, Masters of the Air, "Strategic bombing did not win the war in Europe, but the war could not have been won without it."

The overall commander of European operations was Dwight Eisenhower. He sent Doolittle to North Africa, so he could engage Rommel in the desert and Mussolini in Italy. There, he and Tom Griffin again joined forces.

Tom's orders put him as the navigator on a B-26 squadron based out of Algiers. The B-26 was a larger plane than the B-25 and had a nine-man crew. Tom flew 22 missions between December 1942 and July 1943. His last was over Sicily. Flying in the lead plane in a formation of 50 B-26

aircraft, he was taking pictures of the targets and the countryside. As they passed over Catania, the German anti-aircraft opened up. The port engine was immediately hit and disabled. The left side of the plane was engulfed in flames.

Tom had taken off his barrel chute (a parachute that attaches to the front of the body) so he could move around freely. He had left it in the front of the plane, and there was no way he could retrieve it. “That’s it. I’m a goner,” he thought. At the last minute he remembered he had put a spare chute in the back of the plane for just such an occurrence. Quickly, he put it on and was preparing to jump, when he realized that he was wearing a German helmet, complete with swastikas and other Nazi emblems. He had picked this up in the wreckage of a Messerschmitt Pursuit 109 in Tunisia. He preferred it to the Army issue because the flanged wings allowed him to wear headphones. He said, “It’s funny what goes through your mind in critical situations. I thought if they captured me they’d shoot me as a spy. There was a colonel right behind me in the plane, asking, ‘What the [blank] is the matter? Jump, you [blank]!’ or words to that effect. I took off the helmet and threw it back into the plane. Then I jumped. The colonel came behind me—I think.”

Tom was captured July 4, 1943. He was interrogated in Catania by a German general, who said to Tom, “For you, the war is over.” Hermann Goring had issued instructions that captured Allied airmen were to be protected by the Luftwaffe police from the inflamed German citizens. He also wanted to insure that his own captured airmen were treated humanely by their “comrades.” As the war became more intense, and the bombing of German cities became more pervasive, the rules changed. On March 15, 1945, a month after the fire-bombing of Dresden, Hitler issued a blanket

command that all downed Allied flyers were to be shot or lynched on capture.

Tom was sent to Stalag III, a prison camp for American officers and the RAF, located 30 kilometers west of the Oder River and 90 kilometers southeast of Berlin. He spent the next 22 months as a POW. Officially, 3% of the prisoners of war in Germany died in captivity; in Japan, the official number was 30%. Tom disputes the latter figure. “I know it was over 50%.”

He got back to the States in June 1945 and married his girlfriend of five years—the lovely Essie. But the war wasn’t over for Tom just yet. He was waiting for orders to be shipped to the Far East for the assault on Japan in October. Harry Truman prevented that. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki—on August 6th and 9th—the Japanese surrendered.

On August 15, 1945, Emperor Hirohito addressed his nation by radio. The population had never heard him speak before. His voice was strange, high-pitched, thin and nasal. He used an archaic form of Japanese, a dialect hundreds of years old that few could understand. He told his people, “The war is over, and we have lost.” The next day he told his son, the crown prince Akihito, “Our people knew how to advance, but they didn’t know how to retreat.” On the day of surrender, General Sugiyama—who had wanted all the captured Doolittle Raiders executed—committed hara-kiri.

What would Tom do now? The war really *was* over for him. Did he go out and become a test pilot? Or become president of Pan American Airways? No, he became an accountant in Cheviot, living the most normal life imaginable. How does this happen? How does anyone living on the edge of existence begin living normally? Tom did and has.

He and Essie had two boys, John (now age 60), who teaches German at Murray State University and Gary (now age 55), who plays guitar in a band in LA. Essie passed away two years ago. Before that she was in a nursing home for four years. Tom made it a point to see her every day.

Tom's modest condo is filled with memorabilia. Pictures of Essie and the two boys when they were about seven and two are on the walls. Stacks of correspondence, pictures of his flying buddies, a photo of Tom and Neil Armstrong, one of Tom and Dick Cheney, pictures of carriers, and models of the Hornet grace his small living room. He gets frustrated when he can't locate a particular item. "I'm just going to give it to the boys after I'm gone. They'll decide what they want to do with it."

He frequently gives talks on the Doolittle Raid, and these are fascinating for two reasons: The person who actually participated in the raid is right there talking to you. And, he is very much with it. One can hear every word, and he keeps on point. He has spoken to groups all over Cincinnati, as well as in other cities around the nation. The more he speaks, the more he is in demand.

Nine days from now, the Raiders will hold their annual reunion. This year it will be in San Antonio. This is the 65th anniversary, and only eight of the 15 survivors will attend. The oldest is 94, and the youngest 84. Tom will be 91 this July. Nevertheless, this beats the actuaries who said the last Raider would depart this earth in the year 2000.

The Doolittle Raiders started with 80. For each crew member a silver cup was made, bearing his name. Tradition calls for the ranking officer or a member of the crew of the deceased to offer a toast to those who have died in the previous year. Their cup is then turned upside down. When there are only two left, they will break out the cognac. It is vintage 1896—the year of

Doolittle's birth. A final lonely toast will be made. Tom isn't looking forward to that occasion. He doesn't like cognac.

Tom has a flair for the drama of the spoken word. After all, he majored in English in college. Perhaps that's why he is able to reflect on his experiences so cogently. "I believe all the Raiders thank their lucky stars that they were at the right place at the right time to be chosen for this mission. You might say it was our St. Crispin's Day."

To quote Shakespeare:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition.
And gentlemen in England now abed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

--*Henry V*, act IV, scene 3

Tom Griffin is perhaps the luckiest man alive. If he hadn't been flying B-25s he wouldn't have been chosen for the mission. If the wind hadn't been blowing at 30 knots he wouldn't have gotten off the Hornet. If the flak had hit his plane he'd have gone down over Tokyo. If the prevailing winds had not changed between Japan and China, he surely would have been in the sea. If his chute hadn't been caught in a tree, he could have been hurt badly. If missionaries hadn't shown up, he could have been shot by the Chinese. If the Japanese had discovered them, they all could have lost their

lives. If he hadn't found his parachute in the burning plane over Sicily, he would have gone down.

Today, Tom is thin and wiry. He walks stiffly, but with alacrity and purpose. His eyes are bright; his handshake, firm. He smiles and laughs a lot, and he is never sorry for himself. "I didn't really want to make a lot of money. Just raise a good family." Like our friend Muff Gale, he has a playful personality. He's fun to be around. Tom Griffin is a man at peace with himself.

Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember, with advantages,
What feats he did that day.