

Thomas R. White, M.D., Doolittle Raider Flight Surgeon

David G. Schall

The 18th of April marks the 75th Anniversary of one of the most daring raids of WWII. The United States had just entered the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Most people are familiar with the Doolittle Tokyo raid,¹ however, few know that a flight surgeon flew on that raid with the permission of Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle as a combatant crew-member.

President Roosevelt, outraged at the “unprovoked and dastardly attack,” was determined to strike back at Japan. He turned to his senior military officers to come up with a plan. With the Pacific Fleet in shambles and all nearby countries around Japan either occupied or neutral, it seemed a near impossibility. However, the resourceful staff came up with a daring plan which became one of the first joint action and special operations plans of the war. They would launch B-25 aircraft off an aircraft carrier close to Japan and then recover the aircraft in China. Because time was of the essence, crews who were already trained in the B-25 were sought for volunteers. One of the Docs recently assigned to a B-25 Squadron was a newly minted Flight Surgeon by the name of Thomas R. White, M.D. A brilliant, quiet, reserved professional, Doc was born in the territory of Hawaii, and was especially enraged that his homeland was attacked. He earned his Medical Degree from Harvard and did additional training at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and the Queens Hospital in Honolulu. Recognizing the seeds of war were forming, he joined the Army Air Corps. Doc had an interest in aviation and had taken flying lessons while going to Cal Tech during his undergraduate years. He was then selected for Aviation Medical Examiner training (trainees had to earn their flight surgeon wings operationally) at Randolph Air Base in San Antonio, starting in Sept. 1941. In his class of nearly 100 physicians was a classmate who was allowed to graduate early, as his assigned Bomber Group of B-17's would be leaving for the Philippines. That doctor was William Schick, M.D., of Chicago, who, while flying with his crew to Hawaii on their way to the



Fig. 1. The Crew of Plane #15 of the Doolittle Tokyo Raid Dr. Thomas R. White (Flight Surgeon and Gunner) is in the middle.

Philippines, arrived over Oahu during the start of the attack on Pearl Harbor and was wounded twice by strafing Japanese Zeros and subsequently exsanguinated, becoming the first flight surgeon to die in combat in WWII.

There were 24 B-25 crews that were selected and moved to a secret auxiliary training field at Eglin Air Base in Florida. There they learned how to do heavy short field takeoffs and, under Doc's oversight, received immunizations and training in basic first aid. Doc figured out quickly that they would be attacking Japan and heading to China, and knew that they would have no medical support for the crews in rural China. He convinced Doolittle to let him go on the mission. Doolittle agreed but only if he trained to one of the crew positions. So Doc quickly enrolled in aerial

From the FAA Regional Flight Surgeon-Great Lakes, Palatine, IL.

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AEROSPACE MEDICINE HISTORY, continued

gunnery school. A natural with guns, he easily rose to the top of the class and earned expert in aerial gunnery, as well as having the second highest score of all 24 crews.

As far as his medical role within the detachment went, “Doc” White prepared the crews with numerous vaccines. He also gave lectures to the crews on hygiene and sanitation while in primitive conditions. Medical kits were prepared and assembled for each plane, and “Doc” assembled a small surgical kit for himself, having to bear in mind the severe weight considerations. He also put together personal medical kits for each of the individual crewmembers, containing a dose of morphine, field dressing and sulfanilamide tablets in case of wounds sustained, as well as 60 grains of quinine for protection against malaria, tincture of iodine, caffeine tablets to help the crews stay alert for the long haul to China, and last, but not least, a pint of whiskey.

The crews then flew to Alameda NAS in Oakland where only 16 aircraft were loaded on the recently commission aircraft carrier *Hornet*. They then shipped out under the Golden Gate Bridge under the guise of bringing aircraft to Hawaii. However, they secretly joined a much larger Navy task force as they headed to Japan. As they closed in on their launching point they were discovered by Japanese picket boats who immediately alerted Japan. They were 9 h ahead of schedule and 250 miles further than planned. However, they decided to press on with extra tins of gasoline loaded on each plane. The aircraft each took off to their targets, with four waves of aircraft hitting Tokyo and the fifth wave heading southwest and then dividing to hit Nagoya, Osaka, and Kobe.²

Doc flew with crew 15 (Fig. 1), led by Lt. Don Smith, to their target of Kobe. They flew unmolested and hit their targets and then headed to China. Unfortunately the weather deteriorated and none of the arrangements for a homing beacon had been accomplished. Low on fuel and options, they ditched in the South

China Sea by a small island. Local guerillas then helped them to the mainland where they learned of a crew that was seriously injured on landing. They immediately hastened to assist, where Doc found Ted Lawson, Pilot of Crew 7, delirious and septic. Gangrene had set in on his lower leg. Despite attempts to control with debridement, topical sulfur antibiotic powder, and blood transfusions from other crewmembers, he worsened. Having lost all of his surgical equipment on ditching, Doc was now faced with doing an amputation in a rural Chinese Missionary hospital using 1890s equipment. Traditional doctrine called for a guillotine type amputation, but Doc knew having an exposed wound would lead to further infection. He performed an above the knee amputation and used flaps to cover the stump under a spinal anesthetic. Later he gave Lawson 2 units of his own blood.

Lawson recovered sufficiently to be evacuated and Doc moved him and two other injured crew men (one with a basilar skull fracture and the other with bilateral dislocated shoulders) on a journey halfway around the world, to safety. Traveling nearly 15,000 miles they passed through India, Southwest Asia, central Africa, and then across the Atlantic to South America, up the Caribbean, and back to the U.S., landing at Bolling Air Base in DC. Doc delivered his crewmates to Walter Reed Army Hospital. He would later be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Silver Star for his actions on this mission, exemplifying a Flight Surgeon who went above and beyond the call of duty.

REFERENCES

1. Glines CV. Doolittle's Tokyo Raiders. New York (NY): D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc.; 1964.
2. White TR. The Hornet Stings Japan. *Atlantic Monthly*. 1943; June (21):41–46.

Erratum

In the February 2017 issue of *Aerospace Medicine and Human Performance*, in the article “Decelerations of Parachute Opening Shock in Skydivers” by K. Gladh et al. (*Aerosp Med Hum Perform*. 2017; 88(2):121-127; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3357/AMHP.4731.2017>) we inadvertently missed providing the credentials and affiliations for one of the authors: Anton Westman, M.D., Ph.D., Department of Neurobiology, Care Sciences and Society; Karolinska Institutet Huddinge, Stockholm; Department of Physiology and Pharmacology; Karolinska Institutet Solna; and Department of Anesthesia and Intensive Care Medicine, Karolinska University Hospital, Huddinge, Sweden. We apologize for the inconvenience.