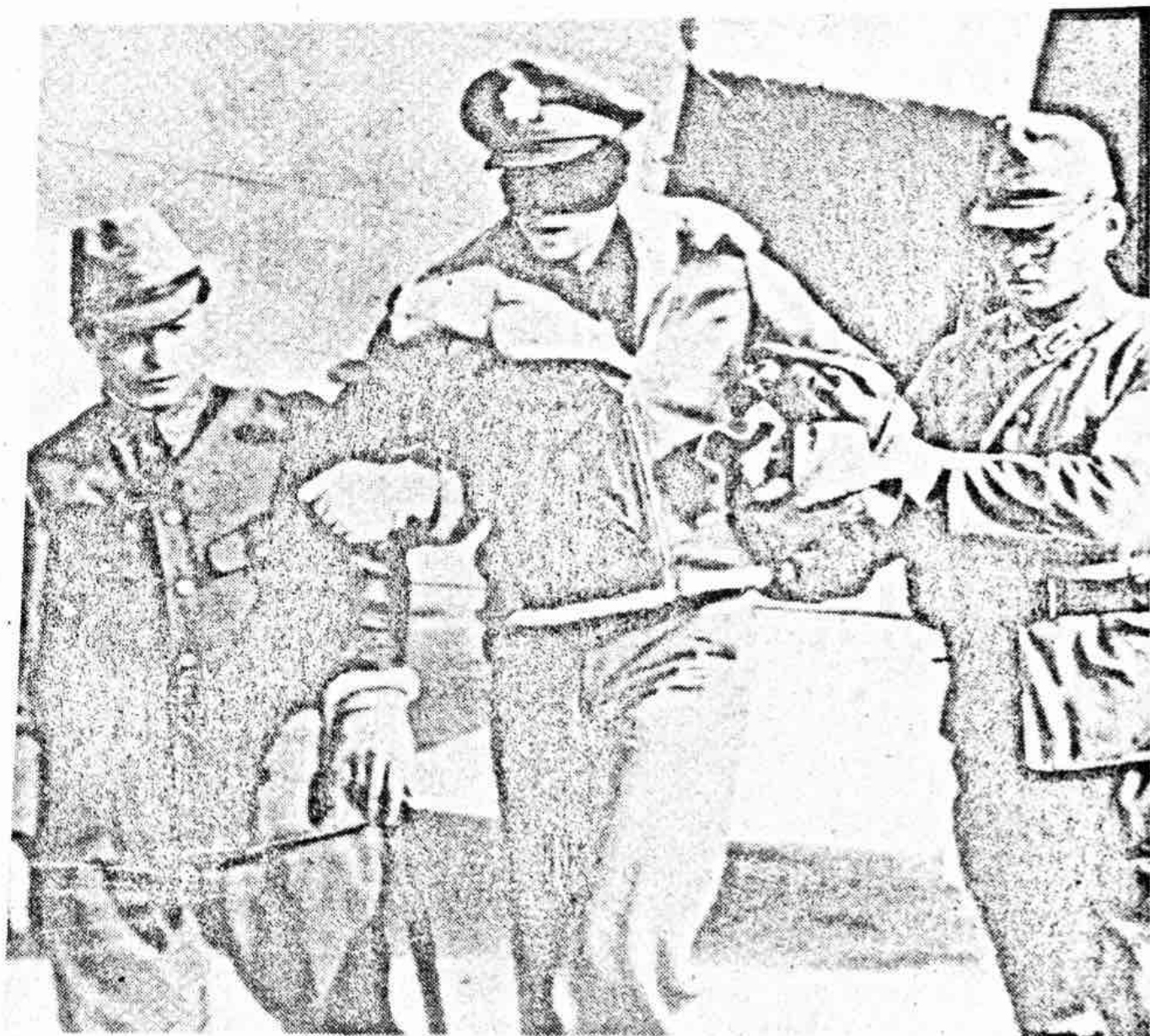


Obituaries

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1, 2015



PHOTOS BY US AIR FORCE

Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Hite was led by his captors after US warplanes bombed Tokyo in World War II.

Robert L. Hite, crewman for Doolittle Raiders; at 95

By Sam Roberts

NEW YORK TIMES

NEW YORK — Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Hite, the last survivor among eight crewmen who were captured by the Japanese when US bombers brought World War II home to Japan in Jimmy Doolittle's daring air raid in 1942, died on Sunday in Nashville.

He was 95.

The cause was heart failure, his son, Wallace, said.

The raid led by Doolittle inflicted relatively light damage on military and industrial targets, but it delivered a moral victory to Americans, disconsolate since the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor less than five months earlier, and it was a stunning psychological blow to the Japanese, who had been led to believe that their homeland was inviolable.

The raid became the basis for the 1944 movie "Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo," adapted from the book of the same title by Captain Ted W. Lawson, a pilot who took part in the attack.

Lieutenant Colonel Hite, the son of tenant cotton farmers from Texas, almost missed the



He remained in prison until Japan's surrender in August 1945, and then released, which he called a miracle.

the pilot who chose him, Lieutenant William G. Farrow, "I had people offering me \$500 for my place. I said, 'No way.'"

The mission started inauspiciously: A sailor's arm was severed when he was blown into a propeller on the windswept deck as Lieutenant Colonel Hite's B-25 took off for Japan. But the plane, carrying four 500-pound bombs and nicknamed *Bat Out of Hell*, sur-

mission. He had volunteered for it and was assigned to pilot one of its B-25 bombers, but was bumped from the roster when all the planes originally massed for the raid could not fit on the aircraft carrier USS Hornet, which was to ferry them toward their target. At the last minute he replaced the copilot of another crew. He was 22.

Sixteen planes and 80 air- men took part in the mission, flown low to the ground in day- light by pilots who had never taken off from a carrier; the planes were designed for take- off from land bases. They left the Hornet on April 18, 1942, their targets 800 miles away.

After the bombing runs, the planes were to land at airstrips in China that had not fallen to the Japanese; the Hornet's deck was too short to accommodate their return. But the planes en- countered a storm and ran low on fuel, forcing crash landings and bailouts that killed three of the crewmen.

Eight others were captured. Three, including the pilot and the gunner of Lieutenant Colo- nel Hite's plane, were shot by a

vived antiaircraft fire by flying as low as 500 feet as it struck a fuel depot and aircraft factory in Nagoya, southwest of Tokyo.

Short of fuel, the crew bailed out near Nanchang, China. Lieutenant Colonel Hite landed in a rice paddy and was cap- tured by Japanese soldiers.

He and other captured crew members were flown to Japan, where they were subjected to water torture. They were then imprisoned in China, tried as war criminals for strafing civil- ians, and sentenced to death.

"We were war criminals ac- cording to the Japanese be- cause we had attacked their homeland," Lieutenant Colonel Hite recalled. "They had to des- ignate someone responsible and execute them. So they des- ignated the first pilots and the gunners."

After three were executed, Lieutenant Colonel Hite and four others were granted a re- prieve, though they were told that they would be shot if Japan lost the war.

He remained in prison until Japan's surrender in August 1945 then released which he

and bailouts that killed three of the crewmen.

Eight others were captured. Three, including the pilot and the gunner of Lieutenant Colonel Hite's plane, were shot by a firing squad. Another died from disease.

Lieutenant Colonel Hite was imprisoned for 40 months, 38 of them in solitary confinement. When the war ended, his weight had dropped to 76 pounds from 180.

With his death, only two Doolittle Raiders now survive: retired Lieutenant Colonel Richard Cole and Staff Sergeant David Thatcher.

The Raiders will be honored with the Congressional Gold Medal on April 15 in Washington.

Robert Lowell Hite was born in Odell, Texas, on March 3, 1920, the son of Robert and Lena Hite. After three years at West Texas State Teachers College, he enlisted as an aviation cadet in 1940, flunked the physical, passed a do-over the next day, and was certified an Army Air Corps pilot in 1941.

He was gung-ho to volunteer for the Doolittle mission and even more so once the target was identified.

"After I accepted to go with Bill," he recalled, referring to

prieve, though they were told that they would be shot if Japan lost the war.

He remained in prison until Japan's surrender in August 1945, then released, which he termed a miracle.

After returning home, he married Portia Wallace. She died in 1999. Lieutenant Colonel Hite died in a Nashville nursing home.

In addition to his son, he leaves his daughter, Catherine Landers; five grandchildren; seven great-grandchildren; and two great-great-grandchildren.

Recalled during the Korean War, Lieutenant Colonel Hite trained pilots until he left active duty in 1955.

Afterward, he operated hotels in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas. He retired at 51, his son said, "because of the wear and tear of the 40 months he was a prisoner."

That emotional toll had been lightened when his jailers provided the captured crew with a copy of the King James Bible, Lieutenant Colonel Hite said in an oral history for the Air Force Historical Research Agency.

"We were no longer afraid to the extent that we had been, at least," he recalled. "We no longer had the hatred."