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In the Footsteps of My Father, Doolittle Raider David Thatcher

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While many Americans were celebrating the last days of summer in outdoor pursuits over the long Labor Day weekend, I was halfway across the world in the People's Republic of China, participating in an entirely different type of celebration.

The occasion was the Chinese national holiday declared for September 3 commemorating "the 70th Anniversary of the Victory of the World Anti-Fascist War and the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression." I would later follow in the footsteps of my father, David Thatcher, one of the two surviving Doolittle Raiders, whose plane, *The Ruptured Duck*, crash-landed off the coast of China the night of April 18, 1942 after bombing Tokyo earlier that day.



Chinese generals salute troops marching in the September 3 military parade on Tiananmen Square.

My father and I had received an invitation in mid July from Cui Tiankai, Ambassador for the People's Republic of China to the U.S., to participate in three events that were planned for September 3 in Beijing: a grand assembly and parade at Tiananmen Square in the morning, a memorial reception at the Great Hall of the People at noon, and a memorial gala at the Great Hall of the People in the evening. Chinese President Xi Jinping would speak at the morning grand assembly and oversee his first military parade since becoming president.

"These events will provide opportunities for all the invited guests to recall the genuine friendship built at the hard times of WWII between the Chinese people and all the friends from other countries, and to look forward to peace and development in the future," the letter of invitation said.

My father turned 94 at the end of July and is no longer able to travel long distances. So I went alone to represent him, the Doolittle Raiders, and the Children of the Doolittle Raiders (a group I head).

I had the opportunity to sit down and interview my father one afternoon in mid-July, a few days after receiving the letter of invitation. I was home for a visit to Missoula, Montana, where my father and mother still live in the house where I was raised. Although limited somewhat physically, my father is still sharp mentally and readily recounted his observations of the Doolittle Raid and his time in China some 73 years earlier.



Doolittle Raider Crew #7, *The Ruptured Duck*, aboard the USS *Hornet* before the bombing of Japan. Engineer/Gunner SSgt David Thatcher is the young fellow on the right. The other members of the crew were (from left) navigator Lt Charles McClure, pilot Lt Ted Lawson, bombardier Lt Robert Clever, and copilot Lt Dean Davenport.



I listened closely as he provided exact dates and details. I knew then I had definitely made the right decision to visit China and follow the footsteps my father took after his plane crash-landed off the coast of China.

I reflected back on my childhood when my father rarely opened up about his wartime experiences. I was well into my elementary school years before I knew anything about the Doolittle Raid. My oldest sister was actually in high school before she knew about my father's role, and then it was only because he came to one of her classes at school to speak about it. Like so many members of the "Greatest Generation," he "was just doing the job" he was trained to do, he had told me in July.

My father and the other members of crew #7 had endured some difficult times in China. After running low on fuel following the completion of their bombing run over Tokyo several hours earlier, their plane had hit a wave at 110 miles per hour while trying to land on a beach, throwing four members of the crew out the front of the plane and seriously injuring them. My father was in the back of the plane and was knocked out, but was not injured aside from a bump on his head. He was able to administer first aid and save the other crew members. The crew's odyssey was later made famous in the first book written on the Doolittle Raid, *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, by Ted Lawson, the plane's pilot.



The beach on Nantien Island where *The Ruptured Duck* crash-landed after bombing Japan on April 18, 1942. The crash severely injured four crew members, who were thrown out the front of the plane upon impact.

My father was 20 years old at the time, one of the four youngest flyers on the Raid. He subsequently saved the lives of his fellow crew members with the help of Chinese guerrillas, doctors, and others who risked everything to aid the crew of *The Ruptured Duck* and the other B-25 crews from the Raid that ended up in China (one crew landed in Russia and was interned there for more than a year; two of the crews that ended up in China were captured by the Japanese.)

Crew #7 and their Chinese benefactors narrowly escaped capture a number of times by Japanese troops searching furiously for them on water and land. For the assistance they provided to the Doolittle Raiders, the Chinese paid dearly. Some 250,000 Chinese were later executed by the Japanese.

It's no wonder that while World War II is a distant memory for many Americans, Chinese feelings toward Japan are still raw—extending all the way to the top levels of government. While the U.S. went through four difficult years of warfare during the war, China suffered for eight years, from 1937 to 1945, under the yoke of Japanese oppression. Chinese casualties dwarfed the number of deaths in other countries, with estimates ranging from 14 million up to as many as 35 million, the majority civilians butchered by Japanese soldiers.

President Xi had invited various heads of state to attend the national day of celebration, but the more prominent had declined, given China's recent land grab of disputed atolls/islands in the South China Sea. Thirty heads of state did attend, including Russian President Vladimir Putin. Only Japan and the Philippines did not send representatives. U.S. Ambassador to China Max Baucus represented the United States.

I arrived in the Beijing Airport early the morning of Tuesday, September 1 and was met by Nelson Chen, a representative of the U.S. Division of the Department of American and Oceanian Affairs for the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, the organization that had coordinated my visit. That afternoon I departed by taxi with my friend, Melina Liu, the Beijing bureau chief for *Newsweek* and daughter of "Honorary Raider," the late Tung Sheng Liu, for a meeting at the U.S. Embassy with U.S. Military Air Attaché Col Mark Swentkofske and his assistant Lt Col Terry Vance. We later met with Ambassador Baucus, the former senior senator from my home state of Montana, and posed for a group photo afterwards.

Wednesday, September 2, the area around our hotel was locked down due to intense security surrounding Thursday's parade, but I was able to get out and take photos of parade displays and other sights. Early Thursday morning about 2:30 a.m., I was awakened to a rumbling sound. I opened my curtains and looked out on Tiananmen Square, where tanks and other armored vehicles were being positioned for the parade.

Later that morning, our group was driven by bus to prime seats just off the square to view President Xi, his invited guests, and the participants in the parade—approximately 13,000 troops—including 1,000 from



other countries—500 pieces of equipment, and nearly 200 aircraft. The armaments were Chinese-produced weapons in active service; more than 80 percent had never before been seen in public. China's strategic missile force, the Second Artillery Forces displayed seven types of missiles, including long-range, intermediate-range, and short-range missiles, as well as conventional and nuclear missiles. World War II veterans from forces led by both the Communists and the Kuomintang (Nationalists) also participated.

It was sunny and clear, but also very hot. The parade opened with the booming of 70 cannons being fired one shot at a time, followed by the image of a swinging pendulum with 10-year periods flashing on the screen behind the pendulum, beginning with 1945 and ending with 2015. When the clock struck 2015, a gong sounded and the event began at exactly 10 a.m. President Xi then addressed the crowd.

Following his speech Xi moved down to the street, jumped in a black limousine, stood up through the roof and was driven up and then back down the parade route, exhorting the troops and later saluting them with his left hand. Once Xi had returned to his vantage point overlooking the proceedings, the parade began. For the next 78 minutes, we were treated to a procession of goose-stepping Chinese soldiers, contingents of foreign troops, and various pieces of Chinese military equipment and aircraft.

After the parade concluded, we were taken to the Great Hall, where a reception was held in a massive room which held 115 tables of eight. We were fed a six-course dinner replete with white and red wine, party favors, and musical presentations by various solo artists and groups. Xi welcomed the crowd and recognized many of the foreign dignitaries for their ancestors' assistance in helping China win the Great War.

That evening, we were treated to an extraordinary, dramatic and musical presentation in an ornate theatre also in the Great Hall titled "Victory and Peace," a recounting of China's participation in the war. Xi and many of the invited dignitaries joined the event. At one point, I was within 25 feet of Xi and Putin when they arrived and when they left.

The next three days, I would traverse portions of Zhejiang Province with Melinda Liu, her husband, Alan Babington-Smith, and Zheng Weiyong, a Chinese national who recently wrote a book about the Doolittle Raiders in China. Zheng has extensively traveled the province and mapped the locations where the different Raider crews landed and the routes they took to safety in

inland China. Zheng would be our guide and Melinda, who spoke fluent Mandarin and English, our translator. While making initial preparations for my China trip, I had informed Melinda of my plans to participate in the planned September 3 events. I was hoping we might get together for lunch or dinner while I was in Beijing. She subsequently dropped a bombshell when she invited me to participate in the three-day side trip to Zhejiang Province.

On September 4 Melinda and Alan picked me up in a private car and we made our way to the Beijing airport for a three-hour flight to Ningbo. After arriving in Ningbo, we drove east toward the coast and the South China Sea on our way to Shipu, a small coastal city of about 50,000. Along the way, we saw a Buddhist temple up on the side of a mountain. Zheng told us it was reportedly the site of a cave that had hidden crew #15 when they were escaping Japanese troops who were pursuing them after their plane had crash landed. We decided to check it out.



The cave behind an old Buddhist temple where Raider crew #15 hid from Japanese troops searching for them.

We eased our way up a narrow road filled with switchbacks until making it to the temple site. After we parked, we got out of the van and walked over to the temple where we were greeted by a couple of Buddhist monks and a few of their friends. Zheng explained our reason for being there and one of the monks took us behind the temple to look for the cave.

After climbing a few feet up the side of the hill, we found a place covered by brush that looked promising. Zheng and one of the monks then took a couple of machetes and proceeded to hack away the underbrush and growth for about 10–15 minutes before uncovering a cave that was about four feet below the surface of the ground. Zheng jumped into the cave and took some

video footage while the rest of us marveled at the site.

Crew #15 had reportedly been tracked by the Japanese up to the Buddhist temple by their shoe prints in the mud. The monk who was living at the temple at the time hid them and some of the Chinese guerrillas who were accompanying them in the cave. The Japanese troops searched for but never found the group. They subsequently severely beat the monk, trying to get him to give up the crew's location; but he never did. After the Japanese left, the members of crew #15 took off their shoes and walked down the mountain with their contingent of guerrillas to eventual safety.

After departing the temple, we resumed our trek to Shipu where we stopped for the day. We were met by "Old" Zheng, a former Communist Party official who had established a small museum commemorating the Doolittle Raiders in the city. He had also been responsible for erecting a commemorative marker on the beach where my father's plane had crash-landed and through him, we had rare access to the beach.

The museum in Shipu was relatively modest and included some photos of my father and other Raiders from a 1992 gathering in Washington, D.C. which recognized the Chinese who had helped the Raiders. There was also a B-25 "simulator" with a continuous loop video playing in the foreground. The most interesting and humorous piece in the museum, however, was a black-and-white photo of the beach where my father's plane had crash-landed, which had been taken by Old Zheng.

To the right in the photo is a B-25, which looked like it had crashed. We subsequently discovered that Old Zheng had built a model of a B-25 and "photo shopped" it into the picture.

That evening, Old Zheng hosted us for dinner at a local seafood restaurant in Shipu that featured the catches of the day. As we walked back to our hotel after dinner, we stopped at a local grocery store to get some supplies. While we were inside, the heavens opened up and we were inundated by lightning, thunder, and heavy rain that did not lessen over the next 30 minutes. The storm reminded me of the storm my father and his fellow crew members had faced after their crash-landing some 73 years before.

The next morning, Saturday, September 6, we left our hotel very early and drove to a ferry crossing that would take us to Nantien Island. We boarded the ferry in the van behind a sizable contingent of electric motorcycles. Despite rising levels of affluence that have afforded many Chinese the opportunity to acquire automobiles, many



This photo on display at a small museum in Shipu shows the beach on Nantien Island where *The Ruptured Duck* crash landed. The B-25 on right is actually a model which was "photo shopped" into the photo..

of their countrymen have had to settle for the two-wheeled, less-affluent modes of transportation. But the electric versions have definitely helped lessen China's major problem with air pollution.

The ferry took us across to Nantien where my father's plane had crashed. Once we disembarked the ferry, we drove approximately 20 miles to the beach which lay beyond a small village. In the intervening 73 years following the Doolittle Raid, the beach has become a tourist destination for Chinese vacationers; it was partially covered with tents and beach umbrellas. Since it was low tide, however, we were able to walk down beyond the tourist section to where *The Ruptured Duck* had crashed.

As I soaked in the view of the beach, a wave of emotion rolled over me, and then I was filled with pride. That spot of open beach was where my father's life had changed forever, when *The Ruptured Duck* had come to a screeching halt. At the age of 20, he had been suddenly faced with a monumental challenge that many of us never have to face during the entire course of our lives. His four seriously injured fellow crew members were lying on a beach in a completely foreign country. And he was forced to rely upon the help of total strangers whom he was not able to communicate with except by hand signals in the midst of a driving rainstorm.

My father had been up to the challenge he faced that stormy night in China 73 years before. He had provided first aid to his fellow crew members and had continuously administered to them over the next few days while Chinese guerillas carried them on stretchers to safety in inland China. During their perilous journey, he had made sure they each had water, food, and individual attention. At one point, when Japanese troops pursuing the crew were nearby, the Chinese guerillas suggested he



flee to safety and leave the crew behind. He refused. For his selfless courage in saving the lives of his crew, he was awarded the Silver Star.

After I took several photos of the beach and gathered up some sand and shells to take home, we started walking back up toward the village. As we entered the village, we encountered an old Chinese woman. Thin with gray hair, she was still agile but seemed to be propping herself up with what looked like a metal cane. We soon learned it was a hollow hydraulic tube that had come from the wreckage of *The Ruptured Duck*. Her husband had found it as a child and had kept it for the intervening 73 years. She subsequently gave it to me. I tried to pay her for it, but she would not take any money and seemed embarrassed by my gesture. I thanked her profusely for her generosity. I was now the proud owner of a piece of personal history that meant a great deal to me.



An elderly woman props herself up with a hollow hydraulic tube from *The Ruptured Duck*, which her husband had recovered as a child after the plane crash-landed on the beach.

After returning to the van, we drove back toward the ferry crossing. Along the way, we stopped at an old barn-like structure where my father's crew had spent the night. When we walked inside, it was like stepping back in time 73 years; nothing looked like it had changed. We later stopped alongside a canal where crew #7 had been ferried by boat while escaping their Japanese pursuers. In the course of those stops, I was able to purchase another piece of my father's plane, an aluminum cowling cover, and Zheng Weiyong was able to purchase a hefty metal stand from the plane, likely a part of the engine.

After we crossed back over to the mainland, we continued driving to the southwest for a couple of hours until we reached the completely restored Enze Clinic in Linghai township, where my father's pilot, Ted Lawson, had his gangrenous left leg amputated, and where my father had also stayed. The clinic had been restored at a cost of approximately \$1 million and some of its rooms had been set aside as displays to commemorate the Raiders, including the surgical room, a recovery room, and a room where my father had stayed upstairs. At the clinic

I met the daughter of the Chinese surgeon, Dr. Chen, who had assisted flight surgeon Doc White of crew #15 in performing the surgery that saved Lawson's life.

We left Linghai Township and continued west where we stopped for the night at Quzhou, a city of approximately 2.5 million people. The next morning we drove to the site of an air raid shelter/cave on the outskirts of Quzhou that had been carved out of a limestone cliff where many of the Raiders had spent time. Across the street from the shelter/cave was a modern, high-end residential development. The shelter/cave had been spared destruction by the developers thanks to the efforts of the former mayor of Quzhou. While in Quzhou, we also toured a local city museum which featured a significant temporary exhibit on the Raiders.

I came away from my visit a changed person, marveling at the generosity and humanity of the Chinese, thankful to have seen the places where my father had been, and hopeful in regard to the future of Chinese and American relations. If our leaders could witness the good will, generosity, and friendliness of the Chinese people as I had, I think we would be better off. I was also reminded of something my father told me about the Chinese while he was there: "They treated us like royalty. They had nothing, but they gave us everything they had." 🇺🇸



Photo of the author's father, Doolittle Raider SSgt David Thatcher, at the Museum's ceremony permanently installing the Congressional Gold Medal.

Jeff Thatcher is a professional communicator and long-time resident of Little Rock, Arkansas. His father, retired SSgt David Thatcher, is one of the two surviving members of the Doolittle Raid. The National Museum of the U.S. Air Force houses a major display on the Doolittle Raid including the Congressional Gold Medal, which the surviving members of the Raid received on April 15, 2015.