

Five brothers proud of service to their country

By Kevin Bottrell

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For Colby resident Thurman Cox, you might say service runs in the family.

Cox was a crewman on Army Air Corps bombers and cargo planes based in China, Burma and India in World War II. Two of his four brothers also served during the war. Leonard served in the Army Air Corps. He flew with the 5th Air Force in the South Pacific. Richard served in the Navy in the Philippine Sea.

Cox' other two brothers served stateside after the war. Robert served in the Army National Guard from 1949 to 1956. Ray spent three years in the Army.

Cox first came to Colby in the late 1930s to work in the upholstery business for his uncle, who ran a mattress and re-upholstery shop here. He had several other odd jobs in the winters, including loading bags of potatoes onto trucks.

He went to a school in Denver for airplane mechanics, which stood him in good stead when he joined the U.S. Army in 1942. He was placed in the Army Air Corps and sent overseas as a member of "The Flying Tigers."

Cox said his unit was sometimes responsible for bringing supplies from India to Chiang Kai-shek's military units in China, flying over the eastern end of the Himalayan Mountains. The dangerous 500-mile route was called "The Hump" by pilots.

The supply crews flew C-47 Skytrains or converted B-24 bombers. They flew at 22,000 feet, well below the summit of Mount Everest and many other mountains in the area.

Cox said because there is less air at that altitude, the view of the mountains was crystal clear. However, he said, it was one of the most dangerous places he's been. The temperature at that altitude is so cold that if the men didn't wear gloves, they would freeze to the metal aircraft. If they crashed in the mountains, there was little hope of a rescue.

Cox survived two plane crashes while in the service. One came when he was on his way to a forward base with 27 other men. The plane ran into a thick fog and the pilot flew down to 200 feet to try and see a airfield. The landing strip turned out to be one made for fighters, and the aircraft plowed into the mud at the end of the runway.

Cox' other crash was even worse. Near the end of the war he was stationed on Okinawa. His plane was loaded with several



Brothers Ray (from left), Bob, Leonard, Richard and Thurman Cox all served in uniform. Originally from Texas, two of the brothers, Richard and Thurman, live in Colby. All five recently got together in Colby for a reunion.

thousand gallons of fuel for a supply run. Cox didn't know where the plane was headed, but it only had a five-man crew. Cox was the only enlisted man on board.

Just a few seconds after takeoff, the plane exploded. Cox said the explosion pushed the front section of the aircraft — where the crew was seated — away from the fuselage.

All five men survived with minor injuries. However, the fire sucked the oxygen out of the crew compartment, rendering them unconscious. Cox said if it weren't for the quick response of the emergency ground crews, they would have died.

After the crash, Cox said he couldn't bring himself to fly anymore. After the war was over, he made his way home by boat. He said he still avoids flying if he can.

Cox has tried many businesses in the years since. He trucked lumber to Colby from Fort Riley as its barracks were being dismantled. He owned the Western Hog feeding operation for 17 years, with anywhere from 100 to 500 hogs at a time.

Going back to his roots in Colby, he bought Colby Mattress

and Upholstery in 1954. He kept that business — dropping mattress making along the way — until 2006, when he sold it. He and his brother Richard also owned a produce store.

Richard came to Colby after the war. Within four years of arriving, he owned an ice cream parlor, the produce store, a Phillips 66 station in Atwood, another produce store in Goodland and unloaded coal, lumber and cement for lumber yards. He gave up most of them over the years, giving up the produce store last in 1975. He worked for Ace Services, a fertilizer equipment dealer, for 17 years before retiring in 1987.



Thurman Cox, 1942



Charles Cook

Veteran remembers dangerous jump

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Jumping out of an airplane is dangerous under the best of circumstances, but try bailing out of a dying plane at 700 feet.

That's just what Colby resident Charles Cook had to do in 1943 during his training with Army Air Corps. While on a training flight, the brand new airplane he and his crew were flying encountered a mechanical problem. Three of the engines quit and the crew had to bail out at 700 feet above ground.

Cook said a blast of wind pushed him back from the door on his first try to get out. He made it out on the second try, but his parachute didn't open until he was nearly on the ground. He hit the ground hard and hurt his back.

Cook said the Army gave him and his crew recognition — membership in the "Caterpillar Club" — for the impromptu low-altitude jump,

but it never helped him with any medical expenses.

That was the first of many harrowing experiences that Tech. Sgt. Cook would have during his years of service. After training he was assigned as a flight engineer aboard B-17 bombers based out of England.

On one mission over enemy territory, Cook's bomber took flak damage to three engines and nearly didn't make it back to England. The aircraft crash-landed on an airfield on the southern coast.

As a flight engineer, Cook was responsible for the mechanical operation of the plane while in flight. If anything went wrong with the plane, it was his job to tell the pilot to abort or to keep going.

Cook also manned the top machine gun turret, and with it he scored the only aerial kill his crew would get while on a mission over Germany in 1944. Even today, Cook could still recall how the German fighter came swooping in from the northeast, firing at his bomber.

Cook opened up with his 50-caliber machine guns and the fighter went down in flames.

The bombers often had to deal with German fighters, especially in 1944. Cook said that on his early missions, Allied fighter escorts would have to turn back long before the bombers got to their targets. The smaller planes didn't have the fuel to go the whole distance.

Later in the war as the Allies advanced across Europe, fighters taking off from airfields in France were able to cover the bombers all the way in.

After 35 combat missions, Cook was rotated back to the United States, where he served as an instructor on the new B-29s.

When he was discharged, Cook returned to Colby and has remained here ever since. Over the years he farmed, ran the Veterans of Foreign Wars club and owned Mr. C's Steakhouse. His wife died in 1980. He has three sons. The youngest, Tom Cook, lives in Colby.