

Kirk Funeral Home & Cremation Services

Hilary P. Cole

(May 05, 1920 - March 08, 2019)

Hilary Cole

Hilary P. Cole passed away on March 8, 2019, at the age of 98. In his last days he was surrounded by family and friends.



Visitation will be from 11am-12pm on Friday, May 10, 2019 at Kirk Funeral Home in Rapid City.

Inurnment with military honors will be 1pm, Friday, May 10, 2019 at Black Hills National Cemetery.

Born to John and Mary Cole on May 5, 1920, Hilary was raised on the family farm near Tyndall, South Dakota, with strong Irish and Czechoslovakian influences. He was the sixth of seven sons.

During his early years he worked on the family's 320-acre farm, a large farm in those days. Farm work in the 1920s and 1930s--the Depression and Dust Bowl years--was physical and hard. But it also offered the rewards of living close to the land in the South Dakota countryside, something that would deeply influence his decisions later as a husband and as a father. He graduated from Tyndall High School in 1939 and then attended two years of college at Southern State Normal in Springfield.

Hilary's farm work paid dividends in his several careers that followed, as he went quickly from working the farm tractor in the fields to flying the most advanced war machines of the day under enemy fire.

With World War II imminent, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Aviation Training Corps (Aircraft Flying Corps) in October 1941, graduating in seven months as a qualified pilot and commissioned officer. He was shipped overseas to England in 1942.

Hilary was assigned to fly the A-20 attack bomber on medium- and low-altitude combat missions. Because the United States hadn't completely geared up for the war at this time, his first missions were flown as a part of the British Royal Air Force. In many of his missions he was the squadron flight leader. All told, he completed 65 combat missions, defending England and France, including air support for the D-Day invasion. He attained the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Hilary's plane was shot 48 times in those 65 missions. For his courage

flying aircraft under intense enemy fire, among other military honors he was awarded the Air Medal with 12 oak leaf clusters, and the Distinguished Flying Cross.

After a short time back in the States beginning in January 1945, he was assigned to the 51st Bombardment Squadron, as part of the Army of Occupation in Osaka, Japan, in 1948, flying surveillance missions taking photographs of military areas in Japan and South Korea. One mission assignment was to take photos along the 38th parallel in July 1949, in the runup to the Korean War.

Hilary returned to the United States in 1949, eventually finishing his education at South Dakota State University. He served in the South Dakota Air National Guard fighter squadron in Sioux Falls, commanded during that time by Joe Foss and Duke Corning. After a transfer to the Minnesota National Guard, he was chosen to learn to fly jets, and was assigned to Truax Field in Madison, Wisconsin--an event he described as "a very fortunate transfer."

A fortunate transfer, because it was there that he met his soon-to-be wife, Vivian (Schiefelbein). Together, over the decades, they raised three sons and a daughter, beginning in Madison and spanning the midwestern and western heart of the country he had fought to defend.

As a family man, Hilary chose to return to civilian life, and his career choices were always to serve his country. In the early years he worked for the Civil Defense Administration in Denver. And then he served, after he and Vivian moved their family to South Dakota, as the head of emergency management at Ellsworth Air Force Base.

In addition to this he flew helicopters with the South Dakota National Guard's 1085th Medical Detachment in the 1970s. The South Dakota National Guard's historian Duke Doering has called Hilary "a Black Hills area treasure."

Hilary and Vivian made a very influential choice for their children in their early family years, when they decided to move from the big city of Denver to Rapid City. Top of the list in their decision was access to nature, being close to the land. (Bottom of the list was money, as Hilary took a pay cut to make the move.) Even in the Denver years the young husband and wife regularly took their children on weekend excursions into the mountains, first renting cabins, then traveling with a fold-out camper. Camping, a little hunting, and fishing were family priorities as their children grew.

These priorities made a difference. Two of their children have made at least part of their careers serving in government wildlife or conservation agencies, and the other two have always favored rural living.

In retirement, Hilary made another important choice to help guide others. Along with Gary Engel, he started the Hay Camp Woodcarvers, a group dedicated to helping each other—and particularly inviting newcomers—

in the many ways of self-expression working with wood. The group has been a mainstay at the Central States Fair and the annual Black Hills Stock Show, as well as finding other ways to be visible in Rapid City culture.

Hilary has greatly enjoyed being part of the Veterans Day parade in Rapid City, throwing candy for children, as recently as 2018.

Hilary's lifelong attitude of being humble has attracted many people to him. Definitely he has been a people person, someone who loves being with others. His resilience and activeness in his later years has amazed everyone, even up to his very last few days.

And his past has kept surprising us as well. Here is a story his family learned in just the last few weeks (from the early days when the A-20 had only a pilot and a gunner):

An author who is interested in World War II, working now on another book, recently interviewed an elderly A-20 gunner in Florida. After the interview she mentioned to him that another man she wanted to talk with was Hilary Cole, and the gunner broke into tears.

He and Hilary were returning from a mission, rising through a cloud layer, when they found themselves up in the clear air. The layer spread below them flat and clean, almost paving their way back to base. It was a moment of peace, a time to gather their thoughts.

After a while Hilary said to his gunner, "There might be a time when I don't make it. So then you'll want to know how to bring this plane home on your own."

And he taught him how to land in the clouds.

Hilary was preceded in death by all of his brothers: Cletus, Vitalis, Firmin, Nester, John, and Basil. He is survived by his wife Vivian, his sons David, Brian, and Patrick, and his daughter Linda, as well as 9 grandchildren and 4 great-grandchildren.

A memorial service is being planned for a later date. Arrangements with Kirk Funeral Home of Rapid City, www.kirkfuneralhome.com.