

Doolittle Raiders: Remembering the Mission

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Paths to the Present
FLASHBACK

With American morale torn apart by the attack on Pearl Harbor and the U.S. forced into World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt met with military leaders to plan retaliation against Japan. After weeks of dialogue, planners devised an audacious scheme to attack the Japanese home islands and they proposed that Lt. Col. James E. "Jimmy" Doolittle lead the raid. The basic idea came from a 10 January 1942 report by Navy Captain Francis Low to Admiral Ernest J. King. In it he proposed that twin-engine Army Air Forces bombers be launched from an aircraft carrier 450 miles from Japan. Leaders considered the B-25B, B-26, B-18, and B-23 with Doolittle selecting the North American B-25 *Mitchell* due to its cruising range and short take-off capabilities.

On 3 February 1942, two B-25s took off from the deck of the *USS Hornet* during tests at Norfolk, Virginia. Soon after, AAF officials approved the mission and designated crews from the 17th Bomb Group (Medium) to fly it. On 1 March, the 24 crews picked up their modified bombers and flew to Eglin Field, Florida, for three weeks of simulated carrier takeoffs, low-level and night flying, low-altitude bombing, and over-water navigation.

On 25 March 1942, 22 of the B-25s flew to California where 16



Sixteen B-25s on the deck of the USS Hornet in the Pacific

were selected for the mission. A week later, these bombers, their five-man crews and maintenance personnel, totaling 71 officers and 130 enlisted men, were put onto the *USS Hornet*. Each B-25 carried four uniquely



Crew No. 1 (Plane 40-2344 with target Tokyo): 34th Bombardment Squadron, Lt Col James Doolittle, pilot; Lt Richard E. Cole, copilot; Lt Henry A Potter, navigator; SSgt Fred A Braemer, bombardier; SSgt Paul J Leonard, flight engineer/gunner

fabricated 500-pound bombs, three containing high-explosives and one incendiaries. Five bombs had Japanese "friendship" medals wired to them. These had been awarded by the Japanese government to U.S. servicemen before the war. Each B-25 had two .50 caliber machine guns in the upper turret and one .30-caliber machine gun in the nose. They had simulated gun barrels in the tail section,

designed to dissuade rearward Japanese air attacks. On board, the aircraft were grouped together and tied down on *Hornet's* flight deck in the order of their planned take-off.

At 1000 hours on 2 April, *Hornet* and Task Force 18 departed from Alameda port to join the *USS Enterprise* and Task Force 16 commanded by Vice Admiral William F. "Bull" Halsey, Jr. Plans called for them to launch 450 miles from Japan. However, on 18 April, at 0738, with the task force still about 620 miles from their take off point, they were sighted by the Japanese picket boat *Nitto Maru*. Even though it was promptly sunk by the *USS Nashville*, it had time to radio a warning to Tokyo. Doolittle and the *Hornet's* commander Captain Marc Mitscher decided to launch the B-25s without delay, 10 hours early and while still, 170 nautical miles farther from Japan than intended.

With only 467 feet in front of him, Doolittle revved his engines at maximum speed and rolled down the carrier's wooden deck toward the ocean. After a moment of anxiety, Doolittle's aircraft gained altitude. He had made it into the air! During the next hour, all 15 of the other bombers launched.



Gunners arm their individual machine guns



Colonel Doolittle attaches one of the Japanese "friendship" medals to the fabricated bombs

Most of the way to Japan, they flew at wave-top level to avoid radar detection. Six hours after takeoff, the first bombers arrived over Japan. They bombed ten military and industrial targets in Tokyo, two in Yokohama and one each in Nagoya, Kobe, Osaka, and Yokosuka. Although some *Mitchells* encountered light anti-aircraft fire and a few enemy fighters over Japan, none were shot down. Only Lt. Richard O. Joyce's plane received minor damage. In turn, they shot down three Japanese fighters.

After their bomb run, 15 of the 16 aircraft proceeded southwest along the southern coast of Japan and across the East China Sea toward airfields in Zhejiang province where they were supposed to use homing beacons to land and refuel before continuing on to China's wartime capital of Chungking. However, fearing enemy detection the navigation code was not sent from the task force. One B-25, piloted by Capt. Edward J. York, was so low on fuel it headed for the closer Soviet port of Vladivostok. The aircraft and the crew were interned and although they were well-treated, diplomatic efforts to return them failed. They were ultimately relocated to a town 20 miles from the Iranian border where, on 11 May 1943, York managed to "bribe" a smuggler to take them across the border to a British consulate. Years later, new evidence suggested the entire smuggling episode had been staged by the Soviet Secret Police, since their government was unable to repatriate them under terms of their neutrality pact with Japan.



Colonel Doolittle departs the USS Hornet in his Mitchell for Tokyo

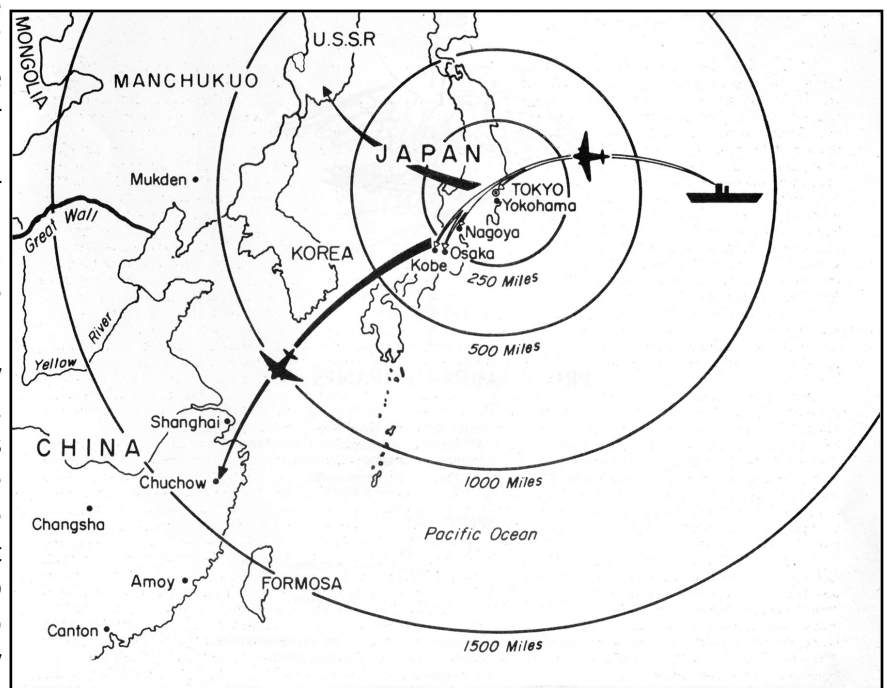
With the weather getting worse, the rest of the raiders headed for China running low on fuel. Without a strong tail wind that added seven hours to their air time, none of them would have reached China. Fifteen aircraft reached the Chinese coast after thirteen hours in the air unable to reach their intended landing strips. They decided to either bail out in Eastern China, or crash-land along the coast.

After parachuting from their plane, Doolittle and his crew received help from Chinese soldiers and civilians. This became the general pattern for most of the crews. As Doolittle made his way out of China he was convinced the raid had been a disastrous failure and expected to be court-martialed. One crewman, Corporal Leland

D. Faktor, a flight engineer and gunner, was killed while bailing out. SSgt. William J. Dieter and Sgt. Donald E. Fitzmaurice drowned when their B-25 ditched in the sea. Those who were able to get to Chinese troops were saved and guided through Japanese lines to safety. The enemy retaliated by killing thousands of Chinese. Only during post-war war crimes trials, did the U.S. discover that the Japanese had captured eight air men from two planes. Second Lts. Dean E. Hallmark and William G. Farrow as well as Sergeant Harold A. Spaatz were executed in Shanghai on 16 October 1942. Lt. Robert J. Meder died in prison a year later.

In spite of Doolittle's chagrin about the raid, when he and his comrades returned home they discovered their efforts had shored up American morale. The President promoted Doolittle to brigadier general and awarded him the Medal of Honor. Later in the war, he would command the 12th, 15th, and 8th Air Forces. Two raiders received a silver star and all the others received the Distinguished Flying Cross. Seriously injured 2nd Lt. Ted W. Lawson wrote a best-selling memoir of the raid. In 1944, it became the famous movie "Thirty Seconds over Tokyo." Twenty-eight of the crewmen remained in the China Burma India Theater flying missions for more than a year. Five died in combat. Nineteen others flew in North Africa and four were killed while four more became POWs. Nine crew members served in the European Theater and one was killed. In total 12 of the survivors died within 15 months of the raid.

Following the war the survivors met annually to honor their fallen comrades. On 12 November 2013, three of the four survivors met at the National Museum of U.S. Air Force to offer a final toast. Lt. Col. Richard Cole, one of the three Raiders present offered the toast saying, "Gentleman, I propose a toast to those we lost on the mission and those who have passed away since. Thank you very much, and may they rest in peace." Then, he joined Lt. Col. Edward Saylor and SSgt. David



Doolittle Raider's targets and egress points in China



Targets and landing fields identified

Thatcher in drinking some of the 1896 cognac they had saved for decades for this occasion. Prior to the toast, there was a roll call of the crews of each of the 16 B-25s that took part in the raid. The fourth Raider, Lt. Col. Bob Hite, could not attend due to illness, but held his own tribute at his home in Nashville, Tennessee. In 2019, Cole became the last Raider to die at age 103.

On a gray drizzly day in 1942, 80 valiant young airmen lifted off on what many believed was suicide mission. Just four months after the U.S. had suffered one of its most devastating defeats they risked their lives to restore America's honor. While their bombs caused little damage to Japan, their mission has become one of the most iconic events in U.S. history.

Further Reading

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Robert L. Hite, blindfolded by his captors in 1942. Hite remained in captivity until August 1945.

*Colonel Doolittle and crew
with Chinese officials in China
after mission*



*The Congressional Gold Medal presented to the Doolittle Raiders
on 15 April 2015 in recognition of their outstanding heroism and
service to the United States during World War II*



*Colonel Doolittle receiving the Medal
of Honor in 1942 from President
Franklin D Roosevelt with Lt Gen H.H.
Arnold, Ms. Josephine Doolittle, and
Gen George C. Marshall in attendance*



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