



U.S. AIR FORCE

Aftermath of 7 December 1941 – The Doolittle Raid



After their 7 Dec 1941 strikes in Hawaii and the Philippines, Japan won an unbroken string of victories across the Pacific theater. U.S. leaders were desperate to disrupt Japanese operations and raise American morale.

U.S. Navy officers suggested that Army Air Force bombers launched from aircraft carriers could strike the Japanese homeland. The idea for such a mission was passed to General Hap Arnold, who chose Lt Col Jimmy Doolittle to organize and lead the operation. Additional goals were to divert Japanese forces to homeland defense and to weaken the faith of the Japanese people in their leaders – who had claimed their home islands would never be bombed.

The Army Air Forces plan was to strike targets in Tokyo under the cover of darkness and then fly on to China. One lead bomber was to light up the city with incendiaries so the others could find their targets. The B-25 was chosen for the mission because it was the only available aircraft with the required range, bomb capacity and short takeoff distance. Volunteers for an unspecified but “extremely hazardous” mission were sought from the most experienced B-25 unit, the 17th Bomb Group. The B-25 crews trained at Eglin Field, Florida to take off on a very short runway in a heavily loaded B-25. The crews also practiced aerial gunnery, night-flying, over-water navigation and low-level bombing. They trained to approach a target at very low-level and then pull up to 1,500 feet to drop their bombs and avoid damage from the explosions. To increase the fuel capacity for this very long mission, some of the B-25s’ components were removed, including the radios and some of the machine guns. Mock wooden gun barrels were mounted in the tails to intimidate enemy fighters. The U.S. made arrangements with the Chinese for the B-24s post-raid reception and onward movement to General Stilwell’s command in the Far East. All the preparations were made in extreme secrecy.

On 2 April 1942, the *USS Hornet* and her escorts sailed from San Francisco bay carrying sixteen B-25 aircraft and their five-man crews. On 13 April, the *Hornet* joined the *USS Enterprise* and her escorts and continued westward. On 17 April, the carriers and escorting cruisers refueled and began a run towards Japan, hoping to close to within 500 miles of Tokyo and launch the B-25s late on the next day. Doolittle thought 650 miles was the outside launch range for any reasonable chance to reach China.



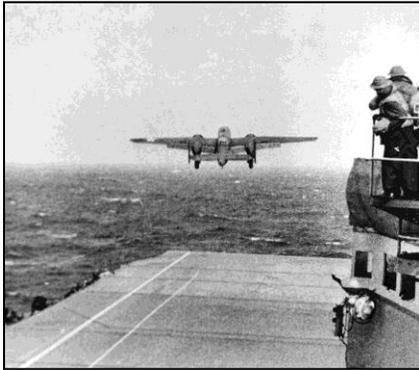


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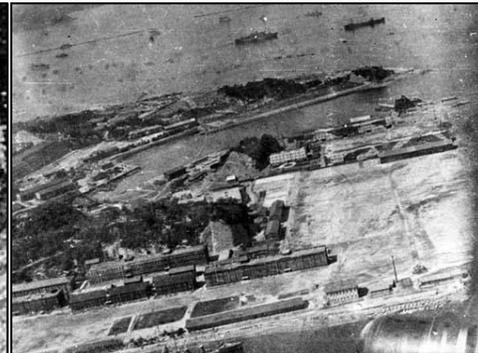
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But early on 18 April, still more than 700 miles from Japan, the carriers were detected by enemy ships. The B-25 crews prepared for immediate launch in order to minimize the risk of enemy attack on the Navy task force. More equipment was removed, routes and targets were adjusted for a longer, daylight raid, and the 80 Doolittle Raiders took off in the sixteen B-25s (see [video](#)) with Doolittle himself flying the lead bomber. Strict radio silence was observed by all the U.S. forces, so there was no notice to the Chinese about the change.



B-25B bomber aircraft



Raider photo of Yokosuka

The inbound B-25s encountered enemy aircraft and ships as they neared Japan, but no effective opposition. The Raiders swept in over the coast at about noon and bombed steel works, oil refineries, oil tank farms, ammunition dumps, dock yards, munitions plants and airplane factories. The attacks were mostly in Tokyo but a few targets were also hit in Kobe, Yokohama, Nagoya and Yokosuka. At the Yokosuka naval base, one of the Raiders bombed the nearly completed aircraft carrier *Ryuho*, delaying her launch until November. Defending Japanese fighters and anti-aircraft gunners caused no serious damage to any of the B-25s. They seemed to the American bomber crews to be inexperienced and ill-equipped. Barrage balloons caused only one diversion to a secondary target, and camouflage on the Japanese facilities was not effective. All sixteen of the B-25s escaped safely from the Japanese home islands, flying southwest into storms and darkness across the East China Sea.



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The early takeoff had changed the mission so that the bombers approached China as darkness fell, short of fuel and without Chinese beacons or signals to guide them to the airfields. Fifteen of the sixteen crews made it to China but had to crash-land, ditch along the shoreline or bail out. One man was killed bailing out and two drowned. There were some serious injuries among the rest. One man's leg was amputated by the only Raider physician – who had volunteered to fly as a gunner. Eight Raiders were captured by the enemy; three of these were executed by their Japanese captors because some strafing in Japan had hit civilian areas. Another prisoner died in Japanese captivity, but the other four POWs survived and were freed in August, 1945. The other Raiders in China were received by friendly Chinese and returned to duty.



Wreckage of Doolittle's B-25



Lt. Col. Doolittle is fourth from right

The sixteenth B-25 had engine problems that caused the aircraft to consume fuel at a high rate. Believing they could never get to China, this crew diverted instead to the Soviet Union in the vicinity of Vladivostok. This was the only crew that actually landed their aircraft intact – but it was confiscated by the Russians and the crew was interned. Over the next year the Russians moved the Americans to the Urals and then south to Turkistan. Along the way



The B-25 flown to the USSR was never returned.

the Russians, who were not at war with Japan, eventually stopped guarding the American flyers and even gave them jobs in an aircraft plant in Ashkhabad, near the Iranian border. The long-lost B-25 crew eventually got a truck driver to smuggle them across the border to Iran, where they contacted the British and received assistance in getting back to the United States.

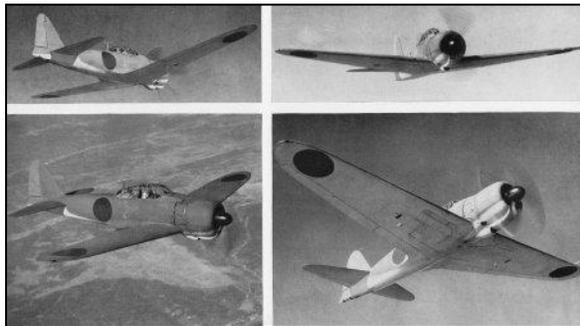


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The results of the Doolittle Raid were significant but varied. It brought a tremendous boost to American morale but had little impact on Japanese loyalties. Sadly, the Chinese suffered terribly as Japanese forces seized the airfields that the Raiders had planned to use and carried out reprisals, killing up to 250,000 Chinese. Japanese commanders were shocked and humiliated by the raid and decided to greatly strengthen their homeland defense. Japan recalled its main aircraft carrier task force from the Indian Ocean and diverted



urgently needed fighter groups from the Solomon Islands and other South Pacific campaigns. The greatest U.S. benefit from the raid was Japan's fateful decision to expand their defensive perimeter outward to prevent Allied operations against their home islands. A huge Japanese task force sailed eastward hoping to seize Midway Island

and crush the U.S. Pacific Fleet. Instead, the U.S. won a decisive naval battle as Navy bombers sank four of the Japanese aircraft carriers that had launched the attacks on Pearl Harbor. This victory turned the tide of the Pacific war.

Jimmy Doolittle was promoted to Brigadier General soon after his raid on Tokyo. In his 9 July 1942 after-action report, Brig. Gen. Doolittle's focus was not on attacking Japan, but rather on defending the United States:

“Several outstanding lessons may be learned from the flight. First, sufficient modern airplanes and competent pilots should be retained within the territorial limits of the United States to assure her adequate defense. Second, an absolutely infallible detection and communication system must be provided. Third, efficient utilization of small surface craft, such as fishing boats equipped with an extremely simple radio could, through the use of a simplified code, send messages to a message center indicating the type, position, direction of approach, speed and altitude of any enemy attacking force. Fourth, the necessity for suitable camouflage and adequate dissimulation. Fifth, the highest possible degree of dispersal in order that a bomb attack, if successful, will do the minimum amount of damage.

The desirability of stopping an enemy bombing raid before arrival over target is obvious. This can be accomplished only with a preponderance of fighters.

The successful bombing of Tokyo indicated that, provided the element of surprise is possible, an extremely successful raid can be carried out at low altitudes with great damage and high security to equipment and personnel.”



Lt Col Doolittle and his B-25 crew

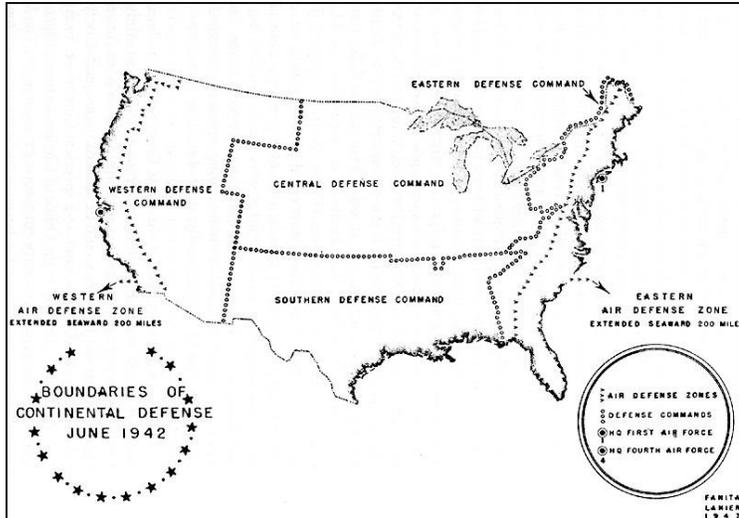


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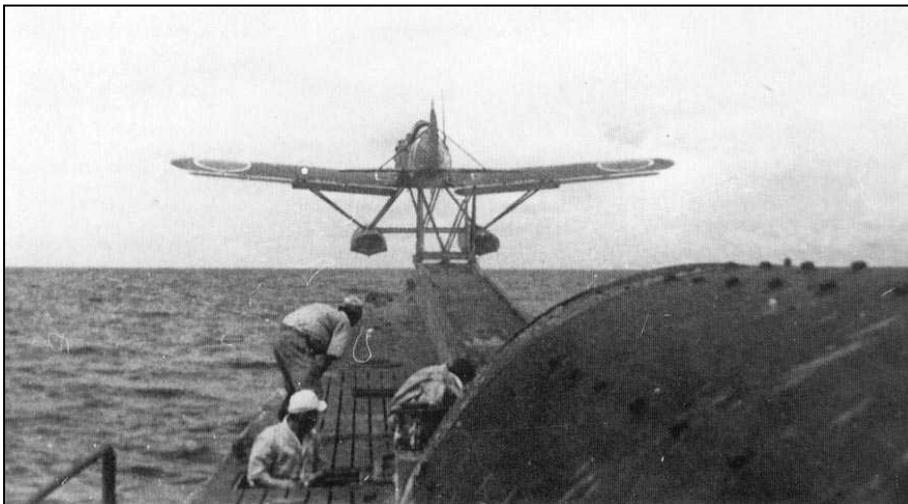


Indeed, after Japan's 7 Dec 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. military had hurriedly established a network of radar sites, visual observers and fighter-interceptor units along U.S. west coast. The Doolittle raid generated new fears among U.S. authorities that the Japanese would retaliate by attacking the mainland. Civil defense officials began to prepare the country for a



revenge bombing. There were even fears that the Japanese might use poison gas against population centers, and 600,000 gas masks were rushed to the Western Defense Command for key civilians such as police and air raid wardens. Bomber deployments to overseas theaters were postponed and the units were held for homeland defense against enemy naval forces in the Pacific.

However, the actual Japanese attacks on the American mainland were inconsequential. A few submarines fired their deck guns at some U.S. coastal installations, causing little damage. The Japanese also tried to start forest fires in the United States in order to produce chaos and divert U.S. manpower from the war effort. Incendiaries were dropped from a submarine-launched seaplane and were also placed on unmanned balloons sent across the north Pacific on the wind. Neither tactic was successful. When climatic conditions were favorable for trans-oceanic balloon flights, they also produced humidity and ground moisture that greatly retarded the spread of any major fires.





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Epilogue. The Doolittle Raid is a story of outstanding courage in the face of extreme danger. The Raiders and the Navy task force braved hostile seas for days and, unlike the Japanese that struck Pearl Harbor, they were detected by the enemy hundreds of miles from their launch point. The Raiders scrambled into their planes with little chance of achieving surprise or reaching a landing base. The pilots had never tried a takeoff from a carrier, but each B-25 got airborne even as the deck of the *Hornet* rose and fell in the rough seas. The Raiders navigated over hundreds of miles of ocean by dead reckoning and struck the heart of Japan in broad daylight with no fighter escort and without a full complement of guns. After 13 hours of flight, the Raiders were out of gas, out of daylight and out of contact with allied forces. Death or capture loomed.



Each Raider was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (left). The dead and wounded, including the POWs tortured in captivity, received Purple Hearts. Lt Col. Doolittle received the Medal of Honor at right. Thirteen Raiders died later in the war, most in action against the enemy. Four became Prisoners of War in German captivity.



The Doolittle Raiders hold a reunion nearly every year. The group keeps a set of 80 silver goblets, each engraved with the name of one of the Raiders. Each name is engraved twice, right side up and upside down, because the goblets of those who have died are inverted. Surviving Raiders hold a roll call and toast Raiders who passed away during the previous year. The Raiders also keep a bottle of vintage 1896 cognac, chosen for the year of Jimmy Doolittle's birth, which will be used to drink a final toast.



The [70th Doolittle Raider Reunion](#) is planned for 17-20 April 2012 at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force in Ohio. Another commemoration is planned for 5 May 2012 at the *USS Hornet* Museum in California.