

Doolittle's Raid

[A short introductory editorial] It's unfortunately true that people tend to forget history almost as rapidly as history is made, and in today's society the value of history, more and more, is looked upon as 'quaint'. How foolish and shortsighted! Still, normal population dynamics is largely responsible, aside from changing traditional values (also foolish and shortsighted). As each generation disappears, its challenges and accomplishments are diminished. The participants pass away, and the vividness of their times fades. Today, for example, there are only three surviving American soldiers left from World War I. Already, the 'War to end all Wars' is something distant, and something few are familiar with.

The same is true, to a lesser extent thus far, of World War II, the greatest military conflict ever to occur on the face of the earth. It's a truism in history that all civilizations rise and fall, and many historians identify World War II as America's peak. The lessons to be learned there should never be forgotten, and certain events can be seen to highlight one or more of those lessons. Such an event occurred on April 18, 1942...

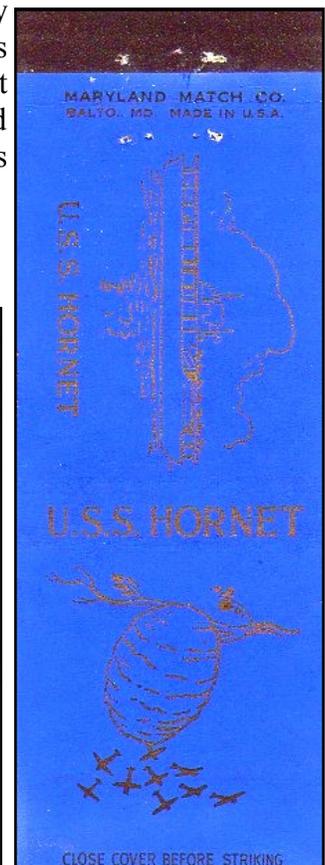
"The air attack on Japan, launched from the aircraft carrier Hornet and led by Lieutenant Colonel James H. Doolittle, was the most daring operation yet undertaken by the United States in the young Pacific War. Though conceived as a diversion that would also boost American and allied morale, the raid generated strategic benefits that far outweighed its limited goals.

The raid had its roots in a chance observation that it was possible to launch Army twin-engined bombers from an aircraft carrier, making feasible an early air attack on Japan. Appraised of the idea in January 1942, U.S. Fleet commander Admiral Ernest J. King and Air Forces leader General Henry H. Arnold greeted it with enthusiasm. Arnold assigned the technically-astute Doolittle to organize and

lead a suitable air group. The modern, but relatively well-tested B-25B "Mitchell" medium bomber was selected as the delivery vehicle and tests showed that it could fly off a carrier with a useful bomb load and enough fuel to hit Japan and continue on to airfields in China.

[B-25 takes off from USS Hornet to Attack Japan, 18 April 1942]

Photo # 80-G-41194 B-25 takes off from USS Hornet to attack Japan, 18 April 1942



On Japan

Gathering volunteer air crews for an unspecified, but admittedly dangerous mission, Doolittle embarked on a vigorous program of special training for his men and modifications to their planes. The new carrier Hornet was sent to the Pacific to undertake the Navy's part of the mission. So secret was the operation that her Commanding Officer, Captain Marc A. Mitscher, had no idea of his ship's upcoming employment until shortly before sixteen B-25s were loaded on her flight deck. On 2 April 1942 Hornet put to sea and headed west across the vast Pacific.

Joined in mid-ocean on 13 April by Vice Admiral William F. Halsey's flagship Enterprise, which would provide air cover during the approach, Hornet steamed toward a planned 18 April afternoon launching point some 400 miles from Japan. However, before dawn on 18 April, enemy picket boats were encountered much further east than expected. These were evaded or sunk, but got off radio warnings, forcing the planes to take off around 8 AM, while still more than 600 miles out.

Most of the sixteen B-25s, each with a five-man crew, attacked the Tokyo area, with a few hitting Nagoya. Damage to the intended military targets was modest, and none of the planes reached the Chinese airfields (though all but a few of their crewmen survived). However, the Japanese high command was deeply embarrassed. Three of the eight American airmen they had captured were executed. Spurred by Combined Fleet commander Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, they also resolved to eliminate the risk of any more such raids by the early destruction of America's aircraft carriers, a decision that led them to disaster at the Battle of Midway a month and a half later.” [<http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/events/wwii-pac/misc-42/dooltl.htm>]

In addition to the carriers *Hornet* and *Enterprise*, fourteen other U.S. Navy ships made up the raid

task force. Three were heavy cruisers, *Salt Lake City*, *Northampton*, and *Vincennes*. USS *Nashville* was a light cruiser. The eight destroyers were *Balch*, flagship of Captain Richard L. Conolly's Destroyer Squadron Six, *Benham*, *Ellet*, *Fanning*, *Grayson*, *Gwin*, *Meredith* and *Monssen*. Vital members of the long-range team were the task force oilers *Cimarron* and *Sabine*.

[B-25 lifts off from USS Hornet on Doolittle Raid]

Photo # 80-G-41196 B-25 lifts off from USS Hornet on Doolittle Raid

