



The Selfless Courage of the Doolittle Raiders

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

In the early morning hours of December 7, 1941, Japanese aircraft lifted off over the Pacific into the early morning light. Their mission was one of war. Without any prior warning, the Japanese flew into U.S. airspace and attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor. By the end of the day, over 2,000 Americans were dead, and hundreds more injured. Across the Pacific, other American installations at the Philippines, Guam, and Wake Island were attacked.

The United States was outraged. War was officially declared on December 8 and the nation began to make its plans for war. Its ability to strike back at Japan, however, was limited. Its Pacific fleet had been severely damaged at Pearl Harbor and would need to undergo significant repairs before it would be an effective fighting force.

Fortunately for the Americans, their aircraft carriers had not been in port at the time of the attack. These would be the tools of reprisal. Military planners knew the nation had become disheartened by the surprise attacks and looked for a bold and risky stroke that would give the country hope. One brave group of men came forward to execute this mission.

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On December 21, 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt met with his Joint Chiefs of Staff at the White House. The topic of the meeting was the same as it had been the previous weeks: the war effort. Roosevelt was eager to act. He knew the attack on Pearl Harbor and other American bases across the Pacific nation had disheartened Americans. He wanted to take a bold action both to bolster American morale and show the Japanese that they too were vulnerable. The President wanted to bomb Japan.

How this would be accomplished was the challenge. One officer came forward with the bold idea of putting two engine bombers onto aircraft carriers, sailing deep into enemy territory to within a few thousand miles of the Japanese coast, and bombing the Japanese capital of Tokyo. The plan seemed suicidal, but planners believed it could be done.

The first step was to determine who would lead and plan the attack. James Doolittle volunteered to lead the dangerous mission. Doolittle was an aviation pioneer and had become relatively well known during the inter-war period. His most significant contribution had been helping to develop instrument flight, or the ability to fly an aircraft solely by the instruments in the cockpit. When Doolittle heard about the mission to Japan, he was quick to volunteer.

Doolittle and other military planners selected the B-25 Mitchell for the mission. It had a large

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enough range to make the attack feasible and a large enough payload to make it effective. However, the Mitchell was a medium bomber that was not designed to take off on the short runway of a heavily pitching aircraft carrier. Additionally, the plane had never before been tested in combat. Despite these issues, Doolittle believed that with enough training, it would be possible.

Next, Doolittle needed men. The 17th Bomber Group crews were offered the opportunity to volunteer for an “extremely hazardous” mission but were given no details about the raid. Many jumped at the chance, and 24 crews were selected.

Next, the planes were prepared, and the men began training. Crews radically lightened the bombers by removing their protective machine guns and other non-essential parts. They were also given auxiliary gas tanks to extend their range. The crews set about training in the modified planes.

The mission ahead of them was daunting. Sailing deep into enemy territory without being detected started to seem like the easiest part. Once in range, the fully loaded bombers would have to take off the short deck of the carriers. They would then fly across the Pacific, relying on their navigators to locate the Japanese mainland. They would then enter enemy territory, fly low to avoid detection, drop their payload on their intended target, and head toward China. The bombing crews would meet with U.S. allied forces there. It was not possible for them to land their planes back on the carrier.

The bombers were flown to California at the end of March 1942, and loaded onto the carrier U.S.S. *Hornet*. On April 2, the fully loaded carrier set off. The mission had begun. After linking up with escort ships, the task force headed toward Japan.

On April 18, disaster struck. A Japanese boat on patrol ran across the task force. The escorts quickly sank the ship, but the Americans feared that it had gotten off a radio message warning Japan of the attack. The task force was still 200 miles from their planned launch point. Either the planes needed to wait until they reached that point and risk the Japanese using that time to prepare, or launch early and risk running out of fuel before reaching their intended landing area in China. The decision was made to launch.

The aircraft fired up their engines. The smell of diesel smoke mingled with the fresh sea air. The planes prepared to launch. Though they had practiced taking off on shortened airfields, the crews had never actually taken off from a carrier deck before. The planes rumbled forward and struggled into the air. All launched safely, and the 80 crewmen of the Doolittle raid set off on their one-way mission.

The planes flew for six hours, finally reaching Tokyo around noon. They successfully bombed ten different military targets. While over Japanese territory they encountered anti-aircraft fire and some fighters, but the desired surprise had been achieved. No bombers were lost to enemy fire.

The planes then continued their flight. All but one headed for China, watching their fuel gauges closely. One aircraft, knowing it could not make it to China, instead turned for the Soviet Union,

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another ally of the United States. Night was approaching, and the weather worsening. Their hope of reaching friendly airfields was quickly fading.

The crews all had to make decisions for themselves. Several, including Doolittle, bailed out of their airplanes into China, hoping to be picked up by friendly Chinese forces. Others bailed into the ocean. Every plane, except for one, was lost. In total, three men were killed, and eight were captured. Four of these would die in the brutal captivity of the Japanese.

Strategically, the raid accomplished little. The Japanese quickly repaired the small amount of damage done by the 16 planes. However, the impact at home was massive. The country finally had a victory to call its own and a group of heroes to celebrate. The raid demonstrated that the United States was committed to absolute victory and not intimidated by the Japanese. It was accomplished thanks to the bravery and sacrifice of the men of Doolittle's Raid.