

This Day in History... April 18, 1942

Doolittle Raid

On April 18, 1942, Jimmy Doolittle led a daring raid against the Japanese in retaliation for the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Within weeks of Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt urged US forces to retaliate. Navy Captain Francis Low first suggested that twin-engine Army bombers could be launched from an aircraft carrier.

Famous aviator James "Jimmy" Doolittle, who had also served as an aeronautical engineer before the war, took over the planning and subsequently led the attack. Doolittle was a trailblazer and already famous for his daring string of aviation "firsts," including several speed records. This mission would test those skills, as the B-25B Mitchell planes, their ability to launch from the aircraft carrier, and the flight distance were tremendous risk factors.



From the World War II, 1941: A World at War sheet



From the World War II, 1942: Into the Battle sheet.

The crew's fate was also a gamble – the B-25Bs could not land on the carrier, so after dropping their bombs they were to continue on to China. Once there, the men were vulnerable to capture by Japanese patrols. But Doolittle and his men were willing to take the risks and launched their attack, the Doolittle Raid, on April 18, 1942. Early that morning, about 650 nautical miles from Japan, Japanese forces spotted the combined fleet of two carriers, four cruisers, eight destroyers, and two fleet oilers.

Doolittle then made the tough decision to launch the bombers immediately – 10 hours and 170 miles earlier than planned. Despite having never taken off from a carrier before, all 16 B-25B Mitchells successfully launched from the deck of the USS *Hornet*. Within six hours, they arrived over Japan and bombed 16 targets, mostly military installations, in six cities.

Though none of the bombers were shot down during the raid, they were all destroyed because the pilots were unable to reach their refueling station in China. In the end, 67 of the total 80 pilots survived the raid. Eleven crewmen were killed or captured. Three of them were tortured and executed by the Japanese, who also massacred 250,000 Chinese civilians for aiding the US airmen.

Due to the loss of all 16 aircraft and the relatively minor damage to the targets, Doolittle considered the raid a failure and expected to be court-martialed. However, the raid had dramatically boosted American morale and proved that Japan was vulnerable to attack. For his service, Doolittle was awarded the Medal of Honor and promoted two grades to brigadier general.

Additionally, all 80 of Doolittle's Raiders received the Distinguished Flying Cross. It was a significant success that lifted American spirits and began to raise doubts in the Japanese leadership.

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