



# One-way Ticket to Tokyo: The Doolittle Raid

Story by Phyllis R. Moses  
Images from U.S. Air Force archives

**F**our months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, a group of the nation's top military and diplomatic advisers met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the oval office to discuss retaliation for the recent bombing of our naval fleet at Pearl Harbor. It was then that plans for a secret military operation began to materialize. In that secret meeting the President and others in the room determined that the best military tactic was a retaliatory strike against Japan. Target: Six cities in Japan, including Tokyo.

Lt. Col. James H. "Jimmy," Doolittle, then 46 years old and already a national hero, was chosen as the command pilot. The initial tasks were many, such as the selection of the aircraft, the crews and the timing for the mission. The B-25 bomber (with specific modifications) met the criteria: it was relatively light in weight, could launch from the deck of an aircraft carrier, and could fly 2,000 miles with a 2,000-pound bomb load.

Please meet Lt. Col. Richard E. "Dick" Cole (USAF Ret.), Doolittle's copilot. Now 92 years of age, his recollections of the

mission are as clear and crisp today as they were 66 years ago. Lt. Col. Cole is completely devoid of ego or arrogance. He is youthful and walks with a strong stride. His bearing is that of an officer in the military. Patriotism and the love of his country are still priorities with him. As he talks about the event that changed WWII, and the part he played in it, he gets a faraway look in his eye, as if he's living it all over again.

Cole grew up in Dayton, Ohio, the "Cradle of Aviation" and the hometown of Orville and Wilbur Wright, inventors of the first powered aircraft. As a young boy, Dick rode his bicycle to the local airport, McCook Field, to watch airplanes take off and land. It was there his interest in airplanes began to grow.

After graduating at Steele High in Dayton, he completed two years at Ohio University. Blue skies beckoned though, and Dick entered civilian pilot training at Wittenburg College in Springfield, Ohio. It was there he received his private pilot license. He enlisted in the army in November 1940. He applied for and was accepted into the U.S. *(continued on the next page)*

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Army Air Corps. After attending Parks Air College in East St. Louis, Ill., he moved on to advanced training at Randolph and Kelly Fields in San Antonio, Tex. In July 1941, he received his 2nd Lieutenant's commission and was assigned to the 34th Bombardment Squadron, 17th Bombardment Group stationed at Pendleton, Ore., flying B-25s as copilot. He transferred to Columbia, S.C., in February 1942, and afterward was upgraded to captain.

Then the opportunity came along to volunteer for a hazardous mission. He, along with 79 other airmen eventually became the famous "Tokyo Raiders." They were pilots, copilots, navigators, engineers and bombardiers/gunners. Disciplined, sharp and well-trained, they had readily responded to an appeal for volunteers, not having a clue about the nature of the mission, its danger or the impact it would have on the war—or for that matter, the rest of their lives.

Not surprisingly, they were more than mildly curious about the secrecy and mystery surrounding the mission for which they had volunteered. In due time, they learned they were to become part of an incredibly important assignment—a mission that would change the direction of the war. Their orders were explicit: The airmen were not to discuss the mission with anyone.

It was barely four months following the most devastating surprise attack in history against the U.S.A. The deaths, property loss and the embarrassment to our country were still fresh in the minds of all Americans, especially the military. Morale was sagging in the United States, and a military victory would bring a much-needed boost to the spirits of all Americans. Unquestionably, it was the most audacious military mission anyone could imagine.

Quartered at Eglin Field in Florida, their training became intensive. Day after day they practiced short-field takeoffs. In time they learned how to wrench a heavily loaded B-25 off the runway in about 500 feet. Eventually, they were able to take off in less than 500 feet with a 10-knot head wind, with their bomber loaded to 31,000 pounds, 2,000 pounds over its normal gross weight.

Many changes were made to the aircraft to reduce weight. They removed 230 pounds of radio equipment, useless for their purposes since complete radio silence was to be observed. Other modifications were made, such as replacing the top-secret Norden bombsight with a simple, light-weight homemade bombsight that cost about twenty cents. An extra fuel tank was added in place of the lower gun turret. Finally the airplanes were ordered to proceed to the West Coast. At Alameda, California, on April 1, 1942, sixteen B-25s were hoisted onto the deck of the *USS Hornet*. Cole recalls, "If there were Japanese spies in the area that day, they were either asleep or blind. There they were: all those beautiful B-25s on

deck, shining in the bright sunlight."

The fleet got underway April 2, 1942. Two days later, when the carrier was out of sight of land, the ship's captain made it official: "This force is bound for Tokyo." As the armada steamed across the Pacific Ocean headed to the Japanese coast it was joined by two carriers, two cruisers, four destroyers and a tanker. Passing north of Hawaii, the task force joined with the carrier, *USS Enterprise*. All together, there were 16 ships in the fleet, all under the command of Admiral William F. "Bull" Halsey.

On April 3, Doolittle called all of his airmen together and told them about the plan. As the task force steamed across the Pacific he met with his "boys" every day. There were many sessions of strategic planning and briefing. Among activities that kept them



Above: Capt. Marc A. Mitscher, skipper of the *Hornet*, presents Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle, leader of the Tokyo Raid with a medal once given to a U.S. Navy officer by Japan. The medal was wired to a 500-pound bomb for return to Japan "with interest." Below: Doolittle Tokyo Raiders, Crew No. 1 (Plane #40-2344, target Tokyo): 34th Bombardment Squadron, Lt. Col. James H. Doolittle, pilot; Lt. Richard E. Cole, copilot; Lt. Henry A. Potter, navigator; SSgt. Fred A. Braemer, bombardier; SSgt. Paul J. Leonard, flight engineer/gunner.



occupied was listening to lectures by officers who had been in Japan and learned the language. The men learned to say "I am an American" in Japanese.

Routine duties, drills and exercise also kept them busy as they waited for that nerve-shattering claxon horn that would signal them to action. Doubts about getting off the deck of the carrier were paramount in their minds, but knowing "the boss" was going to launch first, gave them confidence.

Early on the morning of April 18, Admiral Halsey received information that a Japanese picket boat might have spotted the carrier loaded with strange-looking aircraft, and reported their position to Tokyo. He made the decision to launch the bombers immediately. The horn sounded and the crews scrambled. They gathered their gear and began to warm up their B-25s. Orders were for them to launch immediately. Doolittle and Cole flew the lead plane. Within an hour, all 16 of the planes were headed toward their destinations.

When Doolittle's bomber flew off the rolling deck of the *USS Hornet* on April 18, 1942, Cole was in the cockpit with him. He recalls that day vividly, "Gen. Doolittle was one of my idols and it was such an honor for me to be his copilot on this mission. We were busy in the cockpit; the engines continually had to be adjusted to conserve fuel. There was no time for idle chatter."

The airmen flew directly into enemy airspace, finally reaching Tokyo and the other designated cities. The operation was designed to attack strategic military and civilian installations in several cities in Japan, which included: Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagoya, Osaka and Kobe. As they identified assigned target cities, they dropped their bombs on significant military installations, power plants, oil refineries and factories.

Eighty men took part in the raid; three were killed during the mission, eight became prisoners of war in Japanese internment camps, and five ended up in Russian prison camps. Three were executed by a firing squad; another died in prison. (Thirteen other Raiders died later in the war.) In spite of the loss of lives and all of the aircraft, the mission was considered a military success. All of the bombers reached their targets. Because of their premature departure from the carrier and deteriorating weather, they were not able to reach their planned destinations in China. As they ran out of fuel, the crewmen were forced to bail out along the Chinese coast, amidst lightning, wind and rain.

Doolittle and his crew reunited later and were led to safety by friendly Chinese guerillas (Dick recalls, "We were treated humanely by the Chinese guerillas and eventually (continued on the next page)

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made our way to Chung King (Chongqing).” Thirteen of the fifteen crews that made it to the Chinese mainland eventually slipped through Japanese lines as they made their way to Chungking. Doolittle tried to keep track of his airmen as they made their way to safety. He was disappointed and embarrassed that all of his airplanes were lost. Upon his return to Washington, to his great surprise, he did not receive a court martial (which he thought that he deserved) but instead was awarded the highest military honor, the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Unquestionably, the success of the mission changed the character of the 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. Damage to intended military targets was modest. However, the Japanese high command was deeply embarrassed. The Japanese high command 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. The raid restored respect to the U.S. military and immeasurably lifted the moral of the citizens of the U.S.

After the raid, Cole remained in CBI (China, Burma and India theatre) until June 1943, flying bombing and transport missions over the Hump. In October 1943, he took part in the invasion of Burma, flying in support of Gen. Wingate and his ground forces. When he returned to the U.S. in 1944, he was assigned to the Air Transport Ferry Command ferrying aircraft, and served later as an acceptance test pilot at the Douglas Aircraft plant in Tulsa, Okla.

While in Tulsa, Dick met a pretty young lady named Martha Harrell. At the time she was taking flying lessons, hoping to get into the WASP (Women's Airforce Service Pilots) program. One day, as he was about to test-fly a B-24 and was doing a routine walk-around, she rode up on a bicycle. During the conversation, she said she would like to go up in a big plane. Dick explained to her that it was not possible for him to take passengers on a test flight; it was against the rules.

After take-off Cole and his crew were going through their flight checklist at about 12,000 feet, when Martha came up to the cockpit! She had stowed away on the plane. Cole remembers it took a week to get up the nerve to ask her for a date. They married after a two-week whirlwind courtship. They were married sixty years and had five children. In addition to the five children, there are five grandsons. Sadly, Martha passed away in 2003.

Dick has flown many types and makes of aircraft: B-17s, B-25s, B-24s, A-24s, P-61, A-20, DB-7 (a version of the A-20), the C-47, and the T-33. The last time he flew was in November 2007. He says, "I think I can still pass a medical!" Dick enjoys retirement in Comfort, Texas, on his farm, where he can be found most days working in the barn, trimming trees or doing other chores.

Cole recalls, "I had the honor, pleasure and privilege to fly with Gen. Doolittle, and to serve my country in the best way I knew how. We definitely were not aware of the historic significance of (the raid) at the time it happened." He and his fellow Raiders were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for their courageous efforts on behalf of their country.

Dick Cole credits Jimmy Doolittle with how Cole lived his



U.S. Air Force photo

**Above left:** The Doolittle Raiders hold their traditional goblet ceremony at each reunion.

**During the goblet ceremony, the men toast with cognac and then turn over the goblets of those who died since the last meeting. Above right:** Retired Lt. Col. Dick Cole was one of 80 men, led by then Lt. Col. James Doolittle, who volunteered to bomb mainland Japan on April 18, 1942. Colonels Cole and Doolittle were the pilots of the first of 16 B-25 Mitchell medium bombers that launched from the USS Homet, floating approximately 500 miles from Japan's coast. The mission was the first American strike on the Japanese mainland.



life. "He gave me pointers on how to handle myself and how to treat people; he did that for all of us. He influenced our character for the better. Our dealings with him, our relationship, was always professional. He was the senior officer and we were the junior officers. Yet when we went fishing or hunting together, he was just one of the boys and never placed himself above us."

There are twelve Raiders still living. They meet for a reunion every year, and Dick Cole expects all but four this year in April in Dallas, Tex. (The Doolittle Tokyo Raiders 66th Reunion is in Dallas, Texas, April 16-20, 2008. The host organization for the 66th Anniversary Reunion is the Frontiers of Flight Museum. For more information go to [www.doolittleraider.com](http://www.doolittleraider.com). The event started as a birthday party for Jimmy Doolittle and evolved into an annual event. When they gather, the surviving raiders conduct a private "goblet ceremony." Each Raider has his own silver goblet with his name engraved on it. They call the roll and toast those who have died since the last reunion; the deceased's goblets are then turned upside down. When only two remain, they will open a bottle of 1896 brandy (the year of Doolittle's birth) and toast their fallen comrades for the last time.

Cole stays busy fulfilling requests for appearances all over the country plus frequent events in other countries. For example a few years ago the Chinese government invited the Raiders to participate in a ceremony commemorating the end of the China-Japanese war. He was one of only two who attended. Their hosts took them to town hall meetings to tell about their role in the war. Surprisingly, few of the Chinese knew anything about their raid on Tokyo. In December 2007, he was invited as an honored guest at ceremonies on the USS Arizona in Pearl Harbor. He says, "I'm honored when asked to appear at functions commemorating this historic event, and will continue to accept them as long as I can physically do so."

This humble man's personality befits a hero. He eagerly shares his pride in this long-ago act of patriotism, heroism and military victory with his buddies, who have maintained a bond closer than brothers through the many years, and with generations of Americans whose freedom he helped make possible. Maybe now and then, Dick looks toward the horizon and hears the distant thunder of sixteen B-25s making their way across the sky and into the pages of American military history. He remembers. 🐣