



FACT SHEET

U.S. Air Force Fact Sheet

AMERICA HITS BACK: THE DOOLITTLE TOKYO RAIDERS

In the spring of 1942, America's morale slumped from numerous Japanese successes, and the country desperately needed a victory. Capt. Francis S. Low, a U.S. Navy submariner, suggested an attack against the heart of Japan using U.S. Army Air Forces medium bombers flown from a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier. The difficult task of training for and leading the raid went to Lt. Col. James H. "Jimmy" Doolittle, a brilliant aviator and compelling leader. The top secret plan called for the B-25s to take off about 450 miles from Japan, bomb selected targets at such locations as Yokohama and Tokyo, and then fly another 1,600 miles to friendly airfields in mainland China. The operation was risky -- medium bombers had never been flown from a carrier, and sailing so far into enemy territory endangered the U.S. Navy task force.

At dawn on April 18, 1942, the task force, commanded by Admiral William "Bull" Halsey, was steaming west through rough Pacific seas, about 650 miles away from Japan. On the deck of the USS Hornet sat 16 B-25s. Unfortunately, the task force encountered an enemy patrol boat, and no one knew if it had radioed a warning to Japan before being sunk. Col. Doolittle and Admiral Halsey discussed their difficult choice -- cancel the raid or launch earlier than planned and risk running out of fuel. Doolittle chose to attack, and all 16 aircraft took to the air. Upon reaching the Japanese homeland, the Raiders dropped their bombs on oil storage facilities, factory areas and military installations, and then headed out across the East China Sea.

As their fuel gauges dropped, the Raiders knew they could not reach their designated airfields. One by one, they ditched at sea, bailed out, or crash-landed in China (one crew diverted to the Soviet Union). Fortunately, with the help of the Chinese people, most of the Doolittle Raiders safely reached friendly forces (Japanese forces later executed as many as a quarter million Chinese citizens in retaliation for this assistance).

When authorities released news of the attack, American morale zoomed from the depths to



Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle accepts a medal from the skipper of the USS Hornet, Capt. Marc A. Mitscher. The medal, once given to a U.S. Navy officer by the Japanese, was wired to a 500-pound bomb for return to Japan "with interest." (U.S. Air Force photo)

which it plunged following Japan's many early victories. Although the brilliant strike caused relatively little physical damage, it stunned the Japanese population -- their embarrassed leaders had promised the mainland would never be attacked. The Japanese transferred four fighter groups from the front lines to defend mainland Japan. To prevent future American attacks on the homeland, Admiral Yamamoto ordered the disastrous attack on Midway Island, which became the turning point in the war in the Pacific.