News traveled slow, Doolittle didn’t

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Sunday, April 13, 2003

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, the United States plunged into World War II. Fighting proved difficult both in Europe and in the Pacific where forces were on the defensive. War reports trickled slowly back home. For the first months, most news was dismal and disheartening.

At the same time, America was racing to build up its military arsenal. An opinion column in the Solano County Courier of April 23, 1942 read:

“It has been neither inertia, nor lack of bold strategy, nor want of heroic fighting spirit that has chained the anti-Axis countries to the defensive for so long. Within the past two years, they have had to hold their own against formidable enemies who, all through the 1930’s, armed while we slept.”

Unbeknownst to most Americans, President Roosevelt had ordered military leaders to come up with a retaliatory mission against Japan, to revenge the attack on Pearl Harbor and, if successful, to boost morale and spirit at home and with the troops.

Executing a retaliatory strike did not prove easy, as ships could not operate close enough to Japan, nor were there any Allied air bases nearby. A new idea surfaced when Captain Francis Lowe, while on an inspection tour in January 1942, observed the painted outlines of an aircraft carrier on an airfield near Norfolk, VA.

What would happen if larger, ground-based bombers where launched off an aircraft carrier? This had never been attempted, but their greater range and ability to carry a heavier load could bridge the necessary distance to Japan.

When two trial flights off the USS Hornet’s deck - attempted in calm waters without a bomb load - were successful, a daring plan was conceived: B-25 “Mitchell” bombers, carrying a ton of bombs each and capable of flying 2000 miles with additional fuel tanks, would take off from the relatively short carrier deck, attack Japanese cities, and then continue on, to land on friendly airfields in mainland China.

The designated leader for this operation was Lt. Col James “Jimmy” Doolittle. Born in Alameda, California, on Dec. 14, 1896, he had served as a flight instructor to Army Air Corps cadets during World War I. He made a record-breaking transcontinental flight in September 1922, won several famous air-racing trophies and contributed much to the
development of instrument flying, being the first pilot ever to fly “blind” on instruments in 1928. He returned to active duty in the Army Air Corps in 1940.

Doolittle had scarcely three months to gather a group of more than eighty young volunteers, mostly from the 17th Bombardment Group and the 89th Reconnaissance Squadron and to train them. All the men knew was that the mission was dangerous and might well cost their lives, but not what it consisted of.

Training was exhausting. The pilots learned to take off from a 500-foot-long runway. The planes had to be modified. Yet all was ready by April.

In the meantime, the carrier Hornet made its way from the Atlantic to Alameda Naval Air Station in California. Sixteen B-25 bombers and their crews were loaded aboard the Hornet.

The Hornet left port on April 2 to rendezvous by April 13 with the USS Enterprise, commanded by Vice Admiral William F. Halsey. The raid was set to commence April 18 in the afternoon, when the convoy was within 400 miles of the Japanese coastline.

Instead, enemy picket boats spotted the convoy early on April 18, while it was still more than 600 miles from Japan. To prevent losing the element of surprise, the 16 bombers took off despite rough weather and high waves, starting with Jimmy Doolittle’s plane and crew at 8:20 a.m.

Admiral Halsey, aboard the Enterprise, signaled the message: “Launch planes ... To Col. Doolittle and gallant command, good luck and God bless you.”

All 16 crews launched successfully within one hour then flew toward Japan. It took them a little more than five hours to reach their targets - the cities of Kobe, Nagoya, Tokyo, Yokohama and Yokosuka and their factories, refineries, docks and military defense installations.

Once the planes had dropped their bomb loads, they were supposed to turn around and proceed to mainland China. After a total of fifteen hours’ flight time, several of the planes ran short on fuel. Four planes barely reached China, crash-landing offshore or near islands close to the coast.

In one case, a plane was so short on fuel that the pilot decided to detour into Russia and land at Vladivostok. The crew was interned in Russia until the end of the war.

The Chinese population went out of its way in most cases to rescue bomber crews, despite the risk of being caught and executed by the occupying Japanese forces.
One of the crews made it safely to China, but was captured by the Japanese. In all, eight raiders were imprisoned in Japan. Two of these crewmembers were later executed; a third died in prison.

Of the 80 men who flew off on April 18, seventy-two survived the raid. The successful raid boosted American moral and helped turn around the war in the Pacific.

Local newspapers, except the Solano County Courier, did not report anything about the event.

On April 23, 1942, the Solano County Courier included in Edward C. Wayne’s weekly news analysis the first announcement of a raid, headed “U.S. Bombers. Sensational reports from General MacArthur’s headquarters had provided the information that American planes had made a devastating attack on Japanese bases in the Philippines.”

Wayne continued to speculate on the origins of the attack. For us today, living in an age where journalists are accompanying troops shoulder-to-shoulder into combat, it seems strange to realize how little even supposedly well-informed news agencies seemed to have known and how much they had to rely on guesswork and speculation. Very likely, Wayne was reporting about the Doolittle Raiders, yet he did not seem to have many facts. He continued “Maps showed, however, that unless the planes had been carrier-based or at some point not heretofore revealed as in American hands, the shortest roundtrip from Australian territory would have been 2,800 miles to the southern tip of Mindanao, or about 4,000 miles.”

The only other reference appeared in the Solano County Courier’s Memorial Day weekend edition of May 28, 1942. In a short paragraph, including a photograph of Jimmy Doolittle, it paid tribute to his promotion to Brigadier General. Six weeks after the raid, the article still contained several informational mistakes:

“When Brigadier General James H. Doolittle and his 70 (sic) American fliers skimmed over the housetops of Tokio (sic) and dropped bombs on Japanese docks, ships and munition plants, the first installment was paid in avenging the treacherous attack on Pearl Harbor. For two days (sic) the fires from Doolittle’s bombs devastated Tokio’s war industrial plants and those of other Nipponese cities. Tojo’s propagandists attempted in vain to stem the panic of the people by trying to belittle the importance of the attack. But the warlords of Tokio know that the attack will be repeated - that American bombers will return again and again and the day of vengeance for Pearl Harbor is in sight.

“The Medal of Honor for General Doolittle and the Distinguished Service Cross for
each of his intrepid aviators, bestowed by President Roosevelt, represent every loyal American citizen’s gratitude for this most brilliant exploit in aviation history.”

In 1944, the movie “Thirty Seconds over Tokyo,” based on the book by raider Lt. Ted Lawson and starring Spencer Tracy as Jimmy Doolittle, captured some of the exploits of this daring venture. A year later, the Doolittle Raiders met for their first reunion after the war.

This year, their 61st anniversary reunion takes place at Travis Air Force Base April 16-18, with several events open to the public, including a parade in downtown Fairfield Wednesday from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. The parade will include a fly-over of B-52 bombers in formation. For more information, log on to www.jimmydoolittlereunion.com.