



News Release

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

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DOOLITTLE RAIDERS MEET IN COLUMBIA FOR 60TH REUNION

CHARLESTON AIR FORCE BASE, S.C. – Eighty men watched the sunrise over the Pacific from the deck of the USS Hornet and readied for the flight of their lives. Sixty years later, 14 of the remaining 23 met here to remember that day, those who survive honoring those who've taken their final flight.

Members of the Company Grade Officers' Council at Charleston AFB, S.C., traveled to Columbia, S.C., April 19 to experience first hand the 60th Reunion of the Doolittle Raiders.

Capt. Joseph Trechter, 1st Combat Camera Squadron, said he saw something about the reunion and decided to pursue it as both a way to learn more about Air Force history and a way to tell CAFB's story.

Trechter and other CGOC members set up poster boards explaining the C-17 mission at the Adams Mark Hotel, where a variety of Raiders-related memorabilia was on display. Raiders were also on hand to sign autographs for the public.

"I met a guy who flew the P-47 (Thunderbolt) in the Pacific," said 1st Lt. Pat McCoy, 14th Airlift Squadron pilot. "It was kind of interesting to get that perspective."

Another CGOC member met another example of living Air Force history.

"While standing in front of an F-4U Corsair, an elderly gentleman asked me to snap a photo for him," said Capt. Jeffrey Gray, 1st Combat Camera Squadron. "Through conversation, I learned that he had worked on F-4Us during World War II and the Korean War. He had not seen one in person since he'd come home from the Korean War and was very excited to talk about it."

Gray said the man's story was inspirational.

"At 81-years-old, he took up playing guitar and harmonica and was already performing in front of others," Gray said. "Despite the death of his wife, he was forging ahead, learning new things and living to the fullest he could. A very nice guy, with a lesson for all of us."

Gray said he choose to attend the event to pick up a piece of history.

"I belong to the American Legion, and I always enjoy going to veteran events," said Gray. "The World War II generation is slipping away from us at an increasing rate, and we should take the time now to learn what we can from them."

McCoy said he also talked to the pilots of some of the B-25 Mitchell bombers, on display at the Columbia-Owens Downtown Airport.

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“They’re involved in preserving the B-25 so they can continue to showcase it to today’s generation,” McCoy said. “They can’t really appreciate it if they never see it.”

Seeing is disbelieving in the case of the propeller-driven aircraft.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, Dec.7, 1941, enemy forces overran one base after another in the Pacific. Seeing the slump in American morale, President Franklin Roosevelt wanted a daring air assault into the heart of enemy territory to boost spirits and prove the United States capable of retaliation for the unprovoked attack.

That daring assault came to life April 18, 1942, when then Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle led 16 B-25 bombers off the deck of the USS Hornet, a Navy carrier. The raid resulted in the bombing of five major cities in the Japanese islands, including the capital city, Tokyo.

Doolittle knew it was possible to launch the bombers from the Hornet, using only 460 feet of the carrier’s deck, even though the aircraft were heavily loaded with bombs and extra fuel for the expected 1,600 mile flight. They were to depart the carrier 400 miles from Japan, hit their targets and then fly another 1,200 to friendly bases in China.

But all did not go according to plan. At 3:10 a.m. the day of the raid, radar operators on the USS Enterprise spotted what turned out to be a Japanese vessel on their screens. The fleet changed course and avoided the ship, but this was just the first of many circumstances that conspired to jeopardize the mission.

At daylight, the Enterprise launched patrol aircraft, which soon found another vessel about 40 miles from the fleet. The task force soon discovered something American intelligence efforts failed to pick up. Japan had stationed hundreds of fishing boats with radios in a picket line 600-800 miles off the coast. About an hour after daybreak, crew members of the cruiser USS Vincennes spotted one of these fishing boats about 12 miles away. Cannons from the USS Nashville sank the boat, but it was too late. Intercepted Japanese radio transmissions revealed the boat had already relayed the fleet’s position to Japan. Although Doolittle’s raiders were 700 miles from the coast, instead of the 400 miles planned for, it was decided to launch them at once.

The first B-25 left the Hornet at 8:25 a.m., with Doolittle at the controls. All 16 aircraft launched safely and went on to drop their bombs on oil stores, factory areas and military installations on the Japanese islands before heading out across the East China Sea.

Things didn’t get any easier for the Raiders. Night was approaching, and the B-25s were running low on fuel. The weather deteriorated rapidly. The crews realized they could not reach the Chinese airfields as planned. With the exception of one crew that diverted to Vladivostok, Russia, they were forced to bail out, ditch at sea or crash-land.

Stuck in Japanese-occupied China, many of the crews went into hiding. With the help of friendly Chinese, some of the crews escaped to “Free China.”

On Aug. 15, 1942, the Swiss Consulate General in Shanghai revealed that eight American flyers were prisoners of the Japanese Police in that city. Of the eight, three were executed and one died from mistreatment and deplorable conditions. The remaining four spent the war as prisoners and weren’t released until it was over.

Doolittle thought the attack was a failure, due to the total loss of aircraft. However, the raid resulted in a tremendous boost in American morale and caused the Japanese to revise their strategy of conquest. Japanese forces attacked Midway two months after the Doolittle operation with a huge task force. They lost the resulting battle, as American planes sank four aircraft carriers and caused the enemy to withdraw.

Each of Doolittle’s Raiders received the Distinguished Flying Cross for their efforts in the mission. Two Raiders also received the Silver Star for valor in helping their fellow Raiders.

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Doolittle was promoted to brigadier general, skipping entirely the rank of colonel. He also received the Medal of Honor from Roosevelt for his gallantry in leading the mission.

They watched the sun rise that morning, with no idea what was to come. Not one of those ordinary men knew they'd come home extraordinary heroes.

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