

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

## ***Two Important WWII Combat Missions, Only a Year Apart***

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**KEY WORDS:** Jimmy Doolittle B-25 Tokyo Raid "Frog Low" Nancheng  
Yamamoto Ugaki John Mitchell P-38 Lanphier Barber Holmes Hine

*The Doolittle Raid on Tokyo and the Yamamoto mission were very important to the U.S. victory in the Pacific War, both on the military side and on the morale side. The first was a desperate attempt to slow the Japanese onslaught early in the War and give those on the Home Front a boost, the second was an important step on the path to victory. Both occurred on April 18, the first in 1942, the second in 1943.*

### **Doolittle Raids Japan**

The United States and its Navy had been dealt a serious blow at Pearl Harbor, but in reality, it could have been much worse. The aircraft carriers that were the primary target were at sea, and the battleships they did hit were already too old and slow for fleet operations, and all but two were raised and returned to service late in the War. Had the Japanese concentrated their attack on the large fuel tank farm at Pearl and its submarine base, and then blockaded Oahu with their submarines, far more lasting damage would have been achieved.

Pearl Harbor had a dramatic effect on the U.S. population. Of course, everyone was "fightin' mad," and we quickly unified against the foe that used a surprise attack before war was declared. The Japanese had intended to inform the Roosevelt government that they were declaring war just before the bombs started falling in Hawaii, thereby technically avoiding it being a surprise attack in name, but it wouldn't have mattered. Japan was now our mortal enemy.

True to Yamamoto's prediction, the Japanese military ran wild after Pearl, making big advances across the southwest Pacific. Our Navy had lost a lot of public confidence, the blame game was well underway, and FDR knew that some sort of victory, however symbolic, would do wonders for morale across the board. But what sort of victory was possible in the short term?

Ideas came in from various sources, but the one FDR liked best actually came from a submarine guy, Francis "Frog" Low.

The plan was for AAF medium bombers to be loaded on one of our fleet carriers and be used for a shuttle attack, from carrier to Japan to friendly bases in China. It was going to be difficult, because the carriers of that era did not have launching catapults. The planes had to use the deck as a runway, one that was much, much shorter than that usually required to get a fully-

fueled and bomb-laden medium bomber aloft. And, of course, there was no way for a medium bomber to land on a carrier, so once launched, the bombers were committed.

Planning began immediately, and pilots and crews were selected. James H. Doolittle, a very famous speed racer pilot in the 1930s, was selected to command the mission. He evaluated several bomber types, and selected the B-25 "Mitchell" medium bomber. Two carriers and their supporting ships were assigned to the mission; the *USS Hornet* would carry the bombers (lashed to the flight deck and preventing any flight operations until the bombers had taken off) and the *USS Enterprise* would handle all other flight operations for the first half of the mission.

Numerous modifications to the B-25s were made in order to reduce their weight (hence, take off run). Armor plate and some aerial machine guns were deleted. Additional fuel tanks, including five-gallon gas cans, were added. Sixteen bombers would be used for the mission. Each would carry four 500-pound bombs, three high explosive and one a bundle of incendiary sticks.

The short-takeoff and other training was finished, the crews were ready, but the planes still needed some work. The *Hornet's* task force sailed from San Francisco on the morning of April 2, 1942. The naval blimp *L-8* brought out critical parts the next day, and lowered them aboard the *Hornet* by 'sky crane.'" A few days later, mission commander William F. Halsey, aboard TF-16 built around *Enterprise*, rendezvoused with the *Hornet* group, and off they went. Escorting ships comprised three heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, eight destroyers, and two fleet oilers. The ships sailed west under the strictest radio silence.

The oilers topped off the fleet on the afternoon of the 17<sup>th</sup>, and then moved in to attack, expecting to launch late the following evening. However, the fleet encountered a radio-equipped picket boat about 650 miles from Japan, about 12 hours of steaming from the planned launch point. The light cruiser *Nashville* moved in to sink the picket, but its radio warning was heard before that could happen.

Now Halsey and Doolittle faced some tough choices. They were already within range of land-based bombers, who now had their position. If they continued onward, they would almost certainly face an aerial attack that would swamp the *Enterprise's* joint combat air patrol. If they launched Doolittle's force immediately and reversed course at flank speed, they could outrun both aerial and naval pursuit. But launching so early would severely impact Doolittle's mission, and their chance for survival. Instead of launching at night, bombing in the morning, and getting to their Chinese bases by nightfall, they'd have to find their Chinese airfields in the dark, an almost impossible task given the primitive navigational aids available.

Doolittle was just as aggressive as Halsey, so there was no hesitation. They launched immediately.

Numerous targets in and around Tokyo, and a few other sites, were attacked successfully. Sixteen tons of bombs couldn't do any real damage, but this mission was more about image and "face" anyway. Fifteen of the bombers made it as far as the Chinese coast; the sixteenth, very short of fuel, flew to the USSR instead rather than ditch into the sea. They made it to a field

near Vladivostok, where their aircraft was confiscated and they were interned. They were released after a few weeks and made their way circuitously to friendly territory in Iran by mid-May.

The other fifteen flew on until their fuel was exhausted, and all of them either crash landed or had the crew bail out. The B-25s had flown almost 2500 miles, far beyond their normal combat range. Two crews were missing (10 men total) and three crewmen were KIA (one by parachute failure and two by drowning when their aircraft ditched off the coast). The other 13 crews found friendly Chinese forces that helped them get to safety.

A total of eight men were captured by the Japanese. We did not learn much of their fate until October 19, when the Japanese announced that eight had been captured and sentenced to death, but that some had received a commutation to life imprisonment. Further information as to their fate came during the war crimes trial for the officer in Shanghai that managed their case. The pilots of the two B-25s and one of the tail gunners were executed on the claim that they had purposely strafed and killed civilians. One other died of malnutrition during captivity. The other four were released at the end of the War; all four are now deceased.

All 80 crewmen on the mission received the DFC and a decoration from the Chinese government. Two crewmen also received the Silver Star for helping their colleagues escape. Doolittle personally insisted that every mission participant would receive a promotion, and they did. A number of them returned to combat, where 12 would be KIA, and one was shot down over Germany, imprisoned, and participated in the "Great Escape."

### **Aftermath**

The Japanese were extremely cruel to any Chinese they thought might have helped the Americans escape, and they wanted to be sure that no part of China could be used to support bombing attacks on their home islands in the future. The bishop of the 50,000-person town of Nancheng (not Nanking) had helped the American escapees a lot. In retaliation, the Japanese completely destroyed the entire city, and killed many of its inhabitants. They then proceeded on a brutal scorched earth campaign, including biological warfare (cholera, typhoid, plague, and dysentery); the Chinese claim 250,000 died as the result. The diseases cared little for their targets, about 1700 Japanese troops were killed by them, too. The bitter memories of these atrocities, and others that the Chinese suffered, still affect attitudes today.

Operations in China diverted the attention of many military units away from useful defense duties in the Solomons and elsewhere. The Japanese were also concerned we might try to attack the home islands from bases in the Aleutians, so they diverted a couple of carriers and other forces there, capturing two islands that served them no useful purpose; they would have been more useful at Midway in June.

The Japanese naval leadership had boasted to the Japanese people that the U.S. would never be able to attack the home islands, so they suffered a severe loss of prestige and "face." Any naval officer who realized the futility of a protracted war with the U.S. was overruled. Any resistance to Admiral Yamamoto being installed as the top naval officer was immediately

quashed, and he resolved fervently to destroy the American carrier forces as priority one. The Japanese Navy and Army often quarreled over resources and military strategy; Doolittle's raid tipped the scales to the Army for quite a while.

Even worse for the Japanese was the boon the raid gave to the U.S. codebreakers. The raid generated enormous amounts of emergency radio traffic, some of it coded, some of it in the clear. Our codebreakers made big inroads into the code, which paid dividends long after the attack, until the premature code change a few months later. But some of what we learned from the raid-generated intel stayed useful for the duration.

Morale soared in the U.S. when word of the attack was released. Doolittle was a national hero. He was promoted to Lieutenant General and sent to the ETO, where he commanded the Twelfth (North Africa), Fifteenth (Mediterranean), and Eighth (Europe) Air Forces.

Doolittle was active in a number of fields, and held numerous board posts, etc. in the post-War years. But there was one area of particular interest to *Air and Space this Week*....

Doolittle met Robert Goddard in the 1930s and was impressed with the potential rocketry had for future military operations. He worked with RHG on rocket fuel development, and with the Guggenheim Foundation to help Goddard receive adequate funding for his research.

After WWII, Doolittle, now on inactive status, was appointed a special assistant to the Air Force's Chief of Staff, advising on the Air Force's future role in ballistic missile and manned space programs. In 1958/59, he served as the Chair of NACA, NASA's precursor organization. When NASA was established, he was offered the Administrator position. He was in his mid-60s by that time, and declined the position and retired from his Air Force Reserve position. He didn't completely stop working; he served as Chairman of the Board for TRW Space Technology Laboratories for several years thereafter. He received numerous awards, accolades, and other acknowledgements of his accomplishments, and passed away on September 27, 1993. He was buried at Arlington with fullest military honors, but instead of a "Missing Man" formation overflight, a lone B-25 was brought out of retirement and flown over the ceremony, accompanied by more modern bombers from his former Eighth Air Force.

### **Mitchell Leads the Yamamoto Mission**

One year to the day after the launch of the Doolittle raid against the Japanese home islands, another intrepid attack group scored a major victory in the northern Solomon Islands with the shooting down of Japanese admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the architect of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Yamamoto was one of the few Japanese leaders well-known to U.S. naval brass. He had spent time in the U.S. in the 1930s as a military attaché. He loved playing poker with his American counterparts, and he came to appreciate greatly the industrial strength of his future foe. He recognized that any war with the U.S. would have to be a quick hit, followed by peace negotiations that solidified Japanese gains, because he knew Japan could not win a protracted war should the Americans prove more tenacious than thought.

When Yamamoto got the assignment to plan an attack on the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor, he saluted and obeyed, but with the warning that Japan could catch the U.S. unprepared for war and run wild for six months. After that, victory could not be assured. He was spot on. The Japanese did enjoy a few months of success after success, pushing the U.S. out of the Philippines and the Australians and Dutch out of many places in the southwest Pacific. But the Japanese advance was blunted at the Battle of the Coral Sea, which prevented Japan from capturing the Australian base at Port Moresby, in southern Papua New Guinea. The battle took place in early May, *exactly six months after Pearl Harbor, just as Yamamoto had foreseen*. The U.S. lost the aircraft carrier *Lexington*, but inflicted a lot of damage on two large Japanese carriers, especially to their flight crews, a loss that would keep both out of the next carrier battle...

One month after Coral Sea, the Japanese tried to take over strategically-located Midway Island. Their plans were known to us through the extraordinary codebreaking work by Joseph Rochefort and his talented team in Honolulu. We were able to lay an ambush by three carriers on the Japanese carrier force, timing our attack to catch the Japanese servicing aircraft from their first strike, their decks covered with fueling hoses and bombs. In five short minutes, the heart of the Japanese naval attack capability was destroyed. Japan's offensive lasted but seven months; they would spend the rest of the Pacific War on the defensive.

Even after his sound defeat at Midway, Yamamoto was still America's #1 enemy in the PTO, primarily because of his role in planning the Pearl Harbor attack, but to some degree because he was one of the few Japanese commanders known to the U.S. Navy personally. It was easier to motivate our fighters if the enemy had a known "face."

The codebreakers kept working hard. As related in a previous Item, their task was made more difficult by reporters and politicians shooting their mouths off in forums the Japanese could monitor. Our operations at Guadalcanal and the battles that raged around it in the second half of 1942 were very adversely affected by a premature code change by the Japanese, likely due to those careless disclosures. But our codebreakers gradually regained the ability to decipher the Japanese naval code by the new year, 1943.

The intelligence the codebreakers were producing was gaining in importance, and then a message came through of profound significance – Admiral Yamamoto was making a swing through the northern Solomon Islands to rally the troops, and the intercepted message gave his whole itinerary. Yamamoto had a well-known penchant for punctuality, and his trip would (barely) take him into P-38 range from Guadalcanal.

Should the U.S. try to shoot him down on this trip? Moral considerations about targeting a specific leader for death were considered briefly and then cast aside. More importantly, would the sudden appearance of a squadron of P-38s at exactly the right place and time tip the Japanese that their codes were again unsecure? Possibly. But the value of the target was deemed high enough to justify that risk. Besides, a series of raids could be conducted in the weeks following the Yamamoto attack to make it seem like the Americans just got lucky when they started a sustained P-38 campaign against Rabaul.

Captain John Mitchell was given the task of planning the attempt to shoot down Yamamoto. He devised a meticulous plan that would have his 16 P-38s fly a circuitous route from Guadalcanal to Bougainville Island in the northern Solomons. They had to stay far from other islands in order not to be seen by Japanese coastwatchers, and they'd have to stay down very low to avoid any Japanese radar. Mitchell divided his team into two groups, a flight of four that would attack the "Betty" bomber carrying Yamamoto and a three-flight group that would fly top cover. He also had two additional P-38s flying along on stand-by, should any of the others have mechanical problems early in the mission. Good thing, for one plane had a tire blowout in its takeoff run. The substitutes, Besby Frank Holmes and his wingman, Ray Hine, took the place of the damaged plane and its wingman.

The P-38s followed Mitchell's flight plan to the letter. It was a harrowing flight. They were very low (some of the planes got wet from the spray kicked up from the planes in front of them), so constant attention was required from each pilot. Navigation was difficult, too, because the pilots were out of sight of land for an extended period. They flew by compass, airspeed indicator, and stop watch, all while keeping a very close watch on their altitude. And if that weren't difficult enough, Mitchell's plan required the P-38s to fly to the limit of their range, they had very, very low fuel reserves, especially if they had to fight at the target.

Mitchell's plan worked perfectly, and the Japanese planes were seen right on schedule. The P-38s climbed rapidly, and the four attackers aimed at the Japanese planes ahead. They were surprised to see not one Betty, but two, with an escort of six Zero fighters above and behind.

Whole books have been written about the few minutes that followed. A short synopsis of the action follows. The Japanese sighted the Americans climbing for altitude ahead. The Bettys split up and dove for the deck; the Zeros were out of position but followed. Tom Lanphier turned his P-38 to counter the diving Zeros, while his wingman, Rex Barber, followed the lead Betty to the Bougainville coast. Barber's account had him get directly astern of the Betty, and devastate it with his concentrated .50 caliber machine guns until it crashed in the jungle. Lanphier came charging in, and claimed that he shot down that Betty with a difficult 90° deflection shot, knocking off a wing before the Betty crashed in the jungle below. Spoiler alert: Barber was right. Analysis of the crashed Betty, and the wounds on Yamamoto's body, showed that almost all the damage to the Betty while it was aloft was caused by fire from directly astern, and that it had both wings attached until it hit the jungle trees. Lanphier risked this plane in its low-fuel state to get back to Guadalcanal before the others to claim victory (knowing that the pilot that got Yamamoto would be very famous). Barber stopped at an advance base to refuel before getting home. Let's just say that code security was temporarily ignored in the celebration that followed.

I'm not going to delve any further into the Lanphier vs. Barber dispute that continues to this day; I'll let the verdict of history rest in the hands of noted naval historians like Carroll Glines and others, who clearly prefer Barbers' claim.

Truth be told, the real hero of the Yamamoto mission was John Mitchell. He planned the mission (no mean feat), he made sure his pilots were up to the task, and he made sure the plan

was followed to the letter. And only one of his pilots was lost on what was an extremely dangerous mission.

I'd like to focus now on the other two attacking P-38s, since they shot down the other Betty, one carrying Vice Admiral Matomi Ugaki, Yamamoto's Chief of Staff. His plane went down over the water adjacent to Bougainville, and Ugaki and two others survived the crash. Neither Lanphier nor Barber were anywhere near this Betty, and credit has to go to Holmes.

All of the pilots did their jobs properly. Lanphier's turn into the covering Zeros was heroic, and his move likely gave Barber the opportunity to shoot down Yamamoto's Betty. Holmes (and perhaps Hine) did a number on Ugaki's Betty. The six covering Zeros survived (potentially negating both Lanphier's and Holmes' credits), but the situation was quite confused, there were Zeros arriving on the combat scene from the nearby base, and the Japanese record-keeping was "imprecise."

Besby Frank Holmes was born and raised in San Francisco, and was fascinated by flying at an early age when he saw AAF aviators training in their P-26 "Peashooters" over San Francisco Bay. He attended SF Community College, got the necessary minimum education, and applied to become an AAF cadet. He was accepted, and entered service in March, 1941. He trained at Oxnard, Bakersfield, and then Luke Field, outside Phoenix, where he got to fly the same P-26s he had seen ten years before, still with an open cockpit and non-retractable landing gear.

War clouds were on the horizon, and his Luke class was sent to Hawaii immediately after completing training. He was checked out the Curtiss P-36, the precursor to the P-40 Warhawk, on December 6. It was a big step forward for him.

He had a friend whose cousin was the assistant manager of the famed Royal Hawaiian hotel. They wrangled a room there (way too expensive for them to afford if it weren't for his friend's cousin) and even a blind date to celebrate his move to the P-36. They really tied one on.

The next morning Holmes managed to pull himself together to attend church, during which all hell broke loose. Holmes and his pal commandeered a car and headed for Wheeler Field. They saw the *USS Arizona* get hit severely as they drove by. As soon as they got there, a line sergeant handed Holmes a helmet, a parachute, a pistol, and a P-36. Recall he flew one for the first time less than 24 hours before (and he had a major hangover)! A Val dive bomber dove on them as they ran across the field to the plane. Holmes fired at the Val with the pistol, to no visible effect, finally making it to cover near P-36. The sergeant loaded ammo and helped Holmes with various gun switches and other controls, and off he flew. He reconnoitered around Oahu, drawing lots of inept defensive fire. He saw no trace of the attacking forces, but he did get an eyeful of the damage sustained at Pearl.

A few months later, Holmes was assigned to the 67<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron and sent to Guadalcanal, arriving on August 22, 1943, a mere two weeks after the invasion. They flew P-39s and its export version, the P-400. The plane had an odd design, with the engine amidships behind the pilot, who straddled the drive shaft. The original model of the P-39 was fairly maneuverable, but so much weight was added to make it combat-worthy that it became inadequate as an air-

superiority fighter. The Zeros found them “easy meat.” However, their odd design allowed them more forward firepower than most other planes, and the 67<sup>th</sup> soon discovered their mounts were excellent at ground attack. The Zeros may have laughed at the P-39, but the Japanese ground troops feared the “Long-nose fighters.” These were the “Dark Days” on Guadalcanal, very tough duty, but Holmes survived and left the Island on October 3.

A number of the 67<sup>th</sup> pilots rotated out of combat temporarily after Guadalcanal had been secured (Feb '43). Dale Brannon (CO), Holmes, and some others filled out the 339<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron. Better fighter planes were just then becoming available, and the 339<sup>th</sup> was equipped with P-38s and based back on Guadalcanal. Their mission was different now, to project power against targets further north in the Solomon Islands chain. Their planes could actually reach as far as the Japanese bastion of Rabaul, a volcano complex on the eastern tip of the island of New Britain.

Holmes flew the Yamamoto mission as a stand-in for one of the planes in the attacking flight after it had suffered a mechanical abort. Holmes had difficulty dropping his external fuel tank at first, then he and his wingman followed the second Betty bomber that day, the one that carried Admiral Ugaki and dove for the wavetops rather than the jungle. He was also in a general melee with the six escort Zeros, and those that came out from the nearby base too late. Holmes was credited with the bomber and one Zero that day, and was awarded the Navy Cross. It was his last in combat. He had an official tally of five victories and four probables. He later flew in Korea and has a Legion of Merit from Vietnam. I couldn't find out much else about his military career. He passed on July 23, 2007.

1Lt. Raymond K. Hine was Holmes' wingman that day. He apparently had sustained damage to his left engine, and headed south toward Guadalcanal with Zeros in hot pursuit. Mitchell saw his plane trailing smoke, as did Holmes and a PBY patrol plane. Alas, Hine didn't make it, going down in the vicinity of the Shortland Islands.

The accounts as related above cover the salient points of both missions, but a full treatment is much more involved. You can find car-load lots of information about either in the sources listed below.

## REFERENCES

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The Wikipedia article on the Doolittle Raid has a lot of information about the aftermath of the Raid and individuals who flew it: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doolittle\\_Raid](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doolittle_Raid).

And many others!

### **Yamamoto mission**

Many books and articles have been written about the Yamamoto mission. I used:

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Raymond Hine: <https://pacificwrecks.com/aircraft/p-38/hine.html>

**Didja Know:** A touching moment in the funeral for General Jimmy Doolittle was the overflight by a B-25 accompanied by more modern bombers from his former Eighth Air Force. Perhaps even a more poignant moment came when one of his great-grandsons, Paul Dean Crane, Jr., played *Taps*.

Last Edited on 11 April 2021