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Why the Doolittle Raid Still Matters 75 Years Later

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By Steve Feinstein

History is always relevant if we're willing to learn from it. A good example is the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo Japan on April 18, 1942. By way of quick background, the United States was forced into World War II after the surprise Japanese attack on our naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Japan had been aggressively moving against other countries in the Pacific realm for several years, taking territory and raw materials to satisfy its expansionist aims. The Japanese correctly saw the U.S. Pacific Fleet, stationed at Pearl, as the biggest threat to their continued activities and so devised a plan to mount a surprise attack on Dec. 7, 1941 against our forces. The surprise worked. The attack sank or disabled eight of the nine battleships in the Fleet (only the USS *Pennsylvania*, in dry dock, escaped major damage), destroyed dozens of aircraft on the ground and killed over 2,300 U.S. military and civilian personnel, all for the loss of only 29 Japanese aircraft.

The following day, Dec. 8, 1941, the Japanese attacked our main air base in the western Pacific, Clark Field in the Philippines, destroying dozens of U.S. fighters and bombers on the ground, effectively neutralizing our military strength in that region. Therefore, in less than two days, the Japanese dealt the U.S. military two huge defeats, setting the stage for the fall of the Philippines and leaving the entire Pacific essentially unprotected from Japanese attack.

What is less known but unquestionably just as significant as the dual attacks on Pearl Harbor and Clark Field is the Japanese sinking of the British warships *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* in the South China Sea, just three days after Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 10, 1941. The British had dispatched significant naval forces to protect their interests in the Pacific, especially then-colony Singapore, from Japanese aggression. Britain, although a relatively small country in terms of land mass and population, had long been among the world's pre-eminent naval powers. From Admiral Nelson's many decisive victories in the late 1700s-early 1800s (culminating with his defeat of Napoleon's fleet off of Trafalgar in 1805) to Admiral Jellicoe's leading the British Grand Fleet in all-out battleship warfare against the Germans' High Seas Fleet at Jutland in 1916, to the powerful mastery of the seas enjoyed by the



Royal Navy right through the beginning of World War II, British naval tradition was a source of national pride and identity, very much part of the fabric of their culture.

Only seven months prior (in May 1941), *Prince of Wales* had played a central role in one of the greatest wartime triumphs ever achieved by Britain: the sinking of the German battleship *Bismarck*. The *Bismarck*—a fast, modern, heavily-armed ship—was intended to be a North Atlantic commerce and cargo ship raider. If it managed to break out into the vast undefended expanse of the North Atlantic, it would be free to extract potentially crippling losses from the nation-saving material assistance coming over to England by convoy from the U.S. “Sink the *Bismarck*!” became a national rallying cry in Britain in May 1941, as the deadly German ship attempted to make its way into the open waters of the Atlantic.

The Brits sank it, and the *Prince of Wales* played a major part, inflicting the initial damage on the *Bismarck* that led to its eventual demise. If ever an inanimate object—a warship—could become a national hero, the *Prince of Wales* did.

As stunned and shocked as America was after Pearl Harbor and Clark Field, Britain’s response was one of utter disbelief and horrified astonishment over the sinking of *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales*. As 1941 turned into 1942, the Philippines were falling to the Japanese in yet another humiliating defeat for America, Britain was deadlocked in a bitter struggle of attrition against the Germans in North Africa and Germany was inflicting incredible casualties on the Russians on the Eastern front.

The allies—led by America and Britain—were losing everywhere. Morale was low. Eventual victory seemed impossible. Something needed to be done. A bold, unexpected stroke to rock Japan back on its heels and give a beleaguered public something to cheer about.

President Roosevelt and Army Air Corps Lt. Colonel James Doolittle came up with a daring plan: Strike Japan from the air, using carrier-launched planes. Attack Tokyo, right over the heart of Japan, when Japan was at its militarily-invincible height. In a stroke of immeasurable luck, America’s aircraft carriers were not at Pearl Harbor at the time of the Japanese attack. They were out at sea on maneuvers. In a stroke of immeasurable strategic shortsightedness, Japanese Admiral Yamamoto elected to withdraw his forces back to Japan instead of ordering a follow-up strike, in spite of the fact that Pearl’s air cover was gone. A follow-up attack could well have finished off the U.S. Navy completely, since the carriers returned to Pearl later that day.



But the Japanese didn’t strike again and America’s carrier force was intact. So the plan was this: assemble a task force centered around the carrier USS *Hornet* and sail towards Japan. Once the force was about 400 miles away, they’d launch their planes and then reverse

direction for a fast escape.

The Navy had no planes that could fly 400 miles to Japan, then fly several hundred more into China, where the plan was they'd land in more-or-less friendly territory and the crews would then somehow make it back home.

Doolittle decided to use 16 twin-engined Army B-25 medium bombers to fly off the *Hornet*. The B-25 had the range and payload capability that was needed for the mission, far in excess of any Navy plane then in service. Flying a large two-engine medium bomber off a carrier's deck had never been done before. The crews of five practiced for weeks on land airstrips painted to the *Hornet*'s dimensions. The B-25's themselves were stripped of all unnecessary weight to make the task easier: The bottom gun turret was removed, the upper and side guns were taken out and replaced with wooden broomsticks painted black to look like guns, the heavy precision Norden bombsight was removed and replaced by a lighter, simpler device, and extra fuel tanks were installed to extend the planes' range.

En route to target, the ships encountered a Japanese fishing trawler about 800 miles out from Japan. (Different reports over the years have put this distance anywhere from 170 miles beyond the 400 mile out launch point—570 miles out—to 400 miles short of the launch point—800 miles out.) The boat was quickly sunk by gunfire from an accompanying U.S. escort cruiser, but there was no way to determine if the trawler was just a harmless fishing vessel or a radio-equipped spy ship disguised to look like a fishing boat. Unsure if their cover had been blown, Doolittle's planes either had to launch immediately or the task force had to turn around.

All 80 of the B-25 crews said, "We go now!" Not a single dissent among the group, all of whom had volunteered for what was almost certainly a suicide mission.

Incredibly, all 16 planes—heavily-laden with fuel and bombs—took off successfully and headed towards Japan. They achieved complete surprise, struck a factory complex and flew away towards China without a single loss. It was a total success and the Japanese military planners and public alike were indeed awestruck and rocked back on their heels. Not even five months after Pearl Harbor, amidst never-ending catastrophic news from every front around the world, American boldness and unfathomable bravery struck a blow for the allies and their people, lifting the morale and spirits of everyone, everywhere, to an incalculable degree.

This was presidential leadership at its finest. Roosevelt understood the need for our country, and the British too, to have a "victory," to buttress the will of the people to go on fighting, to end the string of bad news. The Doolittle mission didn't accomplish anything of great material significance—the number of planes was too few, their bomb loads too small—and the idea of risking the loss of an invaluable American carrier task force for what was, in all candor,



simply a publicity stunt was total lunacy, from both a logical and strategic standpoint.

However, rallying public support behind a difficult nationally-shared concern of major import is as important a task as a president has. George W. Bush was able to garner similar support and enthusiasm when he stood among the 9/11 ruins with a bullhorn and said, “..and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!” Presidents Kennedy and Reagan were similarly and legitimately inspirational, any number of times.

But recent presidents seem instead to get caught in the lower-level minutia-du-jour, whether it’s saying that a local town police force acted stupidly or proclaiming that a hoodie-wearing troublemaker “could be my son,” or sending out electronic communications regarding an individual’s physical appearance. It’s been awhile since we’ve heard a president lead a rally for public support of a great national scientific effort or deliver a reassuringly-fatherly address after a national emergency or tragedy. How long has it been since a president has presented the country with a reasoned, logical, non-condescending explanation of why the country is about to embark on a difficult course that will result in the betterment of our situation in the long run?

History is a good teacher. Roosevelt’s decision to green-light the seemingly illogical Doolittle Raid serves as an excellent example of the sort of bold, big-picture, for-national-benefit actions a president should take. Actions that today seem to get lost too often in the instantaneous chaos of media-driven small-minded partisan conflict.

Epitaph—Results of the Doolittle Raid:

All 16 planes made it safely out of Japanese airspace, but being low on fuel because of the greater-than-planned flying distance, all crash-landed in either eastern China or eastern Russia. Three crewmembers were killed during the landings. Eight crewmen were captured by occupying Japanese soldiers in China; three were executed and five were imprisoned, one of whom died in captivity. The rest eventually made their way back and resumed their military service. Doolittle thought he was going to be court-martialed for losing all 16 planes and failing to get his crews home quickly, but instead, he received the Medal of Honor and a promotion to brigadier general when he returned home in June, 1942.

Sources:

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