Meeting Notes – Oct. 11, 2022

The LaFayette Rotary Club met on Tuesday, October 11, 2022, for its weekly meeting. Rotarian Dr. John Caldwell brought us the program on the Doolittle Raid. This past April marked the 80th anniversary of the raid, done in response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor the previous December 7, 1941. Two weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt announce to Admiral King that he wanted to bomb Japan ASAP. Plans were made and four months and 11 days after the Pearl Harbor bombing, on April 18, 1942, Lt. Col Jimmy Doolittle took off from the USS Hornet and led 16 B-25 bombers in the bombing of Japan. The Japanese military was expecting retaliation from the United States but was expecting it to come from carrier planes. Carrier planes had a maximum range of 300 miles to and from their aircraft carrier. The Japanese were confident they could detect and sink American ships before they could get within 400 miles of Japan.

Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle, an MIT graduate with the first degree awarded in aeronautical engineering, and a background in aviation racing, was in charge of the raid. He chose volunteers from the US Air Corp's 17th Bomber group to be trained in secret at Duke Field near Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. By the end of their training, the pilots could take off at 67 MPH in a 31,000 lb. loaded B-25 bomber in 500 feet. One pilot was actually able to take off in 267 feet.

Lt. Col. Doolittle designed and implemented modifications to the B-25s. He increased the fuel load to double the range from 1300 to 2400 miles one way. He reduced the weight of the planes to allow for additional fuel and space for 2,000 lbs. of bombs. He also increased fuel efficiency and modified the carburetors on the engines. Because he had removed the rear guns to save weight and space, he painted broom handles brown and mounted them in the rear of the plane to appear as tail guns.

The plan was, after training was complete, to fly to Alameda Air Force Base near San Francisco and be loaded on the USS Hornet. The USS Hornet would take the 15 (later 16) bombers to within 500 miles of Japan where they would take off late in the day and bomb various Japanese cities at night. They would then fly to the southern part of China where the aircraft would be turned over to General Claire Chennault and his Flying Tigers. The entire distance flown would be 2,250 miles, arriving in Chuchow, China during daylight.

So, what really happened...Upon landing at Alameda the planes were loaded on the USS Hornet. A well-intentioned ground crew technician tampered with one of the planes and replaced the "odd" carburetors with new ones. Both the USS Hornet and another carrier, the USS Enterprise, were noted by spies to be leaving their ports, heading west in the North Pacific. The Japanese were expecting a carrier attack, not a bomber attack that could reach Japan from 500+ miles and have no need to return to the carrier. The Japanese had stationed fishing boats 600-700 miles east of Japan with instructions to report any ship they saw to the Japanese military intelligence. This would allow the Japanese army, navy and air force enough warning to stop an attack.

Early in the morning of April 18, 1942, search aircraft from the USS Enterprise began finding the fishing boats some 650+ miles from Japan. One boat was actually heard transmitting a message about the carriers and warships headed toward Japan. It was obvious that secrecy was lost. The USS Hornet launched 16 Doolittle Raiders beginning at 8:17 AM through 9:19 AM, 650 miles from Japan into a 50-mph wind. None of the raiders had ever taken off from a carrier, but all made good takeoffs under terrible conditions. The first one off the USS hornet was Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle.

All of the Raiders made it to, through and out of Japan without casualties and encountered varying degrees of opposition. They bombed factories, power plants, dry docks and aircraft plants. Total casualties, both civilian and military, included 87 killed and several hundred wounded. A number of fires burned for at least 48 hours. The overall damage was small, but the loss of face, so important to the psyche of the Japanese people, was viewed as total and irreversible. The entire nation viewed the raid as an embarrassment in ways that we as Americans may not be able to comprehend. To other Oriental nations under Japan's control, the knowledge that their conquerors had been "caught with their pants down" was reportedly gleefully, if quietly, celebrated.

The Raiders were now over China, at night in terrible weather, with no beacon to guide them safely home. All of the crews, but one, were forced to bail out or crash land over China. The plane with the replaced carburetors was forced to land in Russia and its crew virtually disappeared until May of 1943. Three crewmen died in crash landings or while parachuting. All others survived although some were severely injured. Two crews, eight men in total, were captured by the Japanese. All were convicted of war crimes. Three were shot and the rest were imprisoned where one of the aviators starved to death. The other four survived the war. Over 250,000 Chinese people were murdered by Japanese soldiers in retaliation for helping the downed pilots. This viciousness is still a bone of contention in Chinese-Japanese relationships.

The results of the raid led to several actions by Japan that benefitted the US Allies as the war continued.

It forced Japan to keep a large defense force in Japan.

It forced the Japanese army in China to stay in Chima to deny airfields to the Flying Tigers and US bombers.

It sent the Japanese navy west to attack Midway Atoll and ultimately Hawaii, resulting in a defeat.

It wasted Japanese strength on an air attack in Alaska.

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