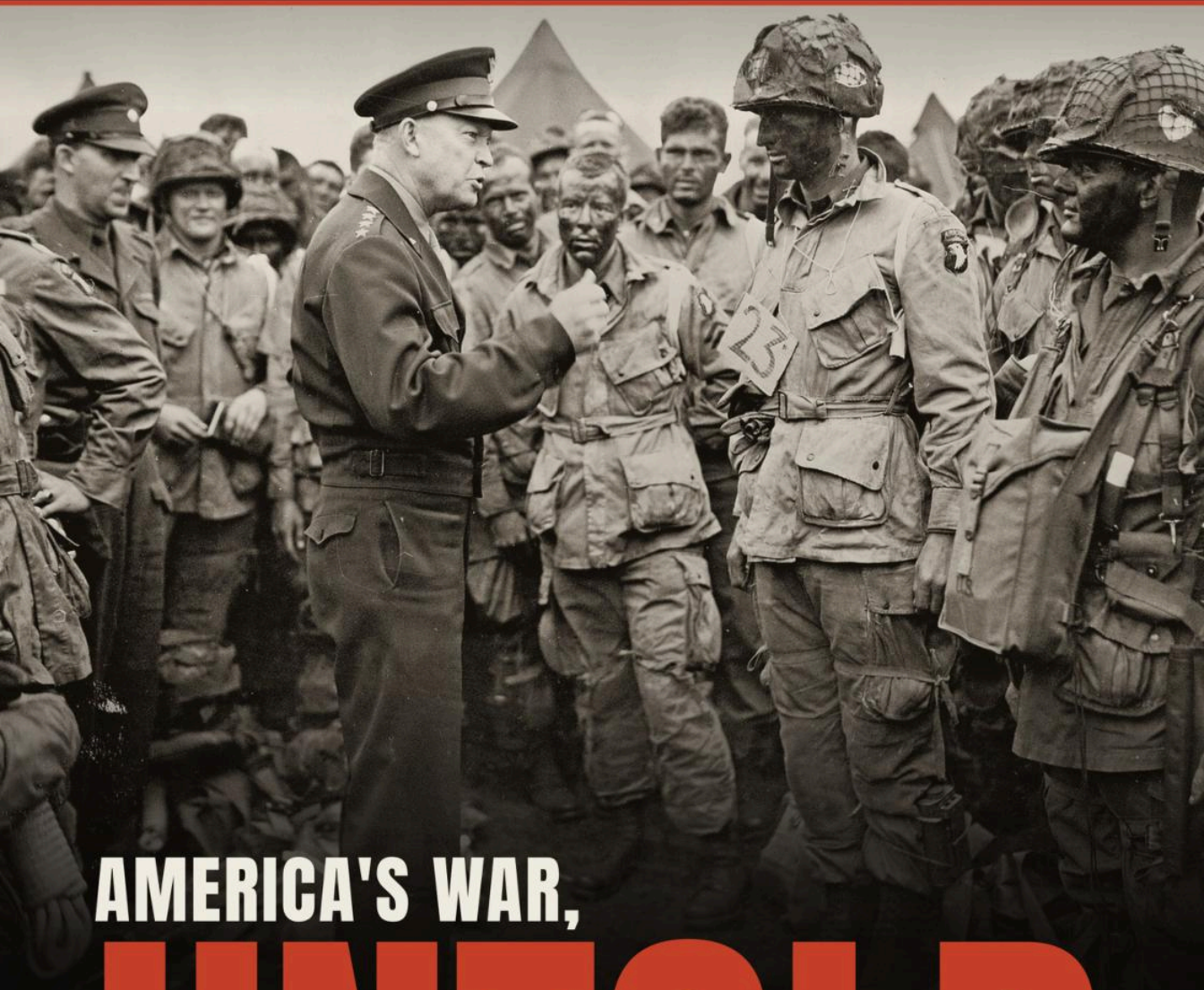
WORLD WAR II · 1941–1945

VOLUME I



# AMERICA'S WAR, UNTOLD

Thirty true stories of courage, cunning and conscience from the American side of World War II

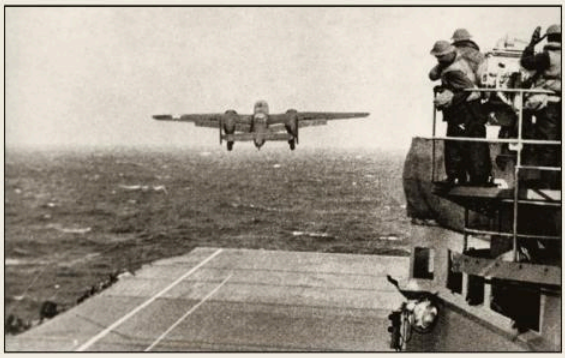
THIRTY TRUE STORIES · MAPS · ARCHIVE PHOTOGRAPHS

EMBERS OF AMERICA

WORLD WAR II · 1941–1945

# *America's War,* UNTOLD.

*Thirty true stories of courage, cunning and conscience from the American side of World War II*



VOLUME I

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

# The other war

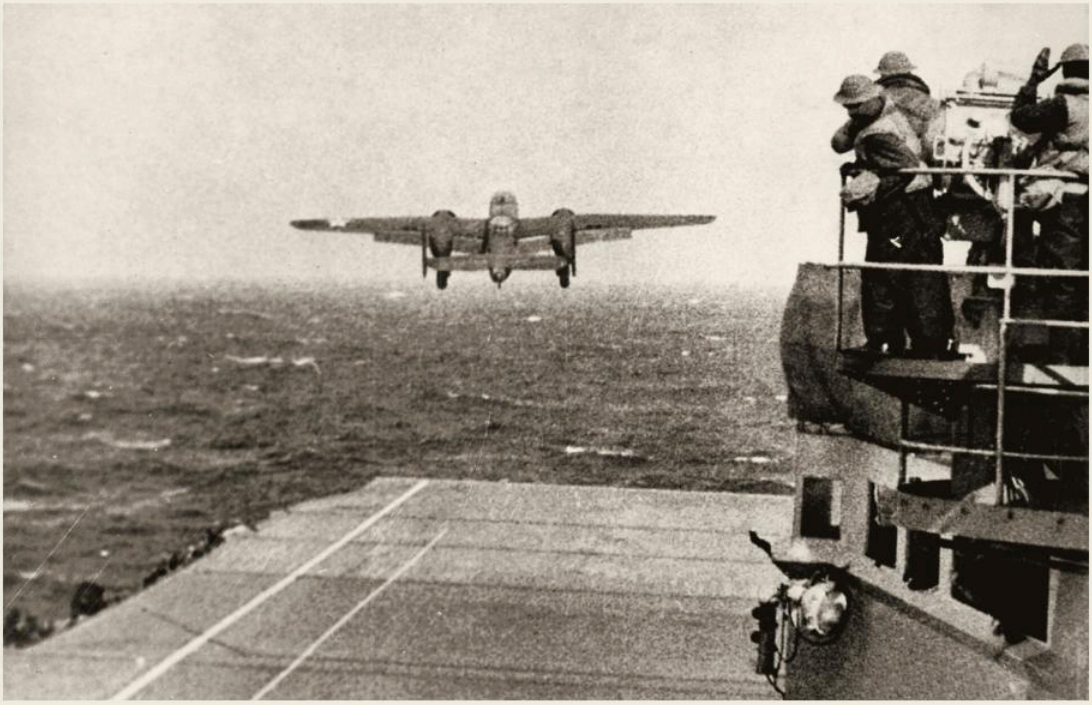
World War II is usually told with maps, arrows and numbers: sixteen million Americans in uniform, fleets of bombers, fronts that moved across whole continents. All of that is true. But between the great battles there was another war, smaller and stranger, fought by ordinary Americans who had to make impossible decisions in a few seconds, and then live with them for the rest of their lives.

A stunt pilot who led sixteen bombers off a carrier deck with no way to land them again. A medic who refused to carry a rifle and lowered wounded men down a cliff, one by one, all night. Marines who turned their grandparents' language into a code nobody could break. Artists who built an army out of rubber. A German fighter pilot who held his fire. Curators in uniform who went hunting for stolen paintings. A ship's cook who had never been trained on a machine gun. Four chaplains who gave away their life jackets. A general whose answer to a surrender demand was a single word. A sergeant who looked into the barrel of a pistol and would not point. Sons of families locked behind barbed wire at home who climbed a French mountain to save a battalion of Texans.

This book collects those stories. All of them are true and documented. Where the memories of the people involved do not match the official records, or where historians still disagree, we say so. Dialogue appears only when someone wrote it down or remembered it on the record. The photographs come from American public archives and are in the public domain.

You can read it in order or open it at any page. Each story begins with its file: the date, the place and the people who lived it. The rest, they tell.

RAID



*April 18, 1942. One of Doolittle's B-25s lifts off the pitching deck of USS Hornet, hundreds of miles from Japan.*

01

# Thirty seconds over Tokyo

*Four months after Pearl Harbor, America had no way to hit Japan. So sixteen army bombers were loaded onto a navy carrier, with fuel for a one-way trip and no plan to land them again.*

| DATE | AIRCRAFT | MEN | LEADER |
|---|---|---|---|
| April 18, 1942 | 16 B-25B Mitchells | 80 volunteers | Lt. Col. James H. Doolittle |

In the first weeks of 1942 the news from the Pacific was all bad. Pearl Harbor was still smoking, Guam and Wake Island had fallen, and the Philippines were about to. Japanese forces seemed to move wherever they wanted. President Franklin D. Roosevelt kept asking his commanders the same question: when could America strike back at Japan itself? Nobody had an answer. The home islands were thousands of miles beyond the range of any American bomber.

**MAP** **The route of the raid, April 18, 1942**




*Approximate positions and routes. The bombers split up over Japan to hit several cities.* Map data: Natural Earth.

## An impossible idea



*Wagner Field, Florida, March 1942. A B-25 in one of the raiders' practice takeoffs.*

The answer came from an unexpected place. In January, a navy submarine officer on Admiral Ernest King's staff, Captain Francis Low, was at an airfield in Norfolk, Virginia, where the outline of an aircraft carrier's deck had been painted on a runway for pilots to practice on. He watched army twin-engine bombers fly over it and had an idea: what if army medium bombers took off from a real carrier? They could never land on one again, but they could bomb Japan and fly on to friendly airfields in China.

The man chosen to make it work was Lieutenant Colonel James H. Doolittle. Before the war he had been a famous racing pilot, the first man to fly a plane purely on instruments, and one of the few pilots in the world with a doctorate in

aeronautics from MIT. He picked the North American B-25B Mitchell,[1] and he asked for volunteers for a mission that was "extremely hazardous," without telling them where they were going.

Eighty men stepped forward, mostly from the 17th Bombardment Group. At Eglin Field, in the Florida Panhandle, a navy flight instructor, Lieutenant Henry Miller, taught them to do something no bomber pilot had ever trained for: get a fully loaded B-25 into the air in a few hundred feet. Lines on the runway marked the length of a carrier deck. Mechanics stripped out everything that was not needed. Extra fuel tanks went into the bomb bay, the crawlway and the space of the lower gun turret. The secret Norden bombsight was removed and replaced by a simple aiming device made from two pieces of aluminum, designed by one of the pilots, Captain C. Ross Greening; it cost about twenty cents. In the tails, where there were no guns, the crews fitted broomsticks painted black.

**JAN 1942**
**Capt. Francis Low suggests army bombers on a carrier**

**MAR 1942**
**Crews train for short takeoffs at Eglin Field, Florida**

**APR 2**
**Hornet sails from Alameda, California**

**APR 18, MORNING**
**Picket boat sighted; Doolittle takes off first**

**APR 18, NOON**
**Bombs fall on Tokyo and five other cities**

**APR 18, NIGHT**
**Crews bail out over China; one lands in the USSR**

**MAY 19**
**Doolittle receives the Medal of Honor**

## A secret voyage

On April 2, 1942, the carrier USS Hornet sailed from Alameda, California, with sixteen bombers lashed to her flight deck. Her own fighters were stowed below; she could not fly them with the B-25s in the way. Out in the Pacific she met Vice Admiral William Halsey and the carrier Enterprise, whose planes would protect the task force. Only then were the crews told the target. The plan was to launch the bombers about 400 miles from Japan, late in the afternoon, so that they would bomb at night and reach China at dawn.

***In the tails, where there were no guns, the crews fitted broomsticks painted black.***

Secrecy was almost impossible to keep. When Hornet sailed out of San

1 *Named for Billy Mitchell, who in 1925 charged the Navy and War Departments with "almost treasonable administration of the national defense."*

bombers in plain view on her deck. People on the bridge and along the shore stared at them. The navy let it be thought that the planes were simply being ferried somewhere across the Pacific.



*A B-25 waits on Hornet's crowded deck before the launch. The tail of each bomber hung out over the stern.*

## Launch!

The plan did not survive the morning of April 18. At dawn, still some 650 miles out, the task force ran into a line of Japanese picket boats. The cruiser Nashville sank one of them, but it had already radioed a warning. Halsey and Doolittle agreed that the bombers had to go at once, in daylight, in a heavy sea, with fuel that would now barely reach the coast of China, if it reached it at all.

When the decision was made, Halsey signaled to Hornet: "Launch planes. To Colonel Doolittle and his gallant command, good luck and God bless you." Horns sounded across the ship.

## *The raid crippled Japanese industry.*

MYTH

**Fact** The physical damage was small and soon repaired. Its real weight was psychological and strategic: it shamed Japan's commanders and helped push them toward Midway.

Crews ran to their bombers through spray blowing across the deck, while sailors hurried to top off every fuel tank they could reach, and gave the crews extra cans of gasoline to pour in by hand during the flight.

Doolittle went first, with the shortest run of all: the deck ahead of his plane was about 467 feet long. A sailor with a flag timed each takeoff to the rise of the bow, so the bomber left the deck as the ship pitched upward. The heavily loaded planes dropped toward the waves, then climbed. All sixteen made it into the air. Watching from the bridge, many sailors had expected at least one to go into the sea.

**James H. Doolittle**
Raid leader and pilot of plane No. 1

**Richard E. Cole**
His co-pilot; the last surviving Raider, died 2019

**Ted W. Lawson**
Pilot of the Ruptured Duck; wrote Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo

**William F. Halsey**
Vice admiral in command of the task force

### Over Japan

Flying low, sometimes just above the water and then above the rooftops, the raiders crossed the coast of Honshu around noon and dropped their bombs on targets in Tokyo, Yokohama, Yokosuka, Nagoya, Kobe and Osaka. By coincidence, Tokyo had held an air-raid drill that morning, and some people on the ground waved, thinking the planes were part of it. One crew wired Japanese medals to a bomb: commemorative medals that Japan had given to American sailors years earlier, in peacetime. They were being returned.

The damage was small. About fifty people were killed on the ground, and the military targets that were hit were soon repaired. The effect was enormous. None of the planes reached a Chinese airfield.

| BOMBERS LAUNCHED | OF DECK FOR TAKEOFF | MILES FROM JAPAN | REACHED CHINA'S COAST |
|---|---|---|---|
| 16 | 467 ft | ≈650 | 15 |

Over the East China Sea, a tailwind helped them stretch their fuel, but darkness and rain covered the coast. One crew, short of fuel, flew north and landed near Vladivostok, in the Soviet Union, where they were interned for more than a year before they escaped through Iran.[2] The others bailed out over China or crash-landed along the shore.



*Crew 1 on Hornet's deck: Doolittle (second from left) with his co-pilot, Richard Cole, and the rest of his crew.*

**2** *Neutral toward Japan, the Soviets had to hold the crew. They crossed into Iran in May 1943; later evidence shows Soviet agents staged the escape.*

**80**

**The number**

*airmen flew the raid in sixteen B-25s. Sixty-nine of them escaped death or capture.*

## Down in China

Lieutenant Ted Lawson's bomber, the Ruptured Duck, hit the water near a beach and broke apart. Lawson was thrown through the windshield and his leg was torn open. Chinese villagers carried the injured men for days to a mission hospital, where the raid's flight surgeon, Lieutenant Thomas White, amputated Lawson's leg. Lawson later told the story in a book whose title became the most famous phrase of the raid: Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo.



*Doolittle (fifth from left) and his crew with the Chinese officials who helped them after they bailed out, April 1942.*

***The B-25 was named after General Billy Mitchell, the outspoken champion of air power who had been court-martialed in 1925 for criticizing his superiors. He died in 1936, before he could see his ideas proved in war.***

CURIOSITY

Chinese guerrillas, farmers and missionaries hid the airmen and passed them from village to village toward safety. Most of the raiders came home. Three men died in the bailouts and crashes. Eight were captured by the Japanese. Three of them, Lieutenants Dean Hallmark and William Farrow and Sergeant Harold Spatz, were executed in October 1942 after a mock trial. Lieutenant Robert Meder died in prison in 1943. The other four survived more than three years of captivity and were freed in 1945.



*May 19, 1942. President Roosevelt presents the Medal of Honor to Doolittle at the White House, with Doolittle's wife Josephine and Army leaders looking on.*

## The court-martial that never came

Doolittle himself came down in a rice paddy. His crew chief, Sergeant Paul Leonard, found him sitting beside the wreck of his plane, convinced that he had failed. He had lost all sixteen aircraft. When he got home, he expected to be court-martialed. Instead, President Roosevelt presented him with the Medal of Honor at the White House, and he was promoted two ranks, to brigadier general.

Doolittle later wrote that he told Leonard he expected to be court-martialed and sent to prison. Leonard disagreed. They would make him a general, he said, and give him the Congressional Medal of Honor. Then he promised that if Doolittle ever flew again, he would want to be his crew chief. Both predictions came true.

> ***Shangri-La.***
>
> — PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT, ASKED WHERE THE BOMBERS HAD COME FROM

When reporters asked Roosevelt where the bombers had come from, he smiled and said: "Shangri-La," the hidden valley of a popular novel. The truth stayed secret for a year. In Tokyo, the raid shamed the military leadership and helped push the Japanese navy into its plan to attack Midway, where it would lose four carriers in June 1942. In China the cost was terrible: Japanese troops swept through the provinces where the raiders had landed, punishing the villages that had helped them. Estimates of the Chinese dead run into the hundreds of thousands, and historians disagree on the exact number.

*The truth stayed secret for a year.*

## An unexpected ending

One of the captured raiders, Corporal Jacob DeShazer, survived years of solitary confinement and hunger in Japanese prisons. While in captivity he was given a Bible and read it again and again. After the war he went back to Japan as a missionary and spent some thirty years there. A pamphlet he wrote about his story was read by Mitsuo Fuchida, the pilot who had led the attack on Pearl Harbor. Fuchida became a Christian, and the two former enemies later preached together.

***"Launch planes. To Colonel Doolittle and his gallant command, good luck and God bless you."***

— VICE ADM. WILLIAM HALSEY, APRIL 18, 1942



*April 18, 1942. Doolittle's own B-25 roars off Hornet's deck at full throttle, some 650 miles from Japan.*

## Did you know?

The surviving Raiders met every year and kept 80 silver goblets, one for each man, engraved with their names. When a Raider died, his goblet was turned upside down. The last survivors made their final toast together in November 2013. Richard Cole, Doolittle's co-pilot and the last of the eighty, died in 2019 at the age of 103.

## Where to see it today

National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, Dayton, Ohio: the Raiders' silver goblets are on display, alongside a B-25 painted like Doolittle's.

YOU'VE JUST READ STORY 01 OF 30

# Twenty-nine more stories are waiting.

The medic who would not carry a gun. The code no one could break. The rubber army. The tin cans that charged. The twelve Americans of Hiroshima.

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