

## This Day in History... December 14, 1896

### Birth Of Aviator Jimmy Doolittle

James “Jimmy” Doolittle was born on December 14, 1896, in Alameda, California.

Doolittle was an early aviation pioneer who devoted 42 years of his life to service in the US Army and Air Force. While he had equals in terms of daring and bravery, Doolittle was one of the first aeronautical engineers. He was a flight leader and gunnery instructor during World War I.

Following the war, he earned fame by making several groundbreaking flights. In 1922, Doolittle was awarded the first of two Distinguished Flying Crosses for flying a de Havilland DH-4 – which was equipped with early navigational instruments – in the first cross-country flight in 21 hours and 19 minutes. Three years later, Doolittle won a race flying his Curtiss R3C with an average speed of 232 mph.



*Airmail stamp pictures a de Havilland DH-4 biplane.*

In 1927, Doolittle was the first to successfully perform an outside loop – a maneuver that was thought to be fatal. But Doolittle’s most lasting contribution may be the development of instrument flying. He was the first to imagine that pilots could use instruments to fly when their vision was restricted by the elements or conditions – which his men did during the “Doolittle Raid.”

Planning for the raid began shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. It was to be the first air raid on Japan. It launched early in the morning on April 18, 1942. Doolittle flew one of 16 B-25B bombers that were launched from the USS Hornet deep within the Western Pacific Ocean. Their targets were industrial and military installations in Japan, but the primary mission was to boost American morale.

Doolittle was a trailblazer and already famous for his daring string of aviation “firsts,” including several speed records. This mission would test those skills, as the unproven planes, their ability to launch from the aircraft carrier, and the flight distance were tremendous risk factors. The crew’s fate was also a gamble – the B-25Bs could not land on the carrier, so after dropping their bombs they were to continue on to China. Once there, the men would be vulnerable to capture by Japanese patrols.

In the end, the raid was successful and morale soared. But the cost was painful. Though none of the bombers were shot down during the raid, they were all destroyed because the pilots were unable to reach their refueling station in China. In the end, 77 of the 80 pilots survived the initial raid, but eight were captured by the Japanese. Of those eight, three were sentenced to death and killed while in captivity. All 80 of Doolittle’s Raiders received the Distinguished Flying Cross medal. It was a significant success that lifted American spirits and began to raise doubts in the Japanese leadership.

For his service, Doolittle was awarded the Medal of Honor and promoted two grades to brigadier general. After the war, Doolittle helped found the Air Force Association and served as its first president. He later served as assistant to the chief of staff of the Air Force and on Eisenhower’s Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities.



*Doolittle’s conversations with Goddard influenced his interest in space and rocketry.*



*WWII stamp honoring the raid on Tokyo that Doolittle led.*



*Doolittle’s Medal of Honor citation reads: “For conspicuous leadership above the call of duty, involving personal valor and intrepidity at an extreme hazard to life. With the apparent certainty of being forced to land in enemy territory or to perish at sea, Brigadier General (then Lieutenant Colonel) Doolittle personally led a squadron of Army bombers, manned by volunteer crews, in a highly destructive raid on the Japanese mainland.”*

Doolittle had been interested in space science and rocketry since the 1930s when he first met Robert H. Goddard. At that time, Doolittle remarked “interplanetary transportation is probably a dream of the very distant future, but with the moon only a quarter of a million miles away – who knows!” In 1956, Doolittle was made chairman of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA), the precursor to NASA.

After retiring from the military, Doolittle received the Tony Jannus Award for his contributions to commercial aviation. He received a number of honors in his later years, including promotion to the rank of full 4-star General. Doolittle was also the first person to receive both the Medal of Honor and the Medal of Freedom, the nation’s two highest honors. He died on September 27, 1993.

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