

# The Extraordinary Dr. Doolittle

By John V. Garrett, Ph. D.

At 5' 4" he towered above the others. He was a daredevil aviation pioneer and holder of numerous world speed and endurance records. He was the first to take off, fly and land entirely "blind," by instruments alone. He was the first to fly an outside loop. He led the first aerial attack on Japan during World War II, a full two years before a second attack was attempted, and later commanded three numbered air forces. He rose in rank from major to major general in a single year and became the first person in the Air Force Reserve to wear four stars. He was a professional boxer, a Ph.D., a Medal of Honor recipient, a vice president of a major corporation and, above all else, as he was always ready to point out, a husband and a father.

It was 16 years ago this month that this most extraordinary man went to the White House at the invitation of the first President George Bush to accept the Medal of Freedom. President Harry Truman had established the award in 1945 to honor exemplary service during World War II. In 1963 President John Kennedy revitalized it and expanded its scope. Normally honored on or near the Fourth of July, its recipients now number in the hundreds. But none accomplished quite so much, in quite so many areas, as Jimmy Doolittle.

James Harold Doolittle was born in 1896 in Alameda, California, but spent much of his early life in Nome when his father, a carpenter by trade, joined the rush for Alaskan gold. Returning to California with his mother, he enrolled in the University of California, studying mining engineering while boxing intercollegiately and professionally. When America entered World War I in 1917 Doolittle left college to join the Army Air Service, becoming an instructor pilot at Camp Dick in Dallas and Kelly Field in San Antonio, Texas.

Doolittle remained in the Army after the war and quickly became integral to Gen Billy Mitchell's efforts to prove air power's range and sway. In 1922 he became the first to fly across the country in under a day, stopping only once to refuel. Studying aeronautical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he earned a doctorate three years later with a dissertation discrediting the belief of contemporary pilots that the speed and direction of the wind and the direction of a plane's flight could be known intuitively, without visual aids or instruments. From this, he helped develop the artificial horizon and the directional gyroscope, ultimately enabling all-weather operations for military and civilian aircraft.

Leaving MIT, Doolittle embarked on an aerial demonstration tour of South America in 1926. The tour involved more than flying, apparently, as he broke both ankles one evening demonstrating handstands at a party. Nevertheless, the following day, he had his ankles in their casts strapped to the rudders of his plane so that he could perform his stunts as planned.

He was that sort of a man. Before Doolittle performed it in 1927, the outside loop was thought to be a fatal maneuver owing to the stresses involved. Before Doolittle accomplished it in 1928, no one had both the nerve and the skill to make a complete flight by instruments alone. He flew a Navy seaplane with pontoons faster than it had

ever gone before, winning the Schneider Cup race in 1925. He set a cross country record of 11 hours in a Laird biplane, winning the Bendix Trophy race in 1931. He set the world speed record for land planes in a Gee Bee R-1, winning the Thompson Trophy race in 1932.

And he led the raid that forever bears his name. According to contemporary Japanese propaganda, the Doolittle Raid was aptly named ... *Do-Little*. But inflicting damage was not the point. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor and the string of Japanese military victories across Asia and the western Pacific, America was shaken and in need of some sort of symbolic success, some harbinger of final victory. Flying fully loaded Army bombers off the 500-foot deck of a Navy carrier, and doing so even though they were spotted early and had to launch prematurely, with little prospect that they would have the range to recover to friendly airfields, Doolittle and his men accomplished precisely that. America had its proof of victory. Doolittle and his men were celebrated as heroes. And Japan moved out to close the perceived gap in its perimeter defense, leading within two months to the decisive United States Naval victory at Midway.

After the raid, Doolittle commanded the 12th Air Force in North Africa, the 15th Air Force in the Mediterranean, and finally the 8th Air Force during the strategic bombardment of Germany and then Japan. He left active duty after the war, becoming a vice president with Shell Oil Company and serving on numerous aviation advisory boards. In 1985, though long retired, he was made a four-star general. Eight years later he died, at the age of 96, and was buried beside his wife and high school sweetheart in Arlington National Cemetery.

In the end it was the Raid that placed him among the immortals of American military aviation. But he had done so much more in his life, striking achievements so numerous and significant and daring, that he rightly could have stood upon any one of them and proclaimed, as he often did when speaking of his marriage, that he “could never be so lucky again.”