

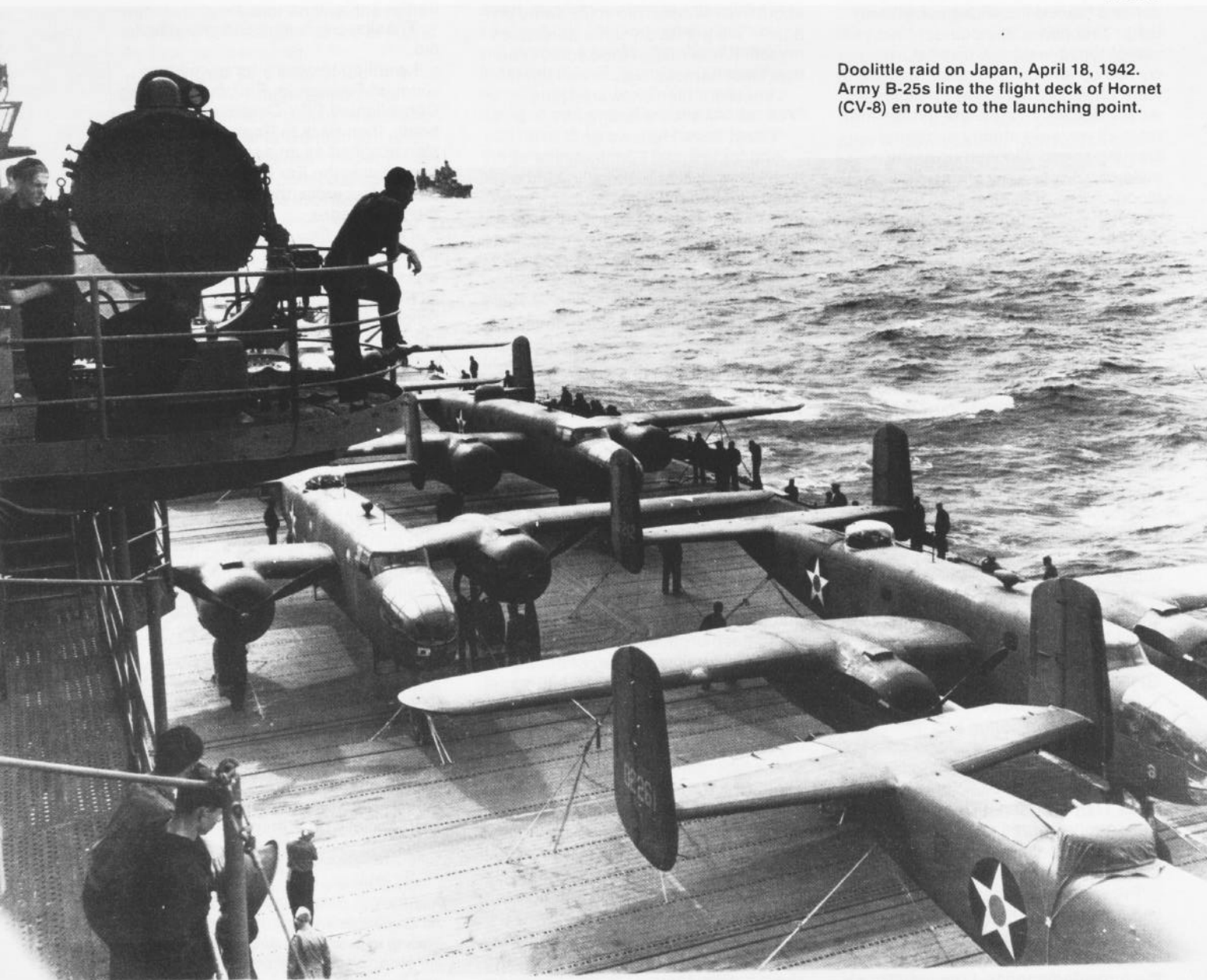
The Early Carrier Raids:

# Proving Japanese Vulnerability

By Marc D. Bernstein

NH 53293

Doolittle raid on Japan, April 18, 1942.  
Army B-25s line the flight deck of Hornet (CV-8) en route to the launching point.

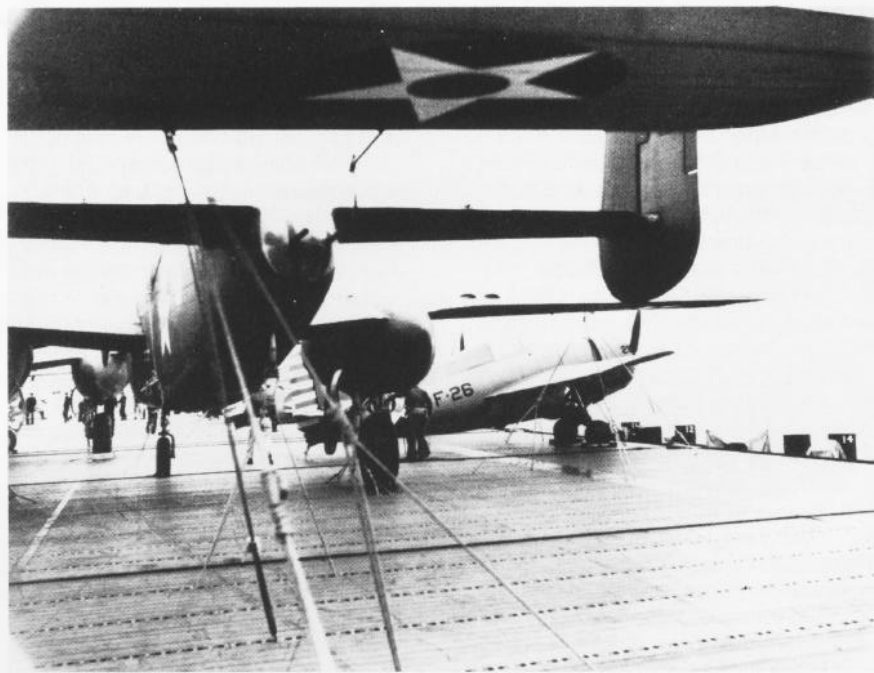


The events of December 7, 1941, placed the United States Pacific Fleet in the then-awkward and unanticipated position of having to rely upon carrier airpower as the principal striking arm of a battered and presumably overmatched naval force. Prewar planning for war with Japan, which had anticipated a thrust across the Pacific led by battleships, necessarily had to be discarded in light of the Pearl Harbor attack. The carrier admirals would have the opportunity to demonstrate the value of seaborne airpower, but they would have to operate under circumstances where success was anything but assured and where defeat could leave the whole West Coast of the U.S. open to attack. The prospect was a daunting one, but the officers and men of the Pacific Fleet in early 1942 were to prove themselves more than equal to the task.

In the early days, before Coral Sea and Midway, carrier warfare was a novelty, a wholly untested mode of combat from the American perspective. Aircraft carriers were in short supply. The day Pearl Harbor was attacked, the U.S. Navy had seven fleet carriers and one escort carrier, embarking a total of 441 combat aircraft. In the Pacific, the fleet had only three carriers: *Enterprise* and *Lexington*, operating out of Pearl Harbor and on separate missions to deliver much-needed aircraft to island outposts on December 7; and *Saratoga* at San Diego on the date of the Japanese attack. By later standards, the Pacific Fleet air arm was not a formidable force but remained the only force available at that time for hitting back against the Japanese. The issue became one of deciding how, when, and where U.S. carrier forces could be most effectively employed against Japan's imperial outposts and her powerful fleet.

On December 10, Admiral Husband E. Kimmel's staff, in a new estimate of the situation in the Pacific, emphasized that the surviving U.S. striking force of carriers, cruisers, and destroyers "must be operated boldly and vigorously on the tactical offensive in order to retrieve our initial disaster." Of the three carrier groups immediately available for action in the Pacific, two would be kept at sea, while the third replenished at Pearl Harbor on a rotating basis. The first order of business was, however, to be an attempt to support the embattled garrison on isolated Wake Island.

The Wake relief expedition centered on the carrier *Saratoga*, sailing from



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Army B-25Bs and Navy F4F-3s share Hornet's flight deck while under way to the raid's launching point.

the West Coast as the flagship of Rear Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch with Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 221 (embarking 18 Brewster *Buffaloes*), intended to reinforce VMF-211, already in the process of being decimated on Wake. Adm. Kimmel named Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, senior to Fitch, as overall Task Force (TF) 14 commander. In addition, TF-11, commanded by Vice Admiral Wilson Brown and built around *Lexington*, was to raid Jaluit in the Marshalls as a diversion to the Wake operation.

Delays plagued the Wake relief effort. TF-11 departed Pearl Harbor on December 14 bound for the Marshalls, but was later ordered to turn to the north and assist Fletcher's TF-14 in the Wake operation. On December 16, three *Lexington* scout planes reported sighting and attacking a Japanese "Ryuzo-class carrier" 95 miles south of the task force. Adm. Brown launched an attack group of 29 bombers and 7 fighters against the target, but the "carrier" turned out to be only a drifting U.S. Navy dynamite barge. TF-14 left Pearl the morning of December 16, but its progress thereafter was sluggish due to the painfully slow speed of the fleet oiler *Neches*.

The Japanese proceeded to attack Wake in force and captured the island on the 23rd, while the U.S. task forces remained too far away to provide any support for the Marines and never

engaged any element of the Japanese invasion or covering forces. Fleet intelligence estimated that at least two Japanese carriers, plus battleships and heavy cruisers, were in the vicinity of Wake at this time. Vice Admiral William S. Pye, by then the acting Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, decided not to risk his carriers and recalled Fletcher and Brown to Pearl Harbor.

On December 31, 1941, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz took formal command of the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, while Admiral Ernest J. King became the new Commander in Chief, United States Fleet, in Washington. King instructed Nimitz to hold the Hawaiian Island chain while also maintaining the line of communications between the West Coast and Australia through establishment of a string of bases along the route from Hawaii to Fiji. A new TF-17, organized around the carrier *Yorktown* (which had passed through the Panama Canal in late December en route to San Diego) was designated to cover delivery of Marine reinforcements to Samoa. Adm. Fletcher flew to San Diego to take charge of TF-17, which departed on January 6 bound for the South Pacific.

The arrival of *Yorktown* in the Pacific at this time was fortuitous, because on January 11 *Saratoga* was torpedoed by the Japanese submarine



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I-6 near Johnston Island and had to return to the West Coast for repairs. *Saratoga* remained out of action for months, and until April Nimitz would have to make do with only three fleet carriers.

The key question at this stage of the war concerned the direction of the next Japanese advance. The expanding Japanese presence in the Marshalls and Gilberts indicated that the next major Japanese move might be in the direction of Samoa or Fiji. As insurance against such an eventuality, Halsey's TF-8 and Fletcher's TF-17 were earmarked for early raids against the Marshalls and Gilberts. Halsey was directed to hit Wotje and Maloelap, two seaplane bases in the eastern Marshalls, and elected also to attack Japanese shipping and aircraft at Kwajalein Atoll. Fletcher was given the mission of raiding Makin in the northern Gilberts and Jaluit and Mili in the southern Marshalls.

Approaching their respective targets from the direction of Samoa, the two task forces parted company on the evening of January 31 and launched their strikes before sunrise on February 1, 1942. Halsey brought *Enterprise* within 40 miles of Wotje before launching his attacks. The initial strike, led by Commander Howard L. Young (*Enterprise* air group commander), headed for Kwajalein Atoll with 37 dive-bombers and 9 torpedo bombers. The principal targets were the air base at Roi on the north end of

the lagoon, Kwajalein Island on the south end, and any shipping lying in between. On the way in, the force had trouble identifying its targets on Roi in the early morning mist and surprise was lost.

The Japanese were able to respond with heavy anti-aircraft fire and were also able to put a number of fighters into the air. Four SBD *Dauntlesses* were downed in the attack on the airfield. But the rest of Young's force, heading for Kwajalein, achieved a marked degree of success. Aided by a follow-up strike from nine TBD *Devastators* of Torpedo 6, the Kwajalein attack force was credited with sinking two ships and damaging at least seven others. Eighteen enemy planes were destroyed or badly damaged and the area commander, Rear Admiral Yashiro, was killed.

Taroa airfield on Maloelap Atoll was attacked by *Wildcat* fighters and later by SBDs which had returned from the Kwajalein raid and were relaunched. On the Taroa strike, Lieutenant (jg) Wilmer E. Rawie became the first U.S. Navy fighter pilot in WW II to down an enemy plane when he splashed a fighter.

Wotje was attacked initially by *Wildcats* carrying 100-pound bombs and gunfire from Rear Admiral Raymond A. Spruance's cruisers and destroyers. Near midday, Young led another force of eight SBDs and nine bomb-armed TBDs against Wotje,

**Douglas SBD-3 dive-bombers from Yorktown (CV-5) head for the target during the Lae-Salamaua strike, March 10, 1942.**

causing substantial damage on the island.

To the south, Fletcher's TF-17 encountered greater difficulties, due to bad weather, especially over Jaluit. Commander Curtis S. Smiley (*Yorktown's* air group commander) led 17 SBDs and 11 TBDs against Jaluit, but succeeded only in damaging two ships in the harbor while losing six aircraft. The attacks on Makin and Mili achieved, if anything, even less than the Jaluit raid. One Japanese four-engine flying boat attacked the task force but was shot down by *Yorktown's* combat air patrol. Fletcher decided that the results obtainable, given the weather conditions and the already heavy losses suffered, did not warrant another attack on these targets and he ordered a retirement after recovery of the initial strikes.

These raids exposed weaknesses in the American effort. The mix of aircraft in the carrier air groups was inadequate, because more than a single squadron of fighters was needed. Fighters were required for combat air patrol and bomber escort duty, as well as for supplemental attacks on land targets and shipping. This problem of a shortage of fighters (and badly needed reserve pilots in the carrier squadrons) was gradually rectified. By the end of the war, fighter-type aircraft,



including those serving as fighter bombers, constituted over 70 percent of a fleet carrier's aircraft complement, as opposed to only 25 percent fighters in early 1942. Machine guns on the *Wildcats* also tended to jam easily, due to a shifting of ammunition belts in their trays, which occurred as a result of violent combat maneuvers. This problem was quickly resolved. However, other complaints, such as a shortage of incendiary ammunition and unreliable aerial torpedoes, which tended to run too deep or fail to explode on contact, took longer to remedy.

While the *Enterprise* and *Yorktown* groups were engaged in central Pacific operations, Adm. Brown's *Lexington* force was providing cover for two critical convoys that passed through the Panama Canal in late January carrying much-needed men

and equipment for island outposts stretching from Bora Bora to New Caledonia. By the end of January, the Japanese threat to Noumea and Port Moresby was becoming increasingly real, with the possibility existing that the Japanese might invade New Caledonia even before American garrison troops could reach that destination. Using Rabaul as a base, the enemy could strike out in a number of directions and there were few Allied forces located at that time between Rabaul and the northeast coast of Australia.

Adm. Brown, directed by Adm. King to operate west of Fiji in conjunction with other Allied naval and air forces, determined that the time was appropriate for a carrier strike against Rabaul itself. But certain problems were evident in any attempt to hit Rabaul: the distance from the fleet sup-

port base at Pearl Harbor was huge (some 3,000 miles) and the availability of fuel could present a serious issue (especially given the vulnerability of the slow-moving fleet oilers to submarine attack); repairs could not be readily effected in the South Pacific; the charts of the waters around New Guinea, New Britain, New Ireland, and the Solomons were woefully out of date; and the Japanese 24th Air Flotilla, operating out of Rabaul, was known to conduct regular air searches to the eastward, with coverage of up to 600 miles from base.

Brown hoped to elude such searches and sneak within 125 miles of Rabaul before launching his strike. Unfortunately, at shortly after 1000 on February 20, while TF-11 was still 450 miles east of Rabaul, *Lexington's* radar detected an enemy floatplane 43 miles from the task force. Although *Lexington's* combat air patrol succeeded in downing the intruder and a second Japanese scout plane, at least one other flying boat escaped the *Wildcats*. Brown had to assume that his presence had been discovered and reported, as was in fact the case. But he decided to continue on toward Rabaul in an attempt to bluff the Japanese into thinking that he was proceeding with the planned attack.

The Japanese responded to Brown's incursion by launching a two-wave attack against the task force, involving a total of 17 "Betty" twin-engine bombers. At 1611, the first wave of nine "Bettys" was picked up on *Lexington's* radar and the carrier's fighter director vectored the six *Wildcats* flying combat air patrol at that time to intercept the raiders, as the deck crew scrambled to get additional *Wildcats* aloft. The *Wildcat* pilots succeeded in shooting down all nine in the first wave, and though several of the raiders were able to drop their bombs, the attacks were wildly inaccurate and caused no damage to the task force.

At 1705, eight more "Bettys" bore down on Brown's ships, but these too were effectively fought off, with Lieutenant Butch O'Hare single-handedly destroying three "Bettys" and seriously damaging two more. One of the crippled bombers attempted to crash *Lexington*, but splashed 1,500 yards off the carrier's port bow. By 1745, the battle was over. The Japanese air attack had been a total failure, with 15 "Bettys" and two "Mavis" flying boats destroyed. *Lexington's* Fighting 3, under Lieutenant Commander Jimmy Thach, suffered two downed *Wildcats*, includ-



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Douglas SBD Dauntlesses and Grumman F4F Wildcats pack the forward flight deck of *Enterprise* (CV-6), April 4, 1942.

## Naval Aviation in WW II

ing one pilot killed and another wounded.

All told, it was a startlingly one-sided victory for *Lexington's* fighter squadron and a defeat with strategic implications for the Japanese. The 24th Air Flotilla's medium bomber force had been gutted and would have to be replaced with additional planes to be flown in from the Marshalls and Marianas. The planned Japanese landings at Lae and Salamaua on the north coast of New Guinea were delayed for five days as a result of the new need for redeployment of air assets to the southwest Pacific. Butch O'Hare was officially credited with downing five enemy planes in the February 20 action, and was later awarded the Medal of Honor for the feat, thereby becoming the first popular hero of the naval air war in the Pacific, somewhat to his embarrassment.

As Adm. Brown's *Lexington* group retired southeastward from the vicinity of Rabaul, Adm. Halsey's TF-8, which had departed Pearl Harbor on February 14, neared Wake Island, the objective of the next central Pacific raid, scheduled for February 24. *Enterprise* sent 36 bombers and 6 fighters against the island, effecting only limited destruction, including the sinking of a single Japanese patrol boat and several Kawanishi flying boats.

Following the Wake raid, Halsey retired northeastward to refuel and then proceeded westward to raid Marcus Island, another isolated Japanese outpost. No enemy aircraft were engaged over Marcus and none were sighted on the ground. One SBD, however, was lost to anti-aircraft fire. After the raid on Marcus, the *Enterprise* force swung back toward Pearl, arriving there on March 10. It would be nearly another month before Halsey again put to sea.

The idea of attacking Rabaul was not shelved after TF-11's first unsuccessful attempt to raid that target in February. Adm. Brown, however, believed that another attempt would require more than a single carrier to fend off the strong air opposition anticipated. On February 27, Nimitz's staff came to the conclusion that two carriers could operate against Rabaul with a reasonable expectation of success and that *Lexington* and *Yorktown* should be tasked for the job. Brown and Fletcher arranged to rendezvous on March 6, about 300 miles north of

New Caledonia, at which time the two task force commanders agreed to make combined air and cruiser bombardment raids against Rabaul and Gasmata on New Britain.

The Japanese, however, landed on March 8 at Lae and Salamaua on the north coast of New Guinea, and that event caused a change of target for the American task forces. In order to reduce the chances that their carriers would be discovered on the way to attack the vulnerable shipping lying off Lae and Salamaua, Brown and Fletcher decided to approach the targets from the south rather than from the east. Task Forces 11 and 17 traversed the Coral Sea and the combined attack was launched at 0800 on March 10.

The day before the raid, Brown had sent two officers on missions to gather information on flying conditions over the towering Owen Stanley mountains, which form the spine of New Guinea's Papuan peninsula. It was determined that the planes could clear the mountains through a 7,500-foot-high mountain pass that was generally free of mist between 0700 and 1100. But there was serious question as to whether the short-ranged *Wildcats* and heavily laden TBD torpedo bombers could successfully accomplish the mission. During the event, the carriers closed to within 45 miles of the Papuan shoreline before launching, and the single TBD squadron (Torpedo 2 from *Lexington*) carrying torpedoes on this raid was able to take advantage of a fortuitous updraft to clear the mountains.

In all, 18 F4Fs, 61 SBDs, and 25 TBDs participated in the raid on the village of Lae and Salamaua harbor. The attack was well-coordinated in multiple waves. The airstrip at Lae was aircraft serviceable, but few enemy planes were in evidence at the time. However, 16 ships were present in the Lae-Salamaua area on the date of the raid, and the combination of surprise and lack of fighter cover proved highly damaging to Japanese forces ashore and afloat. At the cost of one SBD downed by anti-aircraft fire, the raiders sank three transports and damaged six other ships (including a light cruiser and two destroyers) and caused nearly 400 Japanese casualties.

By noon of March 10, the *Lexington* and *Yorktown* task forces were withdrawing southeastward at high speed. Neither force saw action again until Fletcher's raid on Tulagi in early

May, which was a prelude to the Coral Sea encounter.

In January 1942, Captain Francis S. Low, Adm. King's operations officer, had conceived the idea of flying B-25 *Mitchell* medium bombers off the deck of an aircraft carrier as a means for raiding Tokyo. Adm. King found the idea interesting and directed his air operations officer, Captain Donald B. Duncan, to work out the details in coordination with the Army Air Force. Lieutenant Colonel James H. Doolittle was selected to lead the raid under Adm. Halsey's operational command. A conventional carrier-borne attack had been ruled out due to the fact that the Japanese were capable of operating shore-based aircraft well beyond carrier strike range and that a line of early-warning picket boats was known to be patrolling the waters at least 500 miles off the Japanese home islands. B-25s could carry a 2,000-pound bomb load and could be launched at 500 miles from Tokyo. After dropping their bombs, the B-25s would continue on to land at airfields in China.

The Army pilots received training at Eglin Field, Fla., in the unfamiliar art of carrier takeoffs, though they never had the opportunity to perform such takeoffs from a real carrier until they struggled into the air off *Hornet's* flight deck on the fateful morning of April 18, 1942. *Hornet* herself was a newly commissioned carrier under the command of Naval Aviation pioneer Captain Marc A. Mitscher. She sailed from the East Coast to Alameda, Calif., where, on April 1, the 16 B-25Bs of Doolittle's squadron were hoisted aboard. The next day, the *Hornet* task force, including two cruisers, four destroyers and an oiler, set out for a mid-ocean rendezvous with Halsey and his *Enterprise* force.

Halsey departed Pearl Harbor on April 8, meeting Mitscher's group on April 13, well to the north of Midway. The combined force was officially designated Task Force 16 and marked the first instance in the Pacific war where two U.S. Navy carriers operated as part of a single task force (as opposed to the Lae-Salamaua operation, where two task forces operated together for a while and later proceeded independently). The presence of *Enterprise* as an integral part of the mission was necessitated by the fact that *Hornet* was incapable of providing her own defensive fighter cover prior to launching the B-25s. Due to the size of the Army bombers,

they could not be stored on the hangar deck and were retained on the flight deck until launching. *Hornet's* own planes were kept on the hangar deck until the flight deck was cleared of all B-25s. Therefore, the *Enterprise* air group was responsible for flying combat air patrol for the entire task force until such time as *Hornet* could assist in those duties.

The lead bomber (Doolittle's) had only 476 feet of deck to launch from — adequate, as events proved, but hardly reassuring. The original plan was for a night attack against Tokyo and three secondary targets, with the carrier launches to take place on the afternoon of the 18th.

As TF-16 approached within 1,000 miles of Tokyo, the weather turned sour. Just past 0300 on the morning of April 18, while the task force was still more than 700 miles from Japan, radar contact was made with Japanese picket boats. Halsey deftly changed course to avoid them. Three hours later, *Enterprise* planes encountered another picket boat some 42 miles ahead of the force. At 0744, a third picket boat contact was made, and Halsey had to assume that Tokyo was now aware of TF-16's presence. Halsey was at that time over 650 miles east of Tokyo but could not risk closing further on the target due to loss of the element of surprise. He decided (with Doolittle's agreement) to launch the B-25s as soon as possible, despite the fact that Doolittle's raiders would probably not have enough fuel to reach any friendly airfields in China.

The launching operation took place in heavy seas beginning at 0825 and lasted 59 minutes. Mitscher, for one, was not impressed with the facility of the Army pilots in getting their planes into the air. In his after-action report, he noted that "with only one exception, takeoffs were dangerous and improperly executed. Apparently, full back stabilizer was used by the first few pilots. As each plane neared the bow, with more than required speed, the pilot would pull up and climb in a dangerous near-stall, struggle wildly to nose down, then fight the controls for several miles trying to gain real flying speed and more than a hundred feet altitude."

Nevertheless, all 16 B-25s were successfully launched and proceeded to their targets. The 13 raiders bound for Tokyo appeared over the city near midday, surprising the Japanese high command, which had figured that no raid could be launched from the sighted carriers until that force had approached much closer to the

Japanese coast. All of the planes succeeded in dropping their bombs on the city and continued onward, despite sometimes substantial anti-aircraft fire and the presence of Japanese fighters. The three bombers hitting secondary targets also completed their bomb runs and headed for China. None of the planes were able to reach Chinese airfields, however, and with the exception of one B-25 that flew to Siberia and was impounded by the Soviets, all of the planes either crashed for want of fuel or crash-landed in China.

All told, 71 out of the 80 pilots and crewmen participating in the mission survived it; of the nine who did not, three were executed by the Japanese after capture in Japanese-occupied areas of China, and a fourth later died in captivity. The damage caused to the targets was not severe, but the psychological effect on both the American and Japanese public perception of the war was enormous.

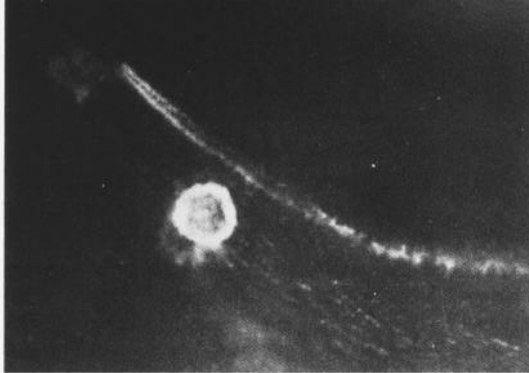
After the Doolittle raiders were launched, Halsey immediately commenced an eastward retirement. The Japanese attempted a pursuit with aircraft and surface ships but were unsuccessful at overtaking TF-16, which reentered Pearl Harbor on April 25 after a job well done, despite the loss of all of Doolittle's planes. The American public persisted in viewing the attack as simply "Doolittle's raid." Halsey, however, should be accorded his fair share of the glory, given his bold decision to continue with the raid under less than ideal circumstances rather than retire without launching, which was his only other alternative after surprise had been lost.

The Doolittle raid was the last of the early carrier raids conducted in the Pacific during the five-month period between Pearl Harbor and the May operations in the Coral Sea. The net effect of these raids was to force the Imperial Japanese Navy to deal with the Pacific Fleet on terms that were not particularly favorable to the Japanese. American commanders attempted to take advantage of the element of surprise and the dispersion of the Japanese fleet as counterweights to the heavy Japanese

numerical advantage in ships and aircraft that existed in early 1942.

The Tokyo raid settled an argument within the Japanese high command as to whether an attempt should be made to strike the Pacific Fleet a final, crippling blow or to pursue other, more indirect options. Admiral Yamamoto, an advocate of seeking to destroy the remainder of the Pacific Fleet's striking power, won that argument, and the Battle of Midway followed as a direct consequence. ■

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The view from a VT-5 TBD-1 off Yorktown (CV-5) shows Japanese seaplane tender Kiyokawa Maru under attack. Note the bomb splash astern and what may be a hit aft.

NH 95444

## 50 Years Ago-WWII

**Mar 1:** Carrier Air Group 9 was established at NAS Norfolk, Va. It was the first numbered air group in the Navy and marked the end of the practice of naming air groups for the carriers to which they were assigned.

**Mar 1:** Ens. William Tepuni, USNR, piloting a Lockheed PBO *Hudson* of VP-82 based at Argentia, attacked and sank the U-656 southwest of Newfoundland — the first German submarine sunk by U.S. forces in WW II.

**Mar 2:** Regularly scheduled operations by the Naval Air Transport Service were inaugurated with an R4D flight from Norfolk, Va., to Squantum, Mass.

**Mar 7:** The practicability of using a radio sonobuoy in aerial antisubmarine warfare was demonstrated in an exercise conducted off New London, Conn., by the blimp K-5 and the submarine S-20. The buoy could detect the sound of the submerged submarine's propellers at distances up to 3 miles, and radio reception aboard the blimp was satisfactory up to 5 miles.

**Mar 9:** VR-1, the first of 13 VR squadrons established under the Naval Air Transport Service during WW II, was established at Norfolk, Va.

**Mar 26:** Unity of command over Navy and Army air units, operating over the sea to protect shipping and conduct antisubmarine warfare, was vested in the Navy.