Minneapolis and the Doolittle Raids

by Jim Johns

After the successful Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States and its allies suffered a succession of defeats in the Pacific. Within a matter of months, Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, Guam, Wake, and finally the Philippines fell to Japan's powerful military offensive. Not long after Pearl Harbor, FDR stated in a meeting of his War Cabinet that we needed to hit back at Japan soon or Americans would not only lose confidence in its army and navy, but in his administration, as well.

A staff member of Admiral Ernest King, who commanded the Atlantic Fleet, offered a daring suggestion: since it was assumed that any attack against Japan would initially come by way of China, and since Japan occupied most of China’s coastland, perhaps we could attack from the other direction by launching medium bombers from an aircraft carrier. Only the Army’s B-25 “Mitchell” was capable of such a take-off, but it was not built to land back on a carrier. The B-25 had a range of about 400 miles. To get within that range, drop its bombs, and continue on would mean flying an additional 1000 miles or more to get to friendly territory inside China. Was it feasible? Exactly how far could a modified B-25 fly?

The project on the Army side was turned over to LTC Jimmie Doolittle. He posed the question to the Army Air Force procurement and design people at Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio.
Minneapolis and the Doolittle Raids (Cont.)

Their report was sobering. To fly 1000 miles beyond the target would require installation of an extra fuel tank in the top of the bomb bay. A third, rubber tank could also be squeezed into the tail section, in place of the bottom turret. Altogether it would add about 450 gallons of fuel, but also 3,000 pounds in weight. With full tanks, bombs, and a crew of five, the plane would gross out at 31,000 pounds—2,000 pounds beyond the B-25's design limits. Moreover, the extra handles, pumps, valves, hoses, fuel lines and stand pipes would be a plumber's nightmare. Doolittle inquired, "Who can we get to do the work?"

The answer: "Mid-Continent in Minneapolis is waiting for your call." Jimmie was told that Mid-Continent Airlines had a first-rate workforce. It was the only airline in the country that did not allow an apprentice to touch one of its planes. You had to be a licensed journeyman mechanic to work on a Mid-Continent plane, which would minimize screw-ups. Second, a bunch of brand new medium bombers parked around an airline hangar would raise eyebrows, but Minneapolis was off the beaten path of air commerce and would attract less attention. And finally, Mid-Continent had just built a huge new hangar in Minneapolis capable of housing the project. Doolittle agreed.

On 2 February 1942, Mid-Continent received official notification that it would be given the contract to modify 18 B-25 aircraft with long range tanks. The work had to be completed within a month. A tall order! Two days later the number of aircraft was increased to 24, providing a few spares. Mid-Continent immediately scoured its rosters for 40 of its best mechanics, engineers, and draftsmen, who would serve as shift chiefs for round-the-clock work.

Meanwhile, the 17th Bombardment Group at Pendleton, Oregon, was assigned to furnish volunteer crews from its four B-25 squadrons. The men were told only that it would be a dangerous mission that would take them out of the country for about three months. Those selected were to fly to Eglin Field in Florida for special training, but first they had to take their B-25s to Minneapolis where auxiliary tanks would be installed. Most of the crews opted to stay at the old Dykman Hotel in downtown Minneapolis. During their time off they roamed Hennepin, Nicollet, and Marquette Avenues, speculating on what they had volunteered for.

To minimize curiosity, the pilots could not park their aircraft at Mid-Continent. Instead they used the Naval Air Station adjacent to Wold-Chamberlain Field (now Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport). Only those being pulled in or out of the M-C hangar could be there. Mid-Continent found that by nosing in one aircraft, and tailing another along side, they could turn out 1 ¾ aircraft per 24 hours. Barring the unforeseen, they could complete all 24 planes in about two weeks. The project was considered top secret. Security was tight. Neither the control tower chief nor airport manager were allowed near the M-C hangar.

The Minneapolis-based McQuay Radiator Company on West Broadway, which had specialized in the manufacture of automobile radiators, built the bomb bay fuel tanks and the modified bomb shackles. The United States Rubber Company of Indiana furnished the rubber tanks for the tail section.

When completed, each aircraft was capable of carrying 1141 gallons of 120 octane fuel. Under normal conditions, B-25 pilots were expected to get aloft in 1500 feet at 90 mph. But with the added weight, they figured they would need a full mile to reach take-off speed. A big surprise awaited them when they reported to a remote strip at Eglin Field. There they learned that they would be expected to get all 31,000 pounds into the air in 500 feet at 50 mph! Training was intense: two aircraft were wrecked. Navigators brushed up on celestial navigation. The gunners wrestled with the top gun turrets, which didn't function properly because they were
Minneapolis and the Doolittle Raids (Cont.)

new and the bugs had never been worked out.

Upon completion of training, they flew to Alameda Naval Air Station near San Francisco where 16 of the remaining 22 aircraft were hoisted onto the carrier *USS Hornet*. With Doolittle in command, 70 officers and 64 enlisted men reported aboard. *Hornet* and an escort task force left port on 2 April under sealed orders. That afternoon, Captain Marc Mitscher informed his men for the first time of their mission: a bombing raid on Japan. At this point, the airplanes started behaving badly. There were generator failures. Spark plugs fouled. There were hydraulic leaks and fuel leaks not only in the auxiliary tanks, but in the main ones. The tail guns were pulled out to save weight, with painted broomsticks installed to ward off attackers. The hefty Norden Bombsight was removed and replaced with a simpler, homemade sight that would suffice for a low altitude mission. Two white lines were painted down the deck. If the pilot kept the nose wheel on the correct line, his right wing should clear the carrier island by almost six feet.

The original plan, with *USS Enterprise* furnishing cover, called for *Hornet* to get within 400 miles of Japan where, on the evening of 19 April, the aircraft would launch and hit five pre-assigned military targets, most in and around Tokyo, at night. They would then fly across Japan, over the East China Sea, and land in Chuchow, China, a distance of roughly 1200 miles. At Chuchow they would refuel and continue on to Chungking.

But at 0600 18 April, a full day and a half before the planned take-off, they were sighted by a Japanese patrol boat—650 miles from Japan. They sunk the patrol boat, but were certain there had been enough time to send warning of the Americans' presence. They had to go now or scrub the mission.

To launch now meant that some aircraft would not reach Chuchow because there would not be enough fuel. And they would be flying over the entire width of Japan in broad daylight with tail guns removed and the top turret inoperative. To cap things off, heavy seas were pitching the deck violently.

Doolittle decided to go. All aircraft hastily received ten 5-gallon cans of gas, which between two engines might give them another 15 minutes of flight.

At exactly 0820, with 467 feet from the nose wheel to the drop-off at the end of the deck, Doolittle lifted the lead plane into the air and headed for Japan. He had proven to those behind him that at 31,000 pounds it could be done. All aircraft made successful take-offs and all hit their pre-assigned targets in Japan. Most surprising, they all made it across the Japanese mainland -- with no tail guns and top gun turrets that still refused to function.

As they crossed the East China Sea that evening, their fuel began to run low and the weather started to close in. In places, visibility was "zero-zero." Most pilots didn't dare climb out of it because it would use extra gas and they didn't know how high the clouds were. They just kept blindly flying in the general direction until they ran out of fuel. To make things worse, Chuchow had not been alerted that they were coming a day early, so the homing beacon was never turned on.

One by one the crews bailed out before crashing on the coast or ditching in the water. Some made it a little further inland. The only aircraft to survive intact was one that headed for Russia, where it and the crew were initially interned. Of the 80 airmen, three were killed in bail-outs or ditching. Eight were captured. Three of those were executed, one died of malnutrition and the remaining four spent 40 months as POWs. (Cont. on Page 8)
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October - December, 2007

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The Curator's Corner
By Doug Bekke

A few months ago I was asked why I was procuring modern military items for the museum's collection. Aren't they just common surplus items and thus not of much interest or value to the collection? At the moment this is often true. People leave the military and throw out their old uniforms or use them for work, hunting, or camping clothes. Surplus stores are full of field equipment, usually at low cost. But today's junk becomes tomorrow's treasures. The most commonly used items from the Civil War today are among the hardest to find because they were once taken for granted; they had a utilitarian value and were worn out or tossed out.

Currently the museum's huge collection of uniforms does not contain a single jungle uniform documented to have been actually worn by a Minnesotan in Vietnam. In the past few years we were very lucky to receive donations of tiger stripe and leaf pattern camouflage uniforms worn by Minnesotans, but not a single example of the standard uniform issued to every soldier. The uniforms were not valued in the '60s and '70s and now they are extremely hard to find in good condition with all of the original insignia. (Continued on Page 5)
The Curator's Corner (Continued)

After Desert Storm, the museum received two desert camouflage uniforms actually worn in a combat zone during the 1990-91 Gulf War. A few years ago another such uniform was donated. So now we have three uniforms representing... how many Minnesotans who served there at that time?

I have made a strong effort to obtain the uniforms of Minnesotans who have served in the current conflicts. In all cases I have tried to obtain supporting photographs and documents so that these artifacts tell the stories of the people who used them. So far, the museum has received four of the tan desert camouflage uniforms (DCU) and two of the gray/green army camouflage uniforms (ACU). We continue to seek more of these uniforms and items of equipment, with supporting documentation, so that in 50 or 100 years we won't need to look back with regret and wish we had done a better job of preserving these representations of the state's military history while they were still commonly available. That is, after all, our museum's mission.

Artifact Donation Honor Roll
October - December, 2007

The museum gratefully acknowledges donations of artifacts from the following:

Advanced Guard Militaria
Gordon Bennett
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October - December, 2007

Given by:
Lyle and Dorothy Doerr
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Dale W. Smith
Betty Masoner

In Memory of:
Anders P. Hassen
Adam Ostapenko
Harold Kielblock
Donald Notch

Artifact Donations

Uniforms:
Jacket, AG344 (3)
Trousers, AG344 (7)
Shirt (4)
Hat, USN utility
Jacket, USN utility
Flight suit, USN khaki
Flight jacket, USN
Flight trousers, USN
Cover, cap, green
Cover, cap, white (3)
Cap, overseas (2)
Gloves, white

Miscellaneous:
Books:
Photos
Patches, shoulder
Medals
Bracelet, ID
Ribbons
Insignia
Mannequin
Buttons, US Army raincoat
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Sweetheart pillow
Cap button, German SS
Button, RAF
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Papers
Veterans histories
Armband, flight safety
Bicycle (used in Iraq)
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Bag, parachute
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Life and Patron
Membership Roll
2007 (Cont.)

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For years, one of our long-time members has doubled the value of his financial contribution to the Military Historical Society of Minnesota, 501(c)(3) organization, because he works for a company that matches his charitable contributions. Many employers sponsor corporate matching gift programs and will match charitable contributions that their employees make. Your gift may double or even triple. Come companies also match gifts made by retirees and/or spouses. Increase your giving power! Contact your company’s human resources department to see if they have a matching gift program.

Museum Highlights and Summary for 2007

Visitor Count
January – April 1,095
May – September 17,580
October – December 950

Tour Groups
Military-related 20
Youth groups 10
School groups 15
Misc. 23

Volunteer Hours 2,762 hours by 41 individuals

Gross sales in the Sutler Museum Store $54,264 (record high)
Sutler store profit for 2007 $10,660 (record high)
Highest single day gross sales in the store $14,881 (record high)

Museum Operations
• Board adopted new Action Plan 2007-2010
• Expanded hours – now open daily May thru September
• Video surveillance system installed
• Remodeled office area
• New office copier and other office equipment
• New picnic tables, benches, grill and flag poles
• New entrance sign and banners

Exhibits and Collections
• New special exhibit opened on the 34th Red Bull Infantry Division – WWI to the present
• Two new helicopter exhibits – Huey UH 1A and Hiller OH-23
• New Cobra Trainer/photo opportunity
• New outdoor plaque honoring Minnesota’s Medal of Honor recipients

Minnesota Military Museum’s Mission Statement:

The Minnesota Military Museum exists to serve the general public as well as military personnel. It provides education and training, enhances public understanding of how armed conflicts and military institutions have shaped our state and national experience, and functions as a major repository in Minnesota for historical military artifacts and records. In particular, the Museum seeks to document, preserve and depict the stories and contributions of Minnesotans who served in all branches of service or on the homefront--in time of peace and war--from Minnesota’s early frontier years to the present.
Minneapolis and the Doolittle Raids (Cont.)

That mission has gone down in aviation legend and the “Tokyo Raiders” have one of the most celebrated WWII reunions. For their second reunion, they returned to the Dykman Hotel and once again wandered the streets of downtown Minneapolis, recalling their first trip when they wondered what lay ahead. That reunion even included a trip to the Mid-Continent hangar where it all started.

Today, as time takes its toll, there are only 12 survivors.

The Doolittle Raid was one of the monumental events of the war. Although it achieved little militarily, American morale shot up like a lightning bolt. We had paid Japan back for Pearl Harbor and hit five cities at once in a surprise attack. But in Japan, the war lords were embarrassed. As a result, Japan resolved to extend its control of the Pacific as far away as Midway Island to make sure that such an attack would not happen again. It was their attempt to take Midway that caused them to lose four of the six carriers they had employed at Pearl Harbor, setting off their slow, bloody retreat back to Japan and their eventual surrender in August 1945.