

# Dad FLEW WITH Doolittle

70 years ago, Colonel Jimmy Doolittle and his 79 men flew a daredevil first raid on Japan. Today, children of the raiders share stories their fathers told.

by Susan Zimmerman





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**T**WO WEEKS AFTER DECEMBER 7, 1941, American morale was devastatingly low. President Franklin D. Roosevelt put the word out to his Joint Chiefs of Staff: Avenge Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, fast. One hundred and thirty-one days later a cutting-edge air raid settled the score by sending 16 North American B-25B Mitchell medium bombers with five-man crews to firebomb Tokyo and other Japanese industrial centers. The assault led by Lieutenant Colonel James "Jimmy" Doolittle did minimal damage, but it shattered Japan's peace of mind and lifted Americans' shell-shocked spirits. Roosevelt's mission was accomplished with flying colors. The April 18, 1942, raid changed the mood of the nation. And America never forgot.

After almost 70 years, the Doolittle Raid, as it became known, still ranks as one of World War II's greatest military achievements. This first joint action between the US Army Air Forces and the US Navy was groundbreaking—from the operation's origins, to the launch of medium-sized bombers off an aircraft carrier, to the brazen daylight bombing of Japan. The stories of this legendary mission have continued to fly through the ages, stories about how 79 twenty-something-year-olds and their revered 45-year-old leader took off from the deck of the carrier USS *Hornet* (CV-8) on what seemed destined to be a flight of no return. Discovery of the mission by a Japanese picket boat led to an unexpected early launch, and the resulting lack of sufficient fuel to cover the extra distance (650 rather than 480 nautical miles) changed the playing field. Although the crews successfully dropped their bombs, all the planes were lost in the raid's aftermath (15 from bail-outs and crash landings over China and one that landed in Russia). Against all odds, 73 men came home.

Throughout the decades, scores of books have documented the daring operation. But the Doolittle Raiders' sons and daughters heard *other* stories, accounts that went beyond the borders of a page, personal recollections that were windows into the courage and ingenuity of their hero fathers. The raid will always be the story of a lifetime for the raiders' families. Some of the raiders' sons and daughters recently shared with me the stories their fathers told them.

**B**ARBARA LEWIS'S FATHER, Master Sergeant Robert Clark Bourgeois of New Orleans, was the bombardier in the 13th plane to take off from the *Hornet*, a B-25B christened *The Avenger*. Despite heavy anti-aircraft fire, the crew dropped one incendiary and three demolition bombs from 1,300 feet at 200 miles per hour, successfully hitting a targeted naval base. All five men safely bailed out and only one man was injured in the landing.

Previous spread: Lieutenant Colonel James "Jimmy" Doolittle and Admiral Marc Mitscher (front, left and right, respectively) stand on the deck of Mitscher's USS *Hornet* (CV-8) as it sets out toward Japan. With them are the fliers of Doolittle's raiding party, on their way to raid Tokyo in B-25B Mitchell bombers launched from the *Hornet*'s deck. Doolittle is holding five Japanese medals bestowed on US military personnel before the war began as tokens of Japanese-American friendship. Above: In a defiant, morale-building gesture, Doolittle wires the medals to bombs destined for Japan. Opposite: A plane of Doolittle's raiding party takes off from the *Hornet* for Tokyo on April 18, 1942.

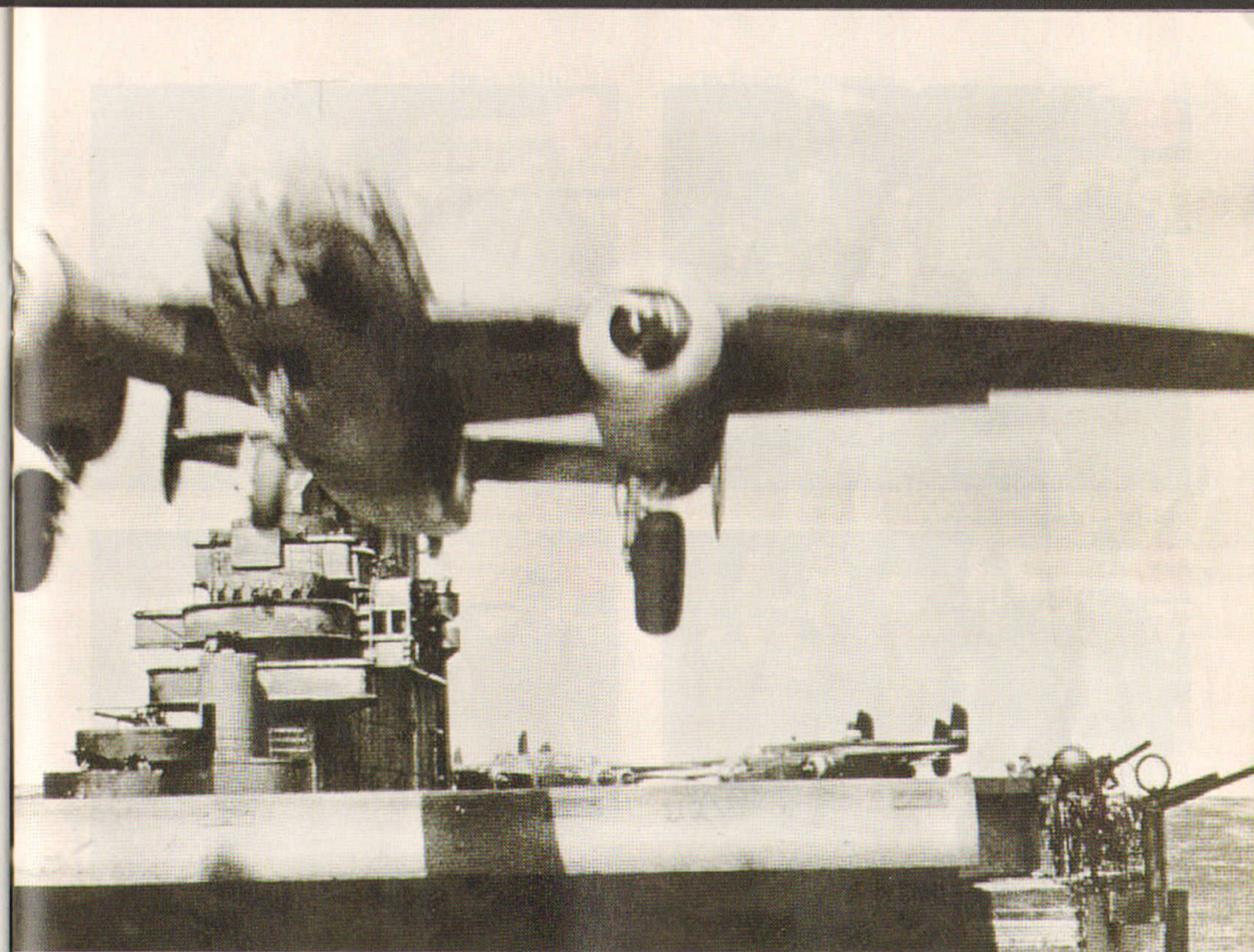
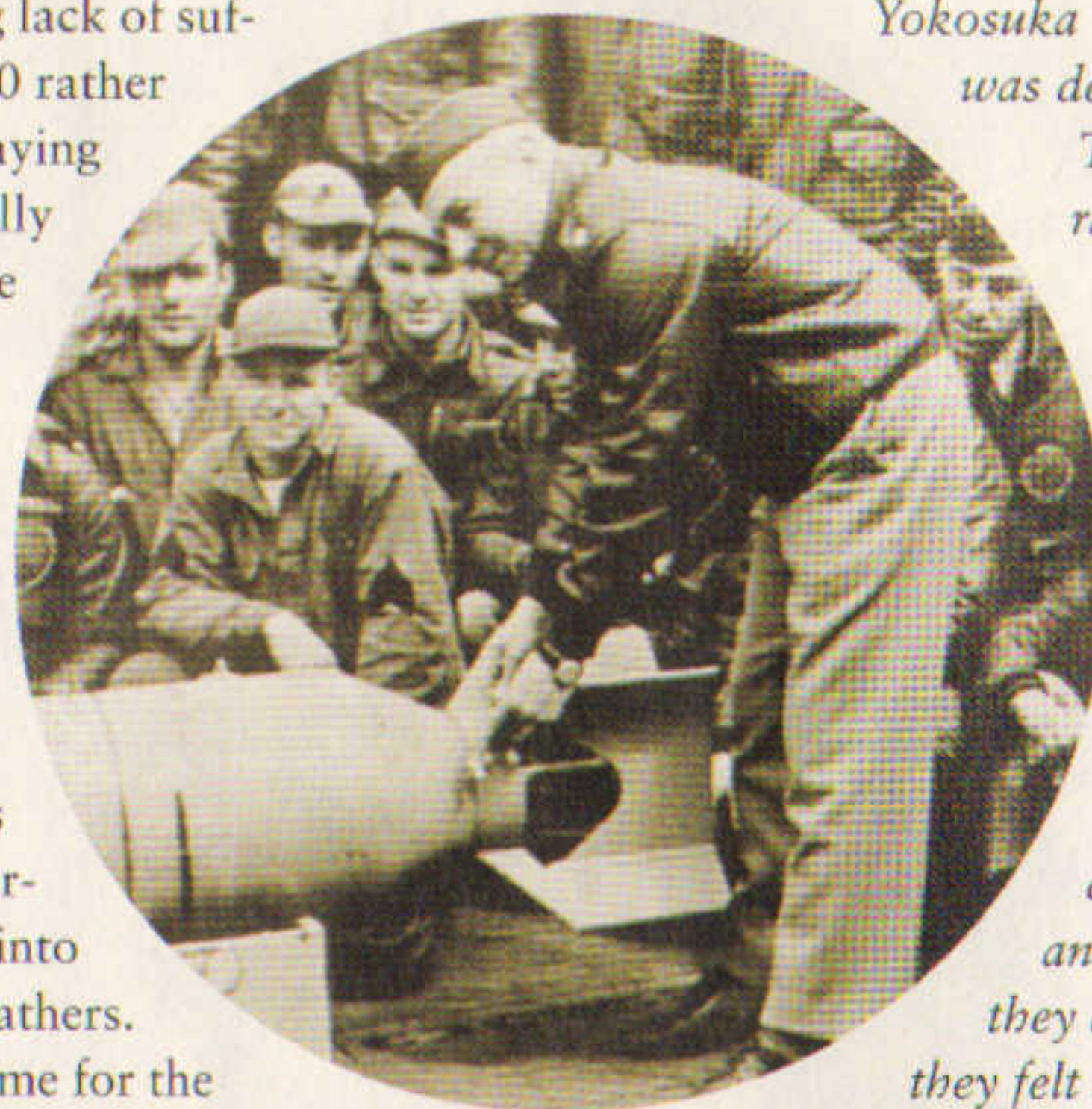
When it came time for Bourgeois to drop the bombs, he declined to use the homemade "twenty-cent bombsight" that had replaced the top-secret Norden bombsight on this risky mission (to prevent the Norden from falling into enemy hands). Instead, he used his shoelaces to get a bead on his target. Lewis vividly recalled the stories her dad told about this "off-the-radar" bombsight—and about a gutsy air maneuver his crew used to escape Japan, and how he knew he would make it back home:

*My father told me he tied his shoestrings together, put his knees up to his chest to steady his eyes, then looked directly into the center of where his shoestrings were and dropped his bombs over Yokosuka Naval Base. And it worked—everything was destroyed on the dock.*

*Then as Dad's crew headed for China, they ran into a task force of about 25 Japanese warships. When the men realized the ships were running parallel to each other, they all agreed their only chance would be to fly right down the middle. They banked that the Japanese wouldn't shoot on each other. So the pilot flew down the center and they got away, but the ride was far from over.*

*As they flew along the coast there was a cloud cover, a 100-mile-an-hour tailwind, and they had lost their instrument panel, so they didn't know where they were. Still Dad said they felt safe because they were together. He told me he wasn't nervous when they bombed Japan or when they had their run-in with the warships, but what upset him most was bailing out because no one knew if they'd make it.*

*When the time came for Dad to jump, it was night and it was raining. The crew thought they were over the China Sea, so they kept looking for the phosphorous on the water [flares] but they never found it. So Dad said, "This is a hell of a note: We completed our mission, we bombed Japan, and now we are going to be dinner for some shark in the China Sea." But the sharks didn't get them. The tailwind had pushed the plane 100 miles inland.*



*Dad had never bailed out [before] but he was told to count to 10 and pull the ripcord, so he did—he counted 5, 10, then pulled. Well, they all ended up landing in a rice paddy, so they didn't break all their bones. Then, within a few days, the crew was rescued by Chinese guerilla forces and taken to a girls' mission. One of the nuns there was Sister Celena, who'd come from New Orleans, and when she served my dad red beans and rice, he knew he'd make it home to New Orleans.*

**W**ALLACE HITE KNOWS HIS FATHER was very lucky to have survived the raid. Lieutenant Robert L. Hite (one of five raiders still living) was the co-pilot of *Bat Out of Hell*, the 16th and last B-25 to take off from the *Hornet*. Hite's plane successfully bombed oil storage tanks and an aircraft factory, but low fuel forced the crew to bail out close to enemy lines. All five men, along with three crew members from the sixth plane (*The Green Hornet*, whose other two crewmen had drowned), were captured by the Japanese.

Hite was one of only four of those eight men to survive the subsequent 40 months of brutal treatment, mostly in solitary confinement. Three of the other men were executed, and one died in cap-

tivity. Hite's fate was closely intertwined with that of crewmate Corporal Jacob "Jake" DeShazer, *Bat out of Hell*'s bombardier, who was held in a neighboring cell. Hite's son recounted his dad's story of how the two men used the "shave and a haircut" knock to communicate secretly:

*Every day my dad woke up, he didn't know if he would be executed or if he would live. Every day the Japanese kept that hanging over his head, and I think probably that was the hardest thing for him to deal with, other than that he was tortured, beat, slapped, or kicked every day. Really, it was amazing that any of them survived.*

Hite recalled how his dad told him that he and DeShazer had to signal to each other nonverbally, because the guards didn't want them to speak.

*When one guy knocked on the wall, "shave and a haircut," the other would answer "two bits," which meant it was time to meet at the banjo [their common toilet]. Since this spot was out of earshot of the guards, they would put their heads down there and talk.*

*But one time Dad knocked on the wall and there was no answer from Jake's side. He knew Jake was in his cell, so he kept "calling" off and on all day. The next day there was all kinds of*

LEFT & PREVIOUS SPREAD: NATIONAL ARCHIVES; OPPOSITE: US AIR FORCE





commotion in Jake's cell and Dad was really concerned something had happened to him. Later the next day Jake finally knocked on the wall "shave and a haircut" and Dad hit "two bits" and that's when Jake told him he had been praying.

The commotion Hite heard that day was the guards beating DeShazer as he knelt down to pray. DeShazer's ability to find solace in religion helped him endure his captors' cruelty. For the next three and a half years, his life was filled with pain, but during the three-week period when he was allowed to read the Bible, he found the will to live and resolved to become a devout Christian.

DeShazer's daughter Carol Aiko Deshazer Dixon recalls her father telling how he was determined to fly the raid despite the hole that had developed in his plane's turret during the 16-day



voyage aboard the *Hornet*. Dixon also remembered his story about the religious turning point that enabled him to survive his horrific imprisonment.

My dad's plane was last in line on the *Hornet's* deck, and at some point during the rough seas en route to Japan, his plane hit the one in front, which put a hole in the turret (where he would sit as bombardier). Dad told me his biggest worry after he discovered the hole was to make sure the plane wasn't scrapped from the mission, so he waited until they were in the air before he told the pilot. After that Dad and Bobby Hite tried to plug the hole with their coats (which kept flying out).

Once they finished bombing, the plane ran out of gas and the crew parachuted over occupied China, where they were all captured the next day. Most of Dad's confinement was in solitary, so he had a lot of time to think. He told me how he had a lot of

The Doolittle Raiders shook Japan's confidence less than five months after Pearl Harbor. Today, their children share stories their fathers told them. Above, numbered, raiders whose stories are in this article: 1. Master Sergeant Robert Bourgeois (back row, center; also on opening spread, second man to the right, diagonally, from Mitscher); 2. Corporal Jacob DeShazer (back row, center) and Lieutenant Robert Hite (front row, right); 3. Lieutenant Thomas Griffin (back row, far left; also on opening spread between Bourgeois and Mitscher); and 4. Captain Edward York (front row, left) and Lieutenant Robert Emmens (front row, right). Above, inset: Captured by the Japanese in China, Hite is led away blindfolded.

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regrets and wished for another chance in life. Then, when Robert Meder (from plane six) died, the emperor told the guards to treat the prisoners better, so they were given a few more baths and some reading material, which included a Bible.

When Dad got ahold of that book, he told me, he decided to find out what it was all about. He only had it for three weeks, but Dad memorized the scripture and the Lord really spoke to him. Some time after that he came so close to death that he thought maybe the best thing to do was die rather than stay on earth and suffer. But then he asked if the Lord would save his life and give him a second chance, he would go back to Japan as a missionary.

Dad really felt like his life was spared, so after he returned home, he went to Seattle Pacific College, met and married my mother, and then in 1948 the two of them went to Japan as missionaries and stayed there for 30 years. During that time he met Mitsuo Fuchida, the man who led the [first wave of the air] attack on Pearl Harbor and who later became a Christian under my dad's ministry. When my father died, even the *Wall Street Journal* wrote, "It is one of life's safer bets that he is resting in peace."

MICHAEL EMMENS'S FATHER, First Lieutenant Robert G. Emmens, was copilot of the eighth plane to take off from the *Hornet*. Due to high fuel consumption and a malfunctioning top gun turret, the pilot landed the plane 40 miles north of Vladivostok, Russia. He hoped to refuel and fly on to China, but instead, Soviets confiscated the plane and interned the fliers in Russia for 13 months. The men finally escaped into Persia (now Iran) and returned home in May 1943.

The Doolittle Raid's original plan had called for the planes to land in Russia. But the Soviets, who were not at war with Japan, made it clear they did not want the Americans to use their fields. Russia was off limits, the raider crews were told. All the planes adhered to this decision except the eighth plane to take off from the *Hornet*. The reason for this landing has perplexed many, especially Emmens's son.

My dad died before I became aware of the mystery and the controversy surrounding the only plane that landed in Russia. He spent his whole life in military intelligence, and if he was told at one time not to reveal whether they went there intentionally, he would not have revealed it to me even if I had asked him.

The only thing my dad ever said to me which might have been a breach of confidentiality happened in the late 1980s in Medford, Oregon. He was reading an article about an arms cache found in Austria in some farmer's hillside, and he said, I remember burying that. Then he told me that one of the things he did as a military attaché in Austria in the 1950s was to take arms caches and bury them around Europe.

There were a lot of mysteries surrounding my dad's crew, but also

a lot of indicators that made me conclude it was a planned diversion to Russia. They included things like he and pilot Ski York [Captain Edward J. York] being on the flight at the last minute without having gone through any training. [The other men selected for the mission had spent three intensive weeks honing their carrier take-off skills at Florida's Eglin Field, where the B-25s' carburetors were adjusted in the meantime so the planes could fly the 2,000-mile mission without refueling.] My dad never went to Eglin and the carburetors on his airplane had not been tuned correctly for the long-range flight. There were other men who had gone through the training that were aboard the *Hornet* and who could have been used to go on the raid. I don't think anyone is ever going to find why my Dad really landed in Russia. Maybe there's a paper somewhere in the military archives, but so far no one has come across it.

MAJOR THOMAS C. GRIFFIN, one of the five Doolittle Raiders still living today, was the navigator on *Whirling Dervish*, the ninth plane to take off from the *Hornet*. After his crew bombed the Tokyo Gas and Electric Company, the plane headed for China, where the men bailed out in the dark and rain. Only one crew member was injured. Almost 70 years later, Griffin's son John is still incredulous about his dad's survival on a most unforgiving mission.

Dad's own bail-out was something his progeny would not want to know about, at least until they were grown. He told me he was in a storm and the high winds were buffeting him about and that his chute was collapsing. Fortunately, he got below those winds, the chute stayed open, and the next thing he knew bamboo leaves were brushing his cheek and he came to as soft a landing as you could ever imagine. After that, Dad said, he unbuckled his harness and just walked out.

The very idea that these planes flew over Japan, reached China—that none of the men had ever jumped out of an airplane and that there was so little loss of life was just amazing. If you wrote this story for a screenplay, Hollywood producers would say, "That is so much hot air. No one is going to believe that. It's just not reasonable." But Doolittle said it could be done. He showed it could be done. So they knew it could be done. These guys were world-beaters. ★

SUSAN ZIMMERMAN is a freelance writer based in St. Louis, Missouri. She interviewed sons and daughters of Doolittle Raiders at the 69th reunion of the surviving raiders in Omaha, Nebraska, in April 2011. The five living Doolittle Raiders are RICHARD E. COLE, THOMAS C. GRIFFIN, ROBERT L. HITE, EDWARD JOSEPH SAYLOR, and DAVID J. THATCHER. The 70th reunion will be at the National Museum of the US Air Force, at Ohio's Wright Patterson Air Force Base, this April.

