

COL. HENRY POTTER, DOOLITTLE RAIDER

On 18 April 1942, 80 airmen from the 17th Bomb Group climbed into 16 B-25 medium bombers, took off from the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Hornet, and proceeded west to bomb Tokyo and several other Japanese cities. Four months after Pearl Harbor, it was the first U.S. bombing raid over Japan and provided a significant boost to American morale.

The navigator aboard Doolittle's lead aircraft was Col. Henry Potter, then a lieutenant in the 17th Bomb Group. Years later Colonel Potter paid a visit to Goodfellow, now the home of his former unit, and provided an interview with wing historians Dr John Garrett and Capt. Mike Strickler. In recognition of the Doolittle Raid, key portions of that interview are reprinted here.

GARRETT/STRICKLER. How were you selected to participate in the raid?

POTTER. I volunteered. I was in South Carolina along with a majority of the people when we were called to put together the officer crewmembers.

GARRETT/STRICKLER. Were you told anything at all about the mission?

POTTER. No, they just told us they needed volunteers for a mission that was going to be important and dangerous; it wasn't until we got to Eglin field that Doolittle told us any more.

GARRETT/STRICKER. So you didn't exactly know the destination until you were aboard the aircraft carrier?

POTTER. I personally didn't know, yet I went to California with all the maps in our airplane – I guess I could have looked at them but I never did. I don't remember really knowing where we were going until we were told on the carrier. We all knew something because of the short field training we had, but we didn't really know what we were going to do.

GARRETT/STRICKLER. Tell us about the short-field takeoffs.

POTTER. The first inkling there was something going on was when they brought in the Navy pilots from Pensacola to teach our pilots short field take-offs. With a full bomb load and gas the B-25 weighed about 30,000 pounds, which was pretty big back then, and the record for that weight was between 400 and 500 feet. We trained at Eglin Field, practicing the bombing, navigation, and gunnery techniques. We also modified the aircraft there.

GARRETT/STRICKLER. How did you compensate for the extra fuel needed on the mission?

POTTER. The airplane normally only carried around 700 gallons of gas, and we had to fly 2,000 miles. So they filled half the bomb bay with a 265-gallon tank, which left a little room for 500-pound bombs. On top of the crawlway space they put an inflatable bladder that could hold around 120 gallons. They removed the telescopic turret, and put a 60-gallon tank in there. As the final bit, each of us had 10 five-gallon cans of gas, and the engineer poured them into the tanks as needed. We ended up with 1,100 plus gallons on board. As it turned out, it was barely enough to get us through.

GARRETT/STRICKLER. As Army pilots, how welcome were you aboard the *Hornet*, the aircraft carrier.

POTTER. When we first went on board, we weren't welcomed by the Navy people. They were already crowded when we came in, most of us stayed in the admiral's conference room on cots, but some of our pilots shared bunks with some of the Navy pilots. That all changed the morning they announced to both us and the Navy people we were going to Tokyo.

GARRETT/STRICKLER. Launching bombers from a carrier had only previously been attempted once, in preparation for this raid. How confident were you that you could get your bomber off the carrier?

POTTER. Flying with Doolittle, if you were not confident he could take an airplane off there, why, you wouldn't be confident with anybody.

GARRETT/STRICKLER. You were supposed to launch from 400 miles off the coast, but a Japanese fishing boat spotted you and the decision was made to launch early rather than expose the task force to Japanese attack. When you had to take off hundreds of miles farther from Japan than anticipated, did you think you'd have enough fuel not only to reach Japan but to continue on and make the airfields in China?

POTTER. At the time we left the carrier, we really didn't have time to think about it. But after we hit the target, it did become a concern. I think we all thought we weren't going to have enough fuel to make it. We decided when we began to run out of fuel, we would buzz a few of the fishing boats off the coast of China, hoping we could ditch along side one of those and be picked up by a Chinese fishing boat. If not, perhaps we could overpower one, since most boats only had two or three people on them. But we lucked out when we left the southern tip of Japan since, although the weather got bad, we picked up a hell of a tailwind that allowed us to get into China before we bailed out.

GARRETT/STRICKLER. Did you have any problem finding the target?

POTTER. We didn't have any problem. It was bright and sunny, with good landmarks. Our target was the center of the industrial area of Tokyo. It was supposed to burn very well, so we had planned to take off so we would get on target at dusk, and hoped to use the burning as a beacon for the other planes to come in on their targets. This would also get us into China at daylight, where we hoped to refuel and get on out.

GARRETT/STRICKLER. When you were approaching the target, there were Japanese aircraft in the vicinity. Did they know who you were?

POTTER. We saw a flight of nine airplanes who seemed like they wanted to attack us, but we had no problems evading them. They were older and slower. We had some anti-aircraft fired at us, but nothing serious.

GARRETT/STRICKLER. How close to your intended landing site were you when you bailed out?

POTTER. Well, it would have been a good one if the pilot hadn't started trying to get a visual fix when we came over the coast. We really were right on course when we went across Mig Po Bay but we really didn't know it since the weather was so bad. The pilot could barely see some lights around dusk so we decided to get down to try and get a visual fix. But by the time we got down either the clouds hid the lights or they were turned out by the residents, thinking an air raid was coming. After doing this, we were basically lost and ended up bailing out around 9:30 p.m. I think we ended up about 60 miles from our landing site.

GARRETT/STRICKLER. Running out of fuel, you and the crew were forced to bail out over Japanese-occupied China. How did you make it out of China?

POTTER. By every means known to man. We walked, went on rickshaws, sedan chairs, rode a horse, went on a boat on the river, some sort of a car, a so-called bus, which was a truck that we sat on, a train, and then finally a C-47 airplane at Chungking. We covered just about every means of transportation you could think of. We flew from there to India, and some of us got to return to the United States, and some stayed there.

GARRETT/STRICKLER. Did you stay with the 17th after the raid?

POTTER. Yes, I went back to the 17th at Barksdale Field, Louisiana, and converted to the B-26. I then went to North Africa in the fall. . . . I got back from Africa fairly early. They sent one B-26 from each of the B-26 groups back to the states not long after we invaded Sicily. They sent us back to talk to the war plants, and since I had friends in high places, I got selected to return. That was pretty much the end of my war career. . . . I retired March 1, 1970.