

Remembering the Doolittle Raid

Key US action in WWII had roots in Pendleton

By JOHN TILLMAN
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The United States was less than five months into World War II and needed a serious boost.

That came April 18, 1942, when 16 Army Air Force B-25 Mitchell bombers took off from the aircraft carrier Hornet in the North Pacific. The 80 airmen raided Tokyo and other parts of Honshu. This unprecedented joint service operation was America's first offensive action of the war.

Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle — later a four-star general — planned and led the raid. Of the 16 planes and crews, 15 crashed, ditched or crash-landed. One landed in the Soviet Union.

Still, the raid showed the U.S. military could reach the far shores of Japan. And the Pendleton Field military base was central to the effort.

According to oregonencyclopedia.org, in November 1941, 14 North American B-25 bombers arrived at Pendleton Field on Pendleton's Airport Hill, and in December, planes from Pendleton Field flew antisubmarine patrols along coastal areas as part of the 2nd Air Force air defense for the Northwest Pacific coastline. That changes in January 1942, when Pendleton Field was assigned the task of providing heavy bombardment unit training. The airfield was one of four bases with runways long enough to fulfill the training requirements.

The Army in February 1942 reassigned the B-25-equipped 17th Bombardment Group at Pendleton Field



Images of the airmen who trained in the early months of World War II at Pendleton Field for the Doolittle Raid hang on a wall Monday, April 18, 2022, during the Pendleton Air Museum's dinner and fundraiser on the 80th anniversary of the raid.

Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

to Columbia Army Air Base, South Carolina, where Doolittle formed volunteer crews to train for the raid.

To commemorate the 80th anniversary of the daring exploit, the Oregon Army National Guard flight facility on the west end of the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport dedicated new plaques for the Guard's B-25 exhibit. And the Pendleton Air Museum that evening held a fundraising dinner with auctions at the Back-Fire Station also in remembrance of the raid, complete with senior members of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 922 presenting the colors.

Recalling the raid

PAM board member, retired Army aviator Col. Tim Kelly, introduced keynote speaker, retired Army Maj. Gen. Fred Rees of Helix, to the sold-out audience. Kelly pointed to photos of the brave bomber crew members adorning the west wall. He noted volunteers for the seemingly suicidal

mission served in the 17th Bombardment Group, based at Pendleton Field from June 1941 to February 1942.

Its four squadrons were the first to receive B-25s and most experienced in operating them. Of the 80 airmen in the raid, 71 survived. Two crew members drowned. The Japanese captured eight, executing three of them, and four died of starvation and maltreatment.

Only Oregon native Staff Sgt. Jake DeShazer lived to return to Japan as a missionary. Other Raiders died during the war.

Kelly's fellow Vietnam War veteran Rees graduated from Griswold High School, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, and from the University of Oregon Law School. Rees served four times as adjutant general of the Oregon National Guard. He was chief of staff of U.S. Northern Command, director of the Army National Guard and twice acting chief of the

National Guard Bureau. After retiring, Rees returned to his family's ranch.

"From my earliest days, the sacrifices of veterans were impressed upon my mind," Rees said. "Five uncles served in World War II, not in B-25s, but in B-24 bombers in the Southwest Pacific. All had stories to share."

He added, "There was a significant amount of pride in Pendleton's association with the Doolittle Raiders. As a youngster, the history of the barracks, hangar and guard shacks at the airport made an impression on me."

Rees recalled he was in second or third grade in the early 1950s when he saw the "Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo" in a Pendleton movie house. The 1944 film starred Van Johnson as pilot Ted Lawson and Spencer Tracy as Doolittle. It was nominated for technical Academy Awards and won for best special effects.

Lawson wrote the book on which the movie was based. He and three other crew members were badly injured while ditching on the China coast. Only one member, engineer/gunner, David Thatcher of Montana, was in good enough condition to help his comrades. He died in 2016, aged 94, the second-to-last surviving Raider. Co-pilot Dick Cole died in 2019 at the age of 103. The mission's flight surgeon amputated Lawson's leg in China.

"The raid was important, so that people knew we could strike back after Pearl Harbor," Rees said.

Just nine days before the raid, Americans and Filipinos surrendered at Bataan.

"It was not a great time for the people of the U.S.," Rees continued.

"While the raid didn't cause a lot of damage, a morale boost swept the country. People were thrilled. Each aircraft had a story of derring-do, skill, courage and patriotism, of 80 volunteers willing to take the fight to the enemy."

Memorials on display

Rees was instrumental in building a second Oregon Army National Guard Aviation Support Facility at Pendleton in 1996.

"It was in my mind to dedicate the facility to the Doolittle Raiders and Pendleton Field," he said. "We collected and displayed memorabilia from the outset. At the dedication, we were honored to host a few Raiders." And he wanted to have a display of a B-25 Mitchell bomber, but that didn't pan out. The U.S. made thousands of the planes, he said, but finding one proved a challenge.

"The surviving Doolittle Raid plane was rumored still to exist in Vladivostok, but that was too far," he said. "We found one in (Texas), dismantled, transported and reassembled it. With the help of the air museum and community people, we restored it in the Chinook hangar. It's now on display at the facility."

The Oregon Military Department, Rees concluded, would like to make a public plaza around the bomber, and he thanked the crowd for their "enthusiasm and support for this event tonight to commemorate some of America's great heroes."

Live auctioneer Ford Bonney of Hermiston said, "Growing up here, I didn't know about this history. So it's great what you're doing."

East Oregonian news editor Phil Wright contributed to this article.

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