

Alameda Museum Quarterly

LOCAL BOY BECOMES LEGENDARY WAR HERO

by Robbie Dileo

ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT HEROES IN UNITED STATES HISTORY

was born in Alameda, December 14, 1896. James Harold Doolittle lived at the corner of Foley and Buena Vista until he was four. The house still exists today, but was moved around the corner to 1620 Foley Street in 1912 when builder George Noble constructed bungalows on the Buena Vista lots. Look beyond the Marketplace parking lot on Park Street and you will see the only Victorian-era house mid-block. Built in 1887 by J.E. Langren, the residence is now a fourplex in only fair exterior condition, but intact architecturally.

His father Frank headed to Nome, Alaska as part of the Klondike Gold Rush, continuing to make his living as a carpenter and building a new house there for his family. His mother Rosa moved north with young Jimmy in 1900 and stayed about eight years. Jimmy was bright, spry, with a head of curls, but his short stature caused bullies to tease him. Good at gymnastics and acrobatic routines, he fought back when challenged, usually winning — a character building skill that lasted a lifetime.

With relatives in Los Angeles, Jimmy and his mother returned there in 1908, leaving his father in Alaska, but



The young Jimmy Doolittle Alameda, 1898



The Doolittle home in Alameda now located at 1620 Foley Street. Image: Robbie Dileo.

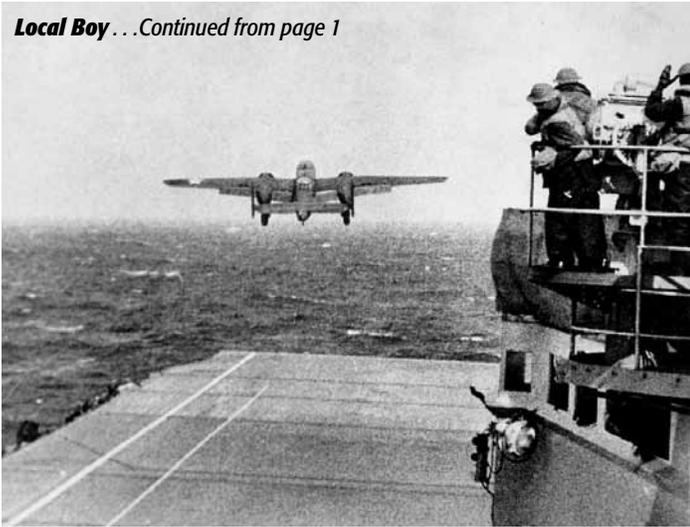
The family in Nome Alaska, 1908. Rosa Shephard Doolittle, James H. Doolittle, and Frank H. Doolittle. Family Images: USAFA Album.



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One of the B-25 bombers taking off from the deck of the USS Hornet (CV-8). All planes lacked enough fuel to reach bases and either crash landed or were ditched along China's south coast.

remaining married. A less harsh environment with better educational opportunities allowed Jimmy to hone his pugilist skills, becoming a West Coast Flyweight Champ at age 15 and then holding his own at 17 in a Bantamweight match-up with World Champion Kit Williams.

Riding motorcycles to get to class and being near an airfield evolved into a love of aviation, as both required strong mechanical abilities with motors. Going fast was fun. A daredevil was born who could tweak engines to win many airplane races.

- **1922** - first transcontinental flight, first to fly only on instruments, did it blindfolded.
- **1932** - fastest cross country flight in 11 ¼ hours, and he miraculously survived several crash landings.

Due to WWI, Doolittle left studies at UC Berkeley to join the military as a flying cadet in 1917. Participation in an army program in practical aero-nautical engineering got him into a special program at MIT. Via petition, UC Berkeley awarded him a BS degree on the basis of those studies and his flying experience. He later earned a Masters from MIT and then received MIT's first Doctor of Science in Aeronautical Engineering. Racing in early airplanes became Jimmy's passion, but he also married his high school sweetheart on December 24, 1917, Josephine Daniels, nicknamed Joe, a remarkable woman in her own right.

They had two sons and lived a nomadic life with Jimmy frequently absent, pursuing his racing and promoting aviation fuel while working for Shell Oil. In 1940, seeing war on the horizon, Jimmy returned to the Army and was given a staff position in the Army Air Corps working for Hap Arnold.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 brought the United States into the war. At age 45, the 5'4" Lt. Colonel was asked to do a secret mission to retaliate against Japan. His men, that history would call The Doolittle Raiders, would have followed him anywhere.

A total of sixteen B-25s that arrived at NAS Alameda, California, on March 31, 1942 had no mechanical issues. Fifteen made up the mission force and the sixteenth, by last-minute agreement with the Navy, was loaded so that it could be launched shortly after departure from San Francisco to demonstrate to the Army pilots that sufficient deck space remained for a safe takeoff. Instead, that bomber was made part of the mission force.

The raid, launched from the deck of the *USS Hornet* (CV-8) at 620 miles off the coast of Japan, dumped tons of bombs on military and industrial targets in Tokyo, Yokohama, Kobe, Nagoya and Osaka. This demonstrated that Japan was vulnerable to attack and boosted American morale after many losses in the Pacific.

Our very own Alameda hero was promoted in 1985 to four-star rank by a special act of Congress and had his stars pinned on by President Ronald Reagan and Senator Barry Goldwater. In 1989 he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President George H.W. Bush.

At the end of his amazing life, September 27, 1993, James H. Doolittle was 96, widowed, and living in Carmel, California. As a final honor, Doolittle and his wife Josephine were interred at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington DC.



Alameda Mayor Winthrop J. Branscheid, James H. Doolittle, and wife Josephine on November 5, 1945. The event, honoring Doolittle is being broadcast on the KLX radio station identified on the microphone stand. The station was owned by the Oakland Tribune and was housed on the 20th floor of the Tribune Tower in Oakland.