

PROFILE IN LEADERSHIP

Moral Courage: Jimmy Doolittle, Eighth Air Force Memorandum 75-1, and Bombing Berlin

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Known for leading the daring Tokyo Raid of April 18, 1942, General James H. “Jimmy” Doolittle is one of America’s best-known Airmen from the World War II era. But as Benjamin Bishop points out in *Jimmy Doolittle: The Commander Behind the Legend*, “the academic community has largely overlooked Doolittle’s performance as a wartime commanding general,” specifically his leadership of the U.S. Army Air Force’s Eighth Air Force from January 1944 until the end of the war (Bishop, 2015, p. 2). Indeed, during his years commanding “The Mighty Eighth,” Doolittle demonstrated superb organizational leadership skills of the Army Air Force’s most powerful air task force in World War II. At its peak strength, the Eighth Air Force comprised 40 heavy bomber groups, 15 fighter groups, over 200,000 personnel, and thousands of aircraft.

Doolittle’s background as a test pilot, doctorate-wielding aeronautical engineer, record-setting aviator, reservist, and corporate executive during the interwar years were essential to his development. A close personal friendship with General Henry A. “Hap” Arnold certainly did not hurt either—and was key to Doolittle’s involvement with the Tokyo Raid and promotion over several more senior Airmen, resulting in command of large air organizations in 1942 and 1943. However, as Donald Miller writes in *Masters of the Air*, “everything in his makeup and personal history—his courage, his flying experience, his managerial background, his compassion for his crews, his technical knowledge of aircraft and foul weather flying, and a sobering prewar trip to Germany to study the *Luftwaffe*—equipped him for his new responsibilities” as the Eighth Air Force Commanding General (Miller, 2006, p. 247). Despite his lack of pre-war military leadership experience, he was indeed the right leader for the right organization at the right time.

It is easy to think of Doolittle in a very positive light. He was a charismatic leader, brilliant decision-maker, and technical and doctrinal innovator. All of his many biographies make his leadership skills and his impeccable character very clear. It is no surprise that members of the Air Force Academy’s Class of 2000 named Doolittle as their

Class Exemplar, the program's first individual to be so honored.¹ If it is true that reflecting on moral exemplars from the past is important to our own development as leaders of character (Zagzebski, 2017; Lamb, Brant, and Brooks, 2021), then knowing something about Doolittle is a must. And one leadership trait is especially worthy of further investigation—Doolittle's moral courage in dealing with both subordinates and superiors while leading Eighth Air Force. The Air Force Academy defines moral courage as “the ability to act and do the right thing even in the face of adversity” (Warrior Ethos, 2020). In an operational context, moral courage could involve having the fortitude to make decisions dealing with life or death that will likely face opposition from subordinates, that is, decisions that commanders know will be unpopular with the troops.

The next section of this article will highlight how Doolittle initiated a revision to the Eighth Air Force's crew rotation policy for sound operational reasons, despite strong resentment from crews flying extremely dangerous missions. Moral courage is also needed when disagreeing with superiors over operational policy. The final section will explain how Doolittle tried to reason with his boss, Lieutenant General Carl “Tooe” Spaatz, and directives from senior Allied leaders over targeting methods he believed were unethical. These two cases highlight for us the importance of moral courage as a leadership trait and Doolittle's example of how to effectively employ it in an operational context. These cases also emphasize the need for leaders of character to respect others and to behave ethically.

Eighth Air Force Memorandum 75-1

After his repatriation following the Tokyo Raid, Lieutenant Colonel Doolittle received the Medal of

Honor, and was promoted to Brigadier General. Arnold offered him to then-Lieutenant General Dwight “Ike” Eisenhower as a candidate to command air units participating in Operation Torch, the November 1942 Anglo-American invasion of Northwest Africa. Eisenhower reluctantly accepted. Ike was not particularly comfortable with Doolittle's lack of senior command experience, but respected General Arnold's offer, nevertheless.

As commander of Twelfth Air Force and later Fifteenth Air Force in the Northwest African and Mediterranean theaters, Doolittle gained experience leading large air organizations. He soon earned the reputation of being a superb air commander, gaining the respect of subordinates, Allies, and superiors for leading aggressively and effectively employing his

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forces. He was known for seeking out new ideas from subordinates and Allies alike. In December 1943 Arnold and Spaatz, with Eisenhower's concurrence, decided to shake up the air command structure in Europe and the Mediterranean. They moved Lieutenant General Ira Eaker from command of the Eighth Air Force in England to overall command of Allied air forces in the Mediterranean and moved Doolittle to command Eighth Air Force. Eighth Air Force comprised strategic bombers and their fighter escorts executing the main American effort in the Combined Bomber Offensive, the operation designed to crush German economic production and civilian morale through American and British long-range bombing. At the same time, Spaatz assumed the role of Commanding General of U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe, overseeing the efforts of Doolittle's Eighth Air Force and the strategic bombers of Italy-based Fifteenth Air Force.

¹ Each USAF Academy class since the Class of 2000 has selected an exemplar, and several World War 2 senior leaders have made the list, including Carl Spaatz (2006), “Hap” Arnold (2012), and Curtis LeMay (2013). The Exemplar Program was largely funded by Lt Gen (Ret) Marcus Anderson, USAFA Class of 1961.

Doolittle arrived at Eighth Air Force in early January 1944, at the same time larger numbers of American bombers, long-range escort fighters, and trained aircrews were arriving in Britain to bolster Eighth Air Force's combat power. Arnold and the Combined Chiefs of Staff ordered Spaatz and Doolittle to focus on the destruction of the *Luftwaffe* in preparation for D-Day, only six months away. What followed was a costly air war of attrition between massive formations of bombers and escorting fighters and defending German fighters and anti-aircraft artillery.

During the month of February 1944, which included a surge in operations called "Big Week" between February 20 and 25, Eighth Air Force lost 299 bombers but could make up its losses with replacements arriving in England from America. Doolittle's new fighter escort tactics—of allowing American fighter escorts to pursue German interceptors back to their airfields and to use a relay system of escorting fighter groups—severely mauled the *Luftwaffe's* fighter squadrons. In February, the *Luftwaffe* units defending Germany lost one-third of their single-engine fighters accompanied by a loss of 18% of their pilots (Davis, 2006). As winter turned to spring, Doolittle's bombers continued to target aircraft production plants, airfields, and oil production facilities to hinder Germany's ability to sustain their air defense.

But throughout this attritional campaign Doolittle and his subordinate commanders continued to worry about aircrew morale. An Army Air Force policy had been put in place in the fall of 1943 that allowed bomber crews to rotate back the continental United States after 25 missions (Wells, 1995). As a senior commander in the Mediterranean, Doolittle had supported this policy to sustain aircrew morale and to provide experienced aircrew members to serve as instructors supporting the massive expansion of the Army Air Forces worldwide (Historical Studies Branch, 1968). The policy gave crew members hope that they could survive their service in Europe, where

bomber loss rates were almost prohibitive. For example, Eighth Air Force's pre-Doolittle attack on Schweinfurt in October 1943 resulted in 60 bombers lost from a force of 229 that reached the target (Davis, 2006).

By early 1944, the 25-mission rotation policy no longer made sense. Though bomber losses were still high in absolute terms, loss rates were rapidly decreasing as a percentage of larger attacking formations. Raids of a thousand bombers and almost as many fighters soon became the norm. Experienced crews were being sent home just as their operational effectiveness was reaching its peak and just as their statistical chances of survival were increasing exponentially. In a letter dated 11 February, Arnold wrote to his field commanders directing them to rescind rotation policies that were based on "arbitrary" numbers of missions (Doolittle, 1991; Revised Eighth Air Force Memorandum 75-1, 1944).

Given this urging from Arnold, Doolittle revised the Eighth Air Force rotation policy, effective March 15, 1944, to state that combat crew members would be "eligible" for rotation after 30 missions but would only be allowed home when operational conditions permitted (Revised Eighth Air Force Memorandum 75-1, 1944). After all, Doolittle had requirements to fill non-combat staff positions in his headquarters and those of his subordinate air divisions, wings, groups, and squadrons. After consulting with his staff, Doolittle concluded that a longer combat tour was warranted for the following reasons:

1. Missions of the previous month had been much less costly through air casualties than the 15 percent anticipated.
2. The loss of combat personnel due to completion of 25 sortie tours was too great to carry out the missions planned and man the aircraft now available.
3. The chance of survival was increased considerably.

4. The Flight Surgeon could find little evidence of operational fatigue to justify retention of the former policy.
5. The replacements were not received at the rate anticipated and needed.” (Headquarters Eighth Air Force Narrative History for March 1944, 1944, p. 47)

Doolittle’s approach to fielding this new change—known as Revised Eighth Air Force Memorandum 75-1—was noteworthy. As he later reflected, he knew his decision would be “greeted with a great lack of enthusiasm” from his bomber crews (Doolittle, 1991, p. 360) and he would have to make his case with the troops. Perhaps his moral courage in making this decision was bolstered by the facts and figures he hoped his men would appreciate. Thus, he armed his commanders with statistics showing rapidly declining casualty rates over time in order to assist them with explaining the new policy (Commanders Meeting Minutes, 2 March 1944). During a meeting with his senior commanders, he emphasized the need to watch closely for declining morale and to openly communicate with the aircrews across the Eighth Air Force: “Remember that we are dealing with intelligent men. They should have explained to them what we are doing and why we are doing it” (Commanders Meeting Minutes, 22 March 1944; Bishop, 2015, p. 88). This approach demonstrates Doolittle’s intimate knowledge of the people he was responsible for leading.

Doolittle and Spaatz often visited units at their airfields to check on the morale of the crews. On one occasion when visiting a bomber unit that had suffered particularly horrific losses, a not-so-sober pilot approached the generals and said, “I know why you’re here. You think our morale is shot because we’ve been taking it on the nose. Well, I can tell you our morale is all right. There’s only one thing that hurts our morale—that’s when generals come around to see what’s the matter with it” (Doolittle, 1991, p. 363; Wells, 1995, p. 143). Excellent feedback indeed.

Target Berlin

Eighth Air Force missions continued to pound enemy industrial production with raids deep into Germany. After D-Day, Eisenhower often tasked Spaatz and Doolittle with supporting ground units with heavy bomber missions, such as during the breakout from Normandy near St. Lo and in support of other operations such as Operation Market-Garden and the counter-offensive following the Battle of the Bulge. By spring 1945, *Luftwaffe* fighters seldom challenged Doolittle’s bomber formations, though new German jet fighters continued to pose a serious threat. Spaatz continued to direct Eighth Air Force to attack remaining German industrial production as well as transportation targets such as railways. Many key junctions of rail lines as well as marshalling yards naturally appeared in towns and cities across Germany. The continuation of the Combined Bomber Offensive would soon challenge Doolittle with an ethical issue demanding that he demonstrate moral courage with his immediate commander.

As a result of the Malta Conference in late January 1945, Spaatz directed Doolittle to bomb Berlin. Senior American and British leaders had determined that heavy bombing raids against cities in eastern Germany would hinder German efforts to move troops and supplies attempting to fend off the Red Army’s advance from the east. Such raids would not only assist Soviet forces but would also show the German people that resistance was futile.

The Eighth Air Force had attacked Berlin several times since its first assault on factories in the vicinity of the German capital on March 4, 1944. Spaatz’s orders of late January 1944 were of a different nature, however. New targeting priorities for U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe would be synthetic oil plants, followed by the cities of Berlin, Leipzig, and Dresden (Davis, 1993). As part of the upcoming Berlin attack, Doolittle received orders to attack political targets, such as the Air Ministry building and Gestapo Headquarters, in

the middle of the city. Spaatz hoped that a heavy attack on Berlin's city center might finally break the morale of the German people.

On January 30th, Doolittle wrote to Spaatz objecting to sending his crews into harm's way for targets that were not "strictly military" (Davis, 1993, p. 549). He also questioned targeting civilian morale in a country where years of bombing had not broken the German people. The American bombing doctrine of World War II had been to attack German economic or transportation targets that had direct military impacts. Collateral damage to civilians had been considered an unfortunate result, but the U.S. Army Air Forces had

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done their best to avoid directly attacking German civilians. Doolittle argued that such an attack on the city center of Berlin would essentially mean that the Eighth Air Force would use the Royal Air Force doctrine of area bombing, which would result in massive civilian casualties and potential accusations of terror tactics. As Richard Davis quotes, Doolittle appealed to Spaatz's humanity, asserting that "We will, in what may be one of our last and best remembered operations regardless of its effectiveness, violate the basic American principle of precision bombing of targets of strictly military significance for which our tactics were designed and our crews trained and indoctrinated" (Davis, 1993, p. 550). Doolittle obviously had to summon his moral courage to a great degree to challenge his immediate superior, who he greatly respected and admired and who many years later said he "loved" (Doolittle Interview, 1971).

Spaatz replied to Doolittle's message simply by restating the targeting priorities, practically ignoring his chief subordinate's reservations. Poor weather conditions postponed the attack until 3 February. On that day, 932 B-17s attacked their railway targets as well as government buildings in the center of Berlin. Doolittle later said in his memoir that "the object was to interrupt troop movements and, concurrently, lower German morale" (Doolittle, 1991, p. 402) with no other comment on the mission. Eighth Air Force mission analysis later showed that this attack resulted in heavy damage to most targets and was "undoubtedly one of the outstanding operations conducted by this air force" (Davis, 2006, p. 499). Unfortunately, some bomber groups had dropped their bombs on nearby residential areas, resulting in almost 5,000 Berliners killed and injured and over 120,000 left homeless. Doolittle's prediction was correct: Berliners proved resilient, at least for several more months, German morale seemed to remain steady, civilian casualties were heavy, and the German propaganda machine branded the attack as terror bombing.

This disagreement between Spaatz and Doolittle seemed to have a negligible impact on their relationship. Spaatz did, however, give up on targeting German morale. The infamous attacks on Dresden during February 13-15, 1945, was an example of Doolittle's bombers continuing to target specific transportation and industrial nodes despite the RAF's continued use of night area bombing techniques. In the remaining weeks of the war, strategic bombers continued to focus on oil and transportation facilities and by early April "were running out of targets" (Doolittle, 1991, p. 404). On April 16, 1945, Spaatz directed his strategic forces to terminate the Combined Bomber Offensive and focus on tactical support to ground forces (Craven & Cate, 1951). The Germans signed unconditional surrender documents on May 7.

After the cessation of hostilities in Europe, Doolittle proceeded to the Pacific to prepare the way for the Eighth Air Force's redeployment against Japanese strategic targets. Under Doolittle's continuing leadership, crews of the Eighth Air Force would train in the B-29 bomber and operate out of bases on Okinawa. Doolittle arrived there on July 17, 1945. As the existing Twentieth Air Force continued to conduct strategic raids against Japan, Doolittle began receiving his newly trained crews and aircraft for Eighth Air Force, not scheduled to be at full strength until early 1946.

Although the atomic attacks of August 6th and 9th, 1945 devastated the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, respectively, the Japanese did not immediately surrender. Hap Arnold subsequently directed Spaatz, who by now had assumed command of strategic air forces in the Pacific theater, to conduct a 1,000-plane conventional B-29 raid against Japan. Spaatz extended an invitation to Doolittle to have his only Eighth Air Force units in theater (two groups of B-29s) participate, warning him that if he did not launch missions soon then the war would be over before the Eighth could be in combat against the Japanese. Doolittle declined. The Japanese surrendered two days later (Doolittle, 1991).

Doolittle's Eighth Air Force experience highlights the need for senior commanders to summon moral courage when necessary, toward subordinates and superiors alike. It is difficult to determine which is more challenging, and that judgment would depend on organizational culture and relationships with superiors, respectively. It seems that in all of his command positions, Doolittle worked very hard to create an atmosphere of open communication while working hard to build trust with those above him and with those below him in the chain of command. He is truly an exemplar not only for senior leaders, but for all of us to emulate.

Thoughts for Consideration

- In your experience has it been more difficult to display moral courage in disagreements with superiors or with subordinates? Why?
- What leadership techniques mentioned above do you admire and plan to emulate? Why?

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