



Mission: History

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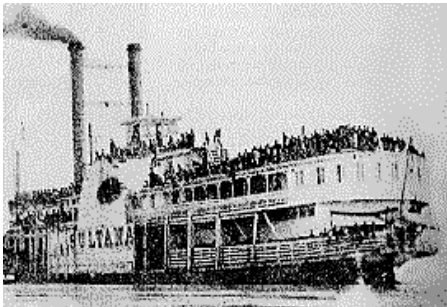
1865: Worst Ever U.S. Marine Disaster Kills 1,800 Union POW's

It was the worst marine disaster in American history. It happened to the river steamer *Sultana* at two in the morning on April 27, 1865, when her boiler exploded on the Mississippi.

Somewhere between 1,700 and 1,800 men lost their lives, when *Sultana* blew up, caught fire and sank, a few miles above Memphis, as she was passing a cluster of islands known in those days as the Hen and Chickens.

The 1,700 to 1,800 men were part of a cargo — that's the right word here — of men that *Sultana* was taking home to Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and thereabouts. The rest of the cargo — about 500 or 600 men — were saved.

The men were on their way home to Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and there-



IT WAS STANDING ROOM ONLY on *Sultana* as she left Vicksburg with about 2,300 repatriated Union POW's

abouts from places like Andersonville, which was a prison down in the South. They were Union soldiers who had been prisoners of war of the Rebels in the American Civil War. Most were emaciated, suffering from malnutrition, and many were on litters, but all were

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1945: The Mightiest Armada Ever Carries the Pacific War to Okinawa



THE BIG GUNS OF USS *TENNESSEE* pound Okinawa as soldiers of the 24th Army Corps head for the beach. It would take three Marine divisions and four Army divisions three months to secure the island.

1942: Malta's Defense Calls for Spitfires — Wasp Delivers the Goods

Though the Royal Navy had effectively affirmed its control of the Mediterranean Sea with its victory over Italian naval forces at Cape Matapan in March 1941, it was control of the sea only. The skies belonged to the Luftwaffe wherever within range of its bases.

Malta and its approaches were within range of Axis airbases in Sicily, only 60 nautical miles away, and German-occupied Tunisia, 175. And Malta was the only British land between Gibraltar, nearly 1,000 miles to the west, and Al-

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Okinawa Proves to be Bloodiest Pacific Battle

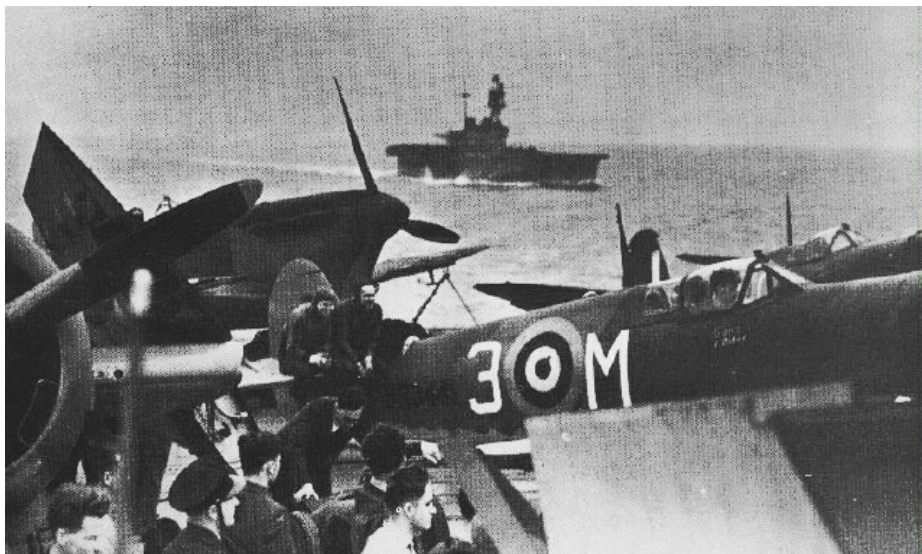
From the bridge of his flagship, USS *Indianapolis*, Admiral Raymond A. Spruance could look out on the mightiest armada the world had ever seen — if he could see that far.

For the invasion of Okinawa on Easter Sunday, 1 April 1945, he had more than 40 aircraft carriers, 18 battle-ships, 12 heavy cruisers, 15 light cruisers, the only two U.S. battle cruisers, *Alaska* and *Guam*, about 200 destroyers and hundreds of assorted transports and support ships — more than 1,300 ships in all. He would need them. Okinawa was a prefecture of Japan. Spruance was hitting the Japs where they lived.

Spruance would land an invasion

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Wasp Launches 59 Aircraft in 61 Minutes



RAF GROUND CREWS AT SEA ready some of the 47 Spitfires for launch. USS *Wasp* was borrowed from the U.S. Navy because no British carrier, such as HMS *Eagle* here, could carry a sufficient number to get the job done.

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exandria, about 800 miles east in Egypt. In 1940, the island's air defenses consisted of three biplane fighters named Faith, Hope and Charity.

Malta's 115 square miles of rock could not feed its 275,000 people, and the Germans mounted a 'round the clock air siege to starve the island out. Convoys were attacked en route to Malta and ships were sunk at wharveside while they were unloading. Though a few Hurricane fighters had joined Faith, Hope and Charity, Malta needed Spitfires to wrest control of the air from the Germans, but the island was well out of fighter range from any British bases.

It would be too risky to crate the Spits and attempt to ship them in with a convoy, and they wouldn't be ready to fight until they had been reassembled even if they got there. It was decided that the only way to provide the airplanes was by carrier. But the British did not have an aircraft carrier that could ferry enough planes to be worthwhile.

USS *Wasp* was operating in the North Sea and a former naval person asked his American friend for a favor. With approval of Admiral Ernest J. King, Captain John W. Reeves sailed *Wasp* around the north of Scotland, down

through the Minch, which separates the Isle of Skye from the Outer Hebrides, and right up the River Clyde to Glasgow. Crowds lined the banks of the river to see and cheer the giant American ship, then just two years old.

Wasp embarked 47 Spitfires and their pilots and a few ground crew at King George V Dock. She then joined her escort, an element of the British Home Fleet with Commodore C. S. Daniel RN commanding in the battle cruiser HMS *Renown*. Captain W. W. Warlick USN commanded a destroyer screen consisting of two U.S. and four British ships.

The force sailed from England on 16 April 1942 on a six-day voyage to the Mediterranean that was uneventful and, at 0400 on 22 April, within range of Malta, she began to fly off her planes, first a dozen of her own for combat air patrol and then the Spits. *Wasp* launched 59 airplanes in one hour and one minute.

Wasp's presence in the Med was not unknown to the enemy. Berlin Betty, a sexy-sounding German radio propagandist, commiserated with the "poor American boys and their fine ship" who were certain to be sunk.

Poor Berlin Betty. *Wasp* returned to do it again the following month.

Overloaded Steamship Sinks Near Memphis After Boilers Blow Up

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glad to be going home.

They had boarded *Sultana* in Vicksburg and there were so many that keeping count was impossible. That's why no one is sure how many died or how many were saved. They kept getting on the steamer even though she was supposed to carry only 376 persons including her crew, and that was the law. Capt. J. C. Mason of St. Louis was a good riverman and he knew the law, but he was happy that the war was over too, and he was happy to be taking all these former prisoners back to the towns and farms in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and thereabouts. The soldiers quit getting on the boat when there was no more room to even stand.

Sultana cleared Vicksburg on 24 April and arrived in Memphis on the evening of the 27th, where a leaky boiler was repaired. At about midnight, she crossed the river to load coal, and then headed north, fighting the Father of Waters which was swollen by spring floods. A few miles upstream from Memphis, right by the Hen and Chickens, the boiler gave up. The blast lit up the sky and was heard back in Memphis where the watch officer of USS *Grosbeak*, a gunboat, checked the time. It was 2:00 a.m.

Not much note was taken of the disaster because the war was just over and the president had just been assassinated — Lincoln's funeral train was crossing the weary land as it happened. And not much note has been taken since. Look for "*Sultana*" in most standard references — it's not there.

About 500 died in the San Francisco earthquake and fire, and they made movies of it. About 1,500 went down with the *Titanic*, and they made movies of that. Perhaps the 1,700 to 1,800 soldiers who didn't get back to Ohio, Michigan or Indiana would be better remembered if someone made a movie. All three are April events.

1587: Drake Hits Spanish in Home Port; ‘Singeing the King of Spain’s Beard’



SIR FRANCIS DRAKE'S small fleet attacked from out of the sunset, using fire ships to destroy Spanish ships where they were anchored. His daring attack set back the Spanish Armada attack on England by an entire year.

With Just 23 Ships, English Fleet Destroys 100 of Spain's

On the evening of 19 April 1587, Sir Francis Drake took about 23 English ships into Cadiz Bay on the southwest coast of Spain and destroyed more than 100 Spanish vessels that were being assembled for an attack on England. This audacious exploit, which Drake called “Singeing the King of Spain’s beard,” delayed for a year the attack on England by the Spanish Armada.

Drake had barbered a few other chins before he got to Philip II’s whiskers. Of Drake’s fleet, 17 ships had been contributed by the city of London and were essentially privateers, looking for profit. Six large warships were contributed by Queen Elizabeth.

Ten days after Drake sailed on 2 April, the queen canceled his commission, a cancellation Drake ignored. He knew his mission was Cadiz, and he ignored the wishes of the London captains for plunder. He solved the prob-

lem of his second in command, a government “watchdog” naval officer, by putting the man in irons.

On 19 April, Drake took Cadiz completely by surprise and raised havoc in the harbor. Among the ships destroyed were 24 large warships and 14 royal galleys. Large supplies of arms and equipment were also destroyed. It was a complete victory, but Drake traveled light, and no attempt

was made to follow it up.

After leaving Cadiz, Drake captured the Spanish carrack *San Felipe* with a cargo worth about £150,000, not only paying the cost of his voyage, but satisfying the London

captains. He returned to Plymouth in time to avoid a powerful fleet under the Marquis of Santa Cruz, who had been sent looking for him. A year later, he would again use fire ships against the Spaniards.



Kamikazes from Kyushu Sink 30 American Ships, Damage 164 Others

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force consisting of the 24th Army Corps with four infantry divisions, and the 3rd Marine Amphibious Corps with three Marine divisions. The southern portion of Okinawa would be taken first because of the need to capture two airfields that would be needed quickly to fend off kamikaze attacks, which had already begun.

Wasp had been hit first, while operating near the Japanese home islands. The carrier *Franklin* was hit and abandoned, but survived. On April 6, the first use of massed formations of hundreds of kamikazes hit the fleet. By the time Okinawa was secured, 1,465 kamikaze flights had been flown from Kyushu and had sunk 30 American ships and damaged 164 others.

Ashore, the going seemed easy at first, but the Japs were dug in, particularly around Shuri Castle, the key defensive point. The Nips’ defensive line

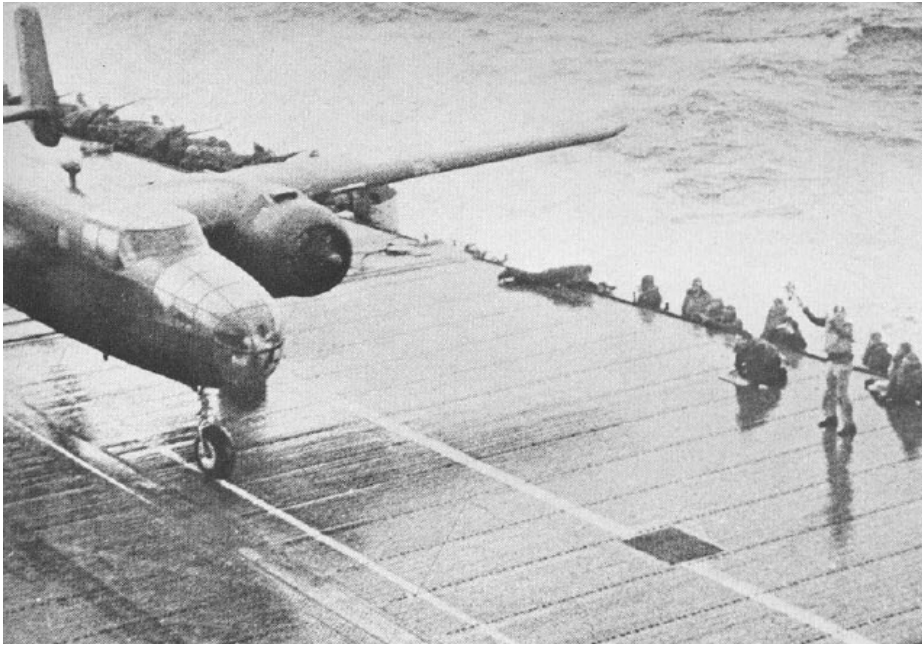


was broken April 28 but the Japanese were ordered to fight to the death and the island wasn’t secured until July 2.

Okinawa was the bloodiest campaign of the Pacific war. More than 4,900 sailors and 3,400 Marines were killed or missing, and the Army lost over 7,600 men.

The Japs lost 107,539 killed and 23,764 sealed in caves, a taste of what might have been expected of an invasion of the homeland proper, where an army of about 2 million was waiting.

1942: Halsey, Mitscher and Pacific Fleet Get Doolittle Close Enough to Tokyo



THE DECK OFFICER'S checkered flag is about to send Lt. Col. Doolittle on his way. The two white lines painted on *Hornet's* deck were not standard. The thin one was for the nose wheel to follow, the thick one for the port landing gear wheel. By staying on the lines, the plane's right wingtip would miss the carrier's island by a scant six feet.

With the words, "Army pilots, man your planes," blaring over the loud-speaker system of USS *Hornet* — the original *Hornet*, CV-8 — Capt. Marc A. Mitscher sent a flight of 16 North American B-25 Mitchell twin-engined bombers under the command of Air Corps Lt. Col. James H. Doolittle on their way to bomb military targets in the Japanese homeland.

The story of Doolittle's daring raid has been told in books and movies, beginning with *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, written by one of the pilots, Lt. Ted Lawson, edited by Bob Considine and published by Random House a year after the event. It became a Book of the Month Club selection.

Carroll V. Glines, a retired Air Force colonel, came along with his *Doolittle's Tokyo Raiders*, published by Van Nostrand in 1964 and *The Doolittle Raid: America's Daring First Strike Against Japan* under the Orion Books stamp in 1988. He also helped Jimmy Doolittle write his autobiography, *I Could Never Be So Lucky Again*, issued by Bantam Books in 1991.

Most folks have had a pretty good chance to learn about the bombing that did only superficial damage to the Nip war machine but forced the Japs to divert aircraft from conquest to defense of the home islands and did wonders for the morale of an American public, weary from four months of one enemy victory after another.

But *Hornet* wasn't alone that morning of 18 April 1942 at Lat. 35°45' N, Long. 153°40' E, in the western Pacific and few people know of or appreciate the risk taken by the U.S. Navy in getting Doolittle and his raiders close enough to Japan to carry out the strike.

The Japs had, of course, sunk or damaged most of the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, only 123 days previously. Now, the Navy was providing in Task Force 16 a sizable chunk of what was left. If brought to action by a superior Japanese force, it could be destroyed and, with nothing to stop the Nip advance across the Pacific, the U.S. line of defense would run through San Francisco.

Commanded by Vice Admiral Wil-

liam F. Halsey Jr., whose flag was in USS *Enterprise*, the force included in addition to Mitscher's *Hornet* three big-gun cruisers, *Northampton*, *Salt Lake City* and *Vincennes*, and the light cruiser *Nashville*, all under Rear Admiral Raymond A. Spruance.

The screen, Desron 6, was commanded by Capt. Richard L. Conolly and consisted of *Balch*, *Benham*, *Ellet* and *Fanning* in Desdiv 12, Capt. Edward P. Sauer, and *Grayson*, *Gwin*, *Meredith* and *Monssen* in Desdiv 22, Cdr. Harold R. Holcomb. Two oilers, *Sabine* and *Cimarron* provided replenishment and rounded out the force.

To be sure, the U.S. Army risked, and lost, 16 B-25 Mitchells, and risked their crews, losing two of them to capture and the execution of three fliers by the Japs. The U.S. Navy risked two-thirds of what was left of its Pacific Fleet and thousands of sailormen.

Doolittle's raiders galvanized the world and heartened both the American and British publics, who had seen disaster after disaster.

Not many people realized the Navy was there and President Franklin D. Roosevelt wasn't about to let the Japs know where Doolittle's raiders had come from. The president told the press that the planes had come from Shangri-La, the mythical kingdom in James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*.

Even today, though most people vaguely know the B-25s flew off an aircraft carrier, few realize that the Navy was there with TF 16.

How to Get in Touch

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Submissions are not encouraged because of constraints on the time available for editing. If such are sent, they should be sent as e-mail attachments in Microsoft Word 6.0 or as typewritten copy, double-spaced, and accompanied by a 3½-inch diskette containing the submission in MS Word 6.0 for Windows.

Quite welcome, however, are suggestions of events for coverage. Please offer suggestions two months ahead of the anniversary of an event.