

GANG OF ALL-AMERICANS

IMMEDIATELY BEFORE THE DOOLITTLE RAID ON JAPAN, FIVE B-25B MITCHELL CREWS TRAINED AT WILLOWS AIRPORT IN CALIFORNIA. INSTRUCTED BY A NAVY PILOT, THEY BECAME ADEPT AT SHORT-FIELD TAKEOFFS

BY TED ATLAS

“As each plane came out of that interim overhaul period, I’d take it up with the crew to Willows, California, and give them takeoff lessons at the Willows airfield.” Those words, spoken by Rear Admiral Henry L. Miller, US Navy (Retired), in his 1971 oral history and they confirmed what wartime residents of Willows had long thought — that the Doolittle Raiders had trained at their small airport. A US Naval Academy graduate, Miller had started his career on board the USS *Texas* (BB-35) but after a chance flight physical, he became a carrier pilot then a flight instructor.

Lieutenant Henry L. Miller was the Navy pilot assigned to train the Army pilots in short field takeoffs for their top-secret mission. After training at Eglin Field in Florida, the B-25B Mitchell medium bombers of the 17th Bombardment

Group, under the temporary command of Lt. Col. James Doolittle, were undergoing final maintenance and modification work at the Sacramento Air Depot (SAD) at McClellan Field.

The Willows-Glenn County Airport is a general aviation airport, 80 miles north of Sacramento. Located about one-half mile west of town, it was surrounded by rice fields and quite remote. The airfield came into existence during October 1928 — a period when “airmindedness” was sweeping the country after Charles Lindbergh’s epic flight to Paris.

It appears that a landing strip was established when the Department of Commerce’s Airways Division selected the land as an Intermediate Landing Field (ILF). Money was supplied for creating the field as well as constructing a 51-foot steel tower with a beacon to aid the Los Angeles-Seattle Contract Air Mail Route 8 (CAM 8). This light had a 1000-watt

bulb incorporated with a two-foot mirror that would create 1,000,000 candlepower of light. Pilots could spot the light, depending on weather conditions, from 15 to 40 miles.

Also, and quite unusual for the time, the sod landing area was illuminated with 15-watt clear bulbs that were spaced at 300-foot lengths down the runway. In 1932, civic groups and local citizens improved the area so that it could progress from an ILF to a field capable of handling all aviation services. Local government officials dedicated the field on 9 September 1932.

At this point, pilot and local businessman Floyd Harrison “Speed” Nolta entered the picture. By the time America entered the Great War, the 17-year-old

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Henry Miller later in his Navy career.

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 situation which might arise on the "Big Day".
 All pilots, with the exception of a few reservists, sought on mutually. Doolittle, Gray and Jones were particularly outstanding. It was found that constant practice led to the given reserve pilots were prone to enter into the conventional take-off.
 Practice was given at Eglin Field, Florida, and at Willows, Calif., which is eighty-five (85) miles north of Sacramento, Calif.
 Prior to going on board, lectures were given to officers and men on Carrier Deck Procedure, Safety Precautions, Beak Customs and Traditions, and Living Aboard Ship.
 When the unit finally got aboard ship, it was found that with sixteen (16) planes, a take-off distance of four hundred sixty (460) feet was available. An extra plane was taken aboard, which was the sixteenth plane, for Lt. Jones and taken aboard, which was the sixteenth plane. However, when it was found that four hundred (400) feet were available, all sixteen (16) planes were taken on the trip.
 Prior to the day of attack, all B-25B's were dispersed along the deck.

Henry Miller notes the training at Willows in the second paragraph on Page 3 of his Temporary Duty Report completed upon his return to NAS Pensacola. (USS *Hornet* Museum)

Power coming up on the Wright R-2600s, the crew of B-25B 40-2231 prepares to practice short field takeoffs at Eglin. Try as we might, we have not been able to discover any photographs of the B-25Bs at Willows but this photo from Eglin would certainly have been similar to the training that was taking place at the remote California field.