James Ralph Doolittle

Clan William

World War I Warrior

by Lori Hahn



James Ralph Doolittle was born 07 Jan 1894 in Chicago, Illinois to James Rood Doolittle, publisher and grandson of Senator James Rood Doolittle of Wisconsin and Frances Sterling Golsen.

Doolittle as a young man decided to volunteer with the American Norton-Harjes ambulance services that served the Allied Forces in France World War I. He later became the 37th American to join LaFayette Escadrille, the French Air Force unit which began flying in 1917, nearly a full year before the US got into the war. The unit was made up largely of American volunteer pilots.

Doolittle trained at Buc, Avord, and Pau. During training. In April 1917, he was injured when his aircraft side-slipped into the ground, breaking his ankle and cutting his face, leaving scars. After spending eight weeks in the hospital, he joined La Fayette Escadrille on 02 July 1917. On 17 Jul 1917, he was flying to the newly created base at Dunkirk and became lost in the clouds. Two German aircraft attacked and shot him twice in the leg. While trying to come down, a British Archie (anti-aircraft gun) also hit him as they tried to fight off the German aircraft. On landing, his Spad aircraft flipped, but thankfully, in British territory. His injuries were severe, and his facial injuries were reopened. He eventually recovered and was released from the French service so he could return home.

He was not deterred in the flying department and became a civilian flight instructor for the US Air Service. While at Kenilworth Field near Buffalo, New York, he met socialite Mary Louise Thomas and they became engaged. Their wedding was scheduled for 01 Aug 1918.

On 26 Jul 1918, he was flying with another Air Service employee, in an experimental Curtiss a/c. Doolittle, who was piloting, took a sharp turn, and apparently attempted make that turn with the engine throttled with insufficient air speed. The plane crashed, killing Dunham, 20, instantly. Doolittle survived the crash and was taken to the Buffalo hospital, where he died an hour after arrival. He was just five days from his wedding to Mary Louise. His ashes were sent to France to be buried with his comrades in arms.

Published 01 May 2023