



Morris "Moe" Berg

Linguist, Lawyer, Pro
Baseball Player, Spy, ...



Moe was the most unusual sort of fellow.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt



On April 18, 1942, bombers took off from the aircraft carrier USS Hornet to bomb Tokyo led by Colonel James Doolittle in what has always been called the Doolittle Raid.

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During a time of national uncertainty I have found it comforting to look at some of the great American men and women who have faced adversity and succeeded. Our country has become the great nation that it is today because of the efforts of its people, and we have always found a way to solve our problems. I know that we still have that capacity within us if we believe in ourselves and we apply our skills with courage to address our challenges. Today, I would like to sketch the lives and accomplishments of two men who have fascinated and inspired me. I look at their characters and efforts and I recognize that these men not only gave to their country but also to the world. One man will be familiar to most of you and one man will probably not be. Being obscure does not diminish their importance however. Although they come from dissimilar backgrounds they share some similar personality traits, and their work intersected at a crucial point in American history to change the course of world events. I hope that their stories inspire you as well.

There is only one man who can claim to have been a catcher in the National and American leagues as well as an atomic spy and linguistics genius. Morris "Moe" Berg was born in a cold water tenement on March 2, 1902, to Bernard and Rose Berg, both immigrant Russian Jews, in the Harlem section of New York City. His mother was a seamstress while his father operated a laundry until he could put himself through the Columbia College of Pharmacy. Shortly after Moe's birth the family moved up to the predominately middle class town of West Newark New Jersey where his father opened a new pharmacy. At age 3 Moe began to show athletic interest as he began to throw anything that he could find. One year later he began to play catcher in the horse-cart filled streets of Newark, squatting behind a manhole cover for a beat policeman who would pitch to him. By age 7 he was playing as a ringer for Newark's Rose

Methodist Episcopal Church team under the less ethnic pseudonym of “Runt Wolfe” and earned his first public notice in the local newspaper. He graduated from Barringer High School at 16 and was selected to the All City Team as its third baseman. He began his lifelong love of linguistics at while at Barringer. He then enrolled in New York University, following his older brother Samuel who was in his pre-Medical studies. He stayed for two semesters and then transferred to Princeton. His entrance exam included translating Homer and Cicero into English as well as English passages into Greek and Latin.

Moe was definitely an outsider at Princeton given his relatively modest financial background and his Jewish heritage. He was considered a pleasant loner by his classmates, who found him mysterious but friendly. His social life there is a bit of a cipher but his academic and baseball skills are not. He took 6 courses per semester, almost all of them in language. He was recognized as a prodigy by his professors and was given a remarkably intense academic tutelage by two of Princeton’s most gifted academics. After three years he was fluent in Italian, French, Spanish and German and was becoming highly skilled in Sanskrit and Greek. He was already fluent in Latin. His classmates describe him as being completely convincing as a native speaker in any of the above. He graduated Magna Cum Laude.

Moe played first base on an undefeated Princeton team as a freshman and switched to starting shortstop as a sophomore. His pattern as a great fielder who was a relatively weak hitter and slow base runner became evident at Princeton. However by his senior year he hit .337 overall and batted .611 against Princeton’s arch rivals, Harvard and Yale. He was also team Captain. He often communicated with his second baseman in Latin to confuse the opposition and was heard talking to himself in Sanskrit while fielding on several occasions. During the

1923 Big Three title game at Yankee Stadium, Berg had a particularly fine day and was noticed by the N.Y. Giants and the Brooklyn Robins (later the Dodgers), both of whom wanted to add “Jewish Blood” to their rosters to appeal to the large Jewish community in New York City. The famous professional scouting report of “Good field, no hit” was about Moe. The Giants were already very deep at shortstop and Berg signed with the Robins for \$5,000. For his first professional season Berg hit .187 and made 21 errors in 47 games. When it was over he went to Paris, enrolled at the Sorbonne where he became engrossed in studying the evolution of Modern French. This subject was a lifelong passion for him. He loved the sound of French and greatly appreciated its Literature. Upon returning to the U.S. he had a brief stint in the minors with the Minneapolis Millers. Moe returned to the majors in 1926 with the Chicago White Sox, He also enrolled at Columbia Law School that year and ultimately graduated second in his class while continuing his Baseball career. After graduation, Moe worked as an attorney specializing in international law with a Wall Street firm in the off season. While with the White Sox, Berg was made a catcher to take advantage of his strong arm and baseball intelligence. It was the position he would ultimately play for the rest of his major league career. In 1930 he seriously injured his knee and this made him a part time player from this point onwards. He was valued for his baseball acumen as much as his playing skill and he often functioned as a player-couch. He was popular with his teammates but had a few odd habits. Each morning Berg would buy about 15 newspapers in various languages. His roommates were not allowed to touch them because Moe felt that they were alive in some way until he read them. He would often lounge around his hotel rooms in a Kimono with a straw hat on while reading his beloved papers. After reading however, they were dead and useless to him. At this point his room-mates were allowed to

handle the papers. During his 15 year baseball career he also had stints with the Washington Senators, the Cleveland Indians and finally with the Boston Red Sox with whom he finished his career in 1941. When asked later in life why he had wasted his intellectual capabilities in baseball, Berg simply said that baseball had always made him happy.

In 1934, a group of American baseball stars including Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Jimmie Foxx and others were invited to Japan to play exhibition games against teams of Japanese All Stars and instruct in the game. Despite the fact that Moe was a clearly not a player of this caliber, he was invited at the last minute. He packed a 16 mm movie camera and carried a contract from the movie house newsreel company MovietoneNews to film the sights of Japan. Moe was often absent and unaccounted for during many of the teams social engagements, which was quite out of character for him. During one game, the typically very robust Moe was absent from the ballpark due to a mysterious illness. That day he found his way to the St.

Luke's International Hospital in Tokyo and then ostensibly went to visit the wife of the American ambassador who was in hospital for childbirth. At that time the hospital was the tallest building in Tokyo. Berg never did see the mother and newborn. Instead his films of the Tokyo skyline and harbor became the basis for the planning of the Doolittle raid in 1942. Berg never discussed this event publicly. Moe, who was fluent in Japanese, had many Japanese friends as well as a great love of Japan's culture. He was very upset at Japan's increasingly militaristic drift during the 1930's. At the conclusion of the Japanese baseball exhibition, Berg toured the rest of Japan, China and traveled to Moscow via the Trans-Siberian railroad before coming home.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Berg left baseball and accepted a position with Nelson Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs in January 1942. From August 1942 thru February 1943 he was on assignment in the Caribbean and South America to monitor the health and physical fitness of the American troops stationed there. He left this position when it became apparent that it was of minor importance to the war effort. In August 1943 he joined the OSS, the forerunner of today's CIA. Moe became a great favorite of William "Wild Bill" Donovan, the colorful founder of the OSS, because of his adaptability, stamina, physical courage and natural solitary nature. After extensive military and spycraft training he parachuted into occupied Europe to assess the relative strengths of Yugoslavian partisan groups. Berg recommended that Marshall Tito was the man to back. A year or so later he was sent into Italy disguised as a German Army officer to evaluate the status of Italian jet and aerodynamics research. He ultimately succeeded in smuggling a prominent Italian aerodynamicist, Antonio Ferri into the US after establishing a close personal relationship with the Anti-Nazi scientist. Ferri went on to a highly productive career at Langley Field and ultimately as head of the NYU Aerospace Laboratory.

In the fall of 1943, General George C. Marshall ordered the consolidation of atomic counterespionage activities under the leadership of General Leslie Groves, the military head of the Manhattan Project. Wild Bill Donovan gave him Moe. Despite the obvious handicap of his previous media exposure, Groves accepted Berg. Moe was dropped into occupied Norway and ascertained that Nazi heavy water production had recovered substantially after a daring Norwegian resistance attack on the production plant several months earlier. An American air attack was then ordered, ending German heavy water production at that plant. The remaining

stock piles of heavy water were later destroyed by Norwegian partisans while it was in transit back to Germany at the cost of their lives.

Moe was then intensively prepped by some of the Allies' top scientists in nuclear physics for his next mission, which was to determine the status of the German atomic bomb project. Moe's role was to evaluate the progress of the Nazi program to date and to pinpoint the locations of Hitler's top nuclear scientists. Berg's initial base of operations was neutral Switzerland, where he cultivated relationships with Swiss scientists who were familiar with the work of their German counterparts. Zurich was a frequent meeting point for the two groups of scientists to exchange ideas. Moe soon learned that the chief of the Nazi A bomb project, Werner Heisenberg and a number of other key physicists had moved to Hechingen-Bisingen. Allied aerial photos revealed the construction of slave labor camps and other support facilities, indicating the early stages of a Los Alamos type center in the Black Forest. After receiving Berg's report, Gen. Groves' recommended against immediate bombing of the site, to avoid driving the Nazis further underground into a hardened site until more information was available. This was a correct assessment in hindsight. Moe was then trained in the local dialect, given false papers and was prepared for insertion into the center to gather more information. This was called off at the last minute by General Groves who was fearful of losing American secrets to the Nazis if Moe were to be caught and tortured.

Werner Heisenberg became the focus of the counter-intelligence war on the Nazi Atomic bomb program. His work from 1942 through 1944 focused on separating the rare U-235 from the more abundant U-238. Whether Heisenberg was truly committed to producing a Nazi atomic bomb or not has been an unsolved historical mystery. This was a key piece of information the

Allies needed and Berg was assigned to this task. Through the offices of an Anti-Nazi Swiss scientist, Berg arranged to have an invitation sent to Heisenberg to be the guest lecturer at was understood to be a non-political, purely scientific meeting. This was held on December 18, 1944 in Switzerland amid heavy SS security. Moe sat in the front row, a few feet away from Heisenberg with a pistol in his shoulder harness ready to kill him. As agreed upon previously, the lecture was limited to pure theoretical physics. However, at an after lecture social function Berg overheard Heisenberg make muted defeatist, but not Anti-Nazi statements. Perhaps this is not surprising given the fact that his every word was monitored by the SS. Heisenberg had a visit from the Gestapo upon his return to Germany, but he was ultimately not prosecuted by them. His true intentions are still open to speculation. In any case, Berg made the assessment that the Nazi project was at least two years from completion and that the Allied cause would be better served with Heisenberg alive. This information went directly to Roosevelt and Churchill. Berg continued to infiltrate the German project from his Swiss base of operations and stole a blueprint of the German cyclotron based in Bisingen. He recommended a bombing of the site to his superiors which they once again rejected.

Moe was instrumental in the capture of at least 10 top Nazi atomic scientists including Heisenberg at the end of the war. They were sent to the US and Britain for debriefing and were therefore kept out of Soviet hands. A large German stockpile of Uranium ore was captured, hidden under a church near Hechingen. . Moe was also involved in delivering German swept wing aerodynamic research to the US, which helped make supersonic flight a post war reality. Finally, because of his intimate knowledge of the German war machine, Berg documented the atrocities committed by the Nazis against all of humanity. His Jewish background certainly

enhanced his efforts. This information was used at Nuremberg to help convict and hang these heinous war criminals.

Berg was awarded the Medal for Merit, the civilian equivalent of the Medal of Honor in 1946. The citation, which has been made public record, went on for 10 pages and cited his contributions while he was in the OSS. Berg declined the award in a single paragraph letter stating "I am grateful to those War Department officials who were kind enough, under the circumstances, to offer this award for my very modest contribution. But I cannot accept it." He never explained his action to his friends and he left the life of a spy behind him. He moved in with his brother Sam in Newark. Sam, an Internal Medicine specialist, had led the US team analyzing the medical consequences of the Nagasaki bomb. His accounts are the earliest published scientific accounts of their horrific effects in the medical literature.

Unfortunately Moe came back from the war a changed man. Although he remained superficially polite and pleasant, his friends noticed a loss of his previous Joie de Vivre. He would become upset at the sight of blood or suffering. He also suffered a significant business loss in the immediate post war years leaving him all but destitute. He was never really interested in money and had earned very little in his major league and government service. Although he could and did visit with distinguished friends in the sciences, linguistics, humanities and baseball for the rest of his life, he gradually retreated into a life of solitary study. He loved Boston and often spent weeks browsing libraries, book stores, going to an occasional baseball game and meeting friends in favorite restaurants. The tall, handsome and cultivated Berg remained a sought after dinner guest but he became increasingly reclusive. He worked an occasional law case and apparently could have had a Red Sox job for the asking, but his pride prevented it.

Instead he spent his days studying his favorite subjects, generally alone. Finally, when he was in his mid sixties, a publisher friend arranged to have a biography written of Berg in an effort to ease his financial distress. The meeting was set up in the famous Algonquin hotel and a \$35,000 advance was offered. A young editor was introduced to Moe and went on to say how much he had loved Moe's movies. It became apparent that he thought his subject was Moe Howard of the Three Stooges. This infuriated Berg, who stormed out of the meeting and never considered the project again. He never told his full story.

This narrative of course is missing a critical aspect of Moe's life; his heart. In all the material that I could read, and it is limited by his basically mysterious nature, there is only one mention of any romantic involvement. That was with a Scandinavian woman. He was fond of his friends' children and he was kind to them. Otherwise, this side of his existence is a complete blank to his biographers.

Moe died at 70 of injuries sustained in a fall at his home. His last words were to the nurse attending to him and were "How did the Mets do today?" His friends said goodbye to him in New York City. His casket was covered with our flag. His remains were cremated and spread over Mount Scopus in Jerusalem, the ancient and modern capital of Israel, where he lies with his forefathers.

Our second great American for discussion tonight will be more familiar to you, I am sure. James Harold "Jimmy" Doolittle was born in December 1896 in Alameda, California. His father's family was of French ancestry and he describes his mother's family as being of "pioneer stock". He was an only child. Shortly after his birth his father moved to Nome Alaska, where gold had just been found mixed in with the sand along the beach. Doolittle's father was a skilled

carpenter and had a speculative nature as well. In just the month of June 1900, when Jimmy and his mother joined his father, 10,000 people disembarked in Nome. It was a town that was constructed from pre-fab. lumber, since timber was scarce locally. In his memoir, he recalled the off-loading of people and supplies in Nome as being similar in scale to that of D-Day some 44 years later. Nome was a wild place; crude, yet exhilarating in the style of the American Old West. Disputes were solved without the benefit of an organized legal system for example. Jimmy was always small in stature and needed to defend himself, so he learned to box successfully at an early age. In fact, he had a good career as a semi-professional fighter. He was a physically fearless and independent child. Although his relationship with his father was strained, he learned to work with tools from him and he demonstrated a mechanical and technical skill that served him well for the rest of his life. He had a close and loving relationship with his strong-willed and determined mother. By 1910, his parents separated. Jimmy and his mother returned to California. He saw his first airplane at the Los Angeles International Air Meet. For reference, the world aviation altitude record at that time was 4,165 feet. Inspired by the air show, he tried his hand at aircraft construction by building a glider from scrap muslin and piano wire using plans that he found in Popular Mechanics. When he completed it, he strapped in and jumped off a 15 foot bluff. He had a partially successful flight in that he did not kill himself, but the plane was a write-off. He also continued to box semi-professionally and traveled around California to his bouts by motorcycle. During this time period he began to court his future wife Josephine. Ultimately, they had a long and happy marriage. She seems to have provided a more level headed and stable aspect to their union, which ultimately lasted a lifetime and produced two sons. After finishing high school, Doolittle went back to Alaska for a few months to visit his

father who had stayed on. They collaborated uneasily on a few construction projects. Jimmy then went out on his own to panhandle for gold. After 3 weeks of living in a tent and eating nothing but salmon, he struck his tent and went back to California by stowing away on a steamer. He then enrolled at University of California at Berkeley to study in the School of Mines. Doolittle took a leave of absence in October 1917, to enlist in the Signal Corps Reserve as a flying cadet and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in March 1918. He served as a flight instructor during the remainder of the war. After the Armistice he was assigned to aviation reconnaissance unit and helped in the effort to capture Pancho Villa. He later attended took various air mechanical and aeronautical engineering courses in the Army before returning to earn his B.A. from U.C. Berkeley in 1922.

For the next 20 years, Doolittle went on to have one of the most accomplished careers in aviation history. In September, 1922 he became the first to cross the country, flying a de Havilland DH-4 from Pablo Beach, Florida to Rockwell Field, San Diego California, in 21 hours and 19 minutes while making only one fuel stop. Several previous attempts had led to fatalities. He was awarded his first D.F.C. for this achievement.

After a short stint as a test pilot, he entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in March 1923. The family of four moved to Cambridge to began a two year academic leave from the Army. Doolittle did pioneering, original research on the effects of load, as measured in G force on aircraft structural failure as well as the physiological stresses induced by G forces on the pilot. He did this by actually flying various aircraft in turbulent air as well as during aerobatic flight. This was done while recording the instantaneous G loading using an accelerometer until structural failure was evident by inspection on the ground. He seems to have had an uncanny,

life-saving ability to somehow know the actual point of imminent failure, since he did not experience a break up in the air. He did however break many components of these aircraft, as determined by ground inspection after the flights. His results were then compared to the manufacturers' estimates. The same method was used to test loss of consciousness in the pilot. He logged over 100 hours of flight time as test pilot for this project. Perhaps not surprisingly, he was one of the first pilots to recognize the importance of wearing a parachute, although he did not have to use one during this period. He finished his Master's in only one year and then enrolled for his Doctorate to make use of his second allotted year of study. His next topic of research was to answer the question of whether a wind gradient would affect a pilot's ability to sense direction and altitude changes during blind flying conditions. His conclusion, once again obtained from his own test flying, was that it did not, i.e. that "seat of the pants" type flying was inaccurate in blind flying conditions. This has since become a basic, unquestioned tenet of modern airmanship. He received his Doctorate from MIT in June 1925, making him one of the few aeronautical engineers in the world with that degree at that time. He considered his Master's thesis to be his more important contribution.

Briefly, for the next few years he set numerous land and sea-plane records and he became the first pilot to perform the outside loop. This is a physically punishing maneuver, previously thought to be impossible to perform.

His most important aeronautical contribution by far however is the development of all instrument or "blind" flying. He recognized that the physiological limitations of the human body would always prevent a pilot from accurately being able to determine his position, speed, and angle of bank and attitude. Along with engineers from the Sperry Corporation he developed a

suite of new instruments including vertical airspeed, turn and bank coordinator and artificial horizon that enabled a pilot to compensate safely for these deficiencies. He tested his theory, with a safety pilot, while in a two cockpit airplane. His contact to the outside world was cut off by a canvass hood and he utilized his instruments to become the first pilot to take off, fly and land an aircraft solely by instruments. This in 1929 at Mitchel field, Long Island, New York. The next time that you take off in a commercial airliner at night or in bad weather and arrive at your destination, you can thank Jimmy Doolittle. He made it possible to fly safely in other than ideal weather. This revolutionized air travel and the modern world with it. Doolittle was awarded the prestigious Harmon Trophy for this accomplishment. Perhaps a Nobel Prize in science would have been appropriate.

I have thought about the lives and careers of two other great aviators of that period in comparison with that of James Doolittle. Charles Lindberg was of course a courageous and great aviator. His solo crossing of the Atlantic in 1927 is one of the seminal moments in 20th century history. However, a number of other capable pilots, including Doolittle, certainly could have and ultimately would have achieved this. Lindberg was essentially our first media-manufactured hero of the modern age and it suited him poorly. As a historical figure he comes with an unsavory background of pro-Fascism that could have been disastrous for America and the world, if he had his political way. His aviation achievements do not, in my opinion, have the scientific impact of Doolittle's. Amelia Earhart, another contemporary, was a technically poor pilot who was ultimately swallowed up by the vast and unforgiving Pacific. If anything, she was even more of a media creature, as her public persona was deliberately molded after Lindberg's. Other

than her beneficial effect on the freeing of modern women from old constraints, I think that she is not even in the same class the other two.

Doolittle's next major activity altered world history. The 6 month period after Pearl Harbor was one of the darkest times in American history, with bad news on every front coming in on a daily basis. President Roosevelt wanted to strike back at the seemingly invincible Japanese as quickly as possible. The concept of a carrier based attack on the Japanese homeland originated with a Captain Francis Low, a submariner and operations officer on Admiral King's staff. The planning and execution fell to Jimmy Doolittle in a story that most of us know. On April 18, 1942 he led a flight of 16 B-25 land based bombers from the pitching deck of the Hornet, one of three remaining US carriers. Although forced to take off earlier than planned due to accidental early detection by a Japanese picket ship, all planes successfully bombed industrial and military targets in Tokyo, Yokohama, Osaka and Nagoya. The Tokyo planning utilized Moe Berg's intelligence from his 1934 All Star trip. After their bombing runs, most of the planes flew on to China but lacked the range to make it to their destination airfields due to their premature take-off from the Hornet. Some aircrews bailed out over China and some like Doolittle crash landed their aircraft after they ran out of fuel. He and his crew linked up and were helped to safety by Chinese partisans although 8 other crew men were captured by the Japanese. These men were ultimately tortured and executed. It is a little known fact that an estimated 250,000 innocent Chinese civilians were murdered in reprisal by the Japanese in a 3 month bloodbath after the raid. The Nationalist government of Generalissimo Chang Kai Shek was not informed of the raid in advance, since his government was known to be riddled with Japanese spies. Interestingly, Doolittle's first reaction when he realized that all of his planes were lost in the raid

was to assume that he would be court-martialed. In fact, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor and was doubly promoted to Brig. General by a grateful President Roosevelt.

This daring raid had the hoped for salubrious effect on American morale at home and in the field. But even more importantly, it had a devastating impact on Japanese pride. Even though the tangible military benefit of the raid was negligible, the Japanese military government was horrified at the potential threat and insult to the Emperor. This was intolerable to them and since they were guided by the warrior code of Bushido, they suffered a colossal loss of face. Their response to the raid led directly to an over-aggressive and complex Japanese military plan that eventually resulted in the destruction of the Imperial Japanese Carrier fleet at Midway in June 1942. The fact that this reaction was based purely on the psychological effect of the raid, and not to any real immediate military threat, makes this response even more amazing in retrospect. Without the Doolittle Raid, there most likely would have never been a Battle of Midway. The war in the Pacific as well as subsequent world history might have been very different indeed.

Doolittle continued to serve successfully in command positions for the rest of World War 2 and had a productive and happy life after his military service. In the interests of time I will not outline that phase of his life here, but suffice it to say that he died at 96 years of age, a very unlikely outcome for a man engaged in his activities. In fact his autobiography, *I Could Never Be So Lucky Again*, takes its' title from this self-realization.

So what can we say about these two remarkable Americans? They were men of extraordinary intellectual skills who used their gifts for practical purposes. They were men of resolute action in a dangerous world. Their physical courage and bravery is self-evident. Both men

started early life as avid sportsmen and went on to outstanding achievements at the finest Universities in the nation, purely on their own merit. They served their country and were decorated with America's highest honors, and they did so as volunteers. They changed world history. Their lives intersected in an unexpected way. They were humble, self-effacing and dignified. Neither man sought fame, publicity or personal gain. I think that they would have been uncomfortable if they were called heroes, although they clearly were. They were patriots who believed in America. We can and should honor the memory of these men. Their lives, and those of many other great Americans, can inspire us to face the challenges of today and tomorrow with fortitude and confidence. Thank you for your kind attention.

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