

These balloons packed quite a wallop

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By David Litogot
special writer

The year was 1945. On Feb. 23, two schoolboys sight a strange balloon-like object less altitude and land near their home on northeastern Allegan County.

The collapsed balloon excited the boys and convinced the locals to call the county sheriff. After checking with the weather bureau, a weather balloon was ruled out.

The next day, two FBI agents carried out an investigation and discovered a balloon with 19 ropes and no gondola. The agents took possession of the balloon and ropes. A military intelligence agent took it to Detroit in the trunk of his Chevy. From there, it was sent to the Naval Technical Air Intelligence Center near Washington, D.C.

Any information gathered there was not shared with state or local officials. Military intelligence was instructed to depress any mention of the incident. The local newspaper wasn't impressed with the hearsay evidence and never ran any news of the happening until after V-J Day.

WHAT WAS the purpose of this balloon? Where did it come from? Why the silent treatment from the government?

A little known chapter of American history reveals an attempt by the Japanese to avenge the Doolittle air raids on the Japanese mainland.

The retaliation was in the form of

sending free-floating balloons aloft, laden with explosives and carried by the jetstream 6,200 miles from Japan to the Pacific Coast of North America. Two overshoot their mark and landed in Michigan. One sighting took place in Allegan County and one in Farmington. The Farmington incident will be discussed in detail next month.

This slightly bizarre episode in history, according to one historian, "was a headache for Canadian and American military and security people and created more paperwork and disrupted more routine than any other Japanese attack against the North American mainland. The money, material, and effort expended in defense and investigation caused more time and monetary damage to the Allied war effort than the two-million dollars the Japanese spent to build, equip and launch the balloons."

The Japanese called it their FU-GO project. FU is the 32nd letter in the Japanese alphabet. GO means number. This project might have been number 32 of the Noborito Research Institute (FU is also the first part of the Japanese word for balloon, FUSEN).

THE RESEARCHERS perfected their weapon after years of experimenting with hydrogen-filled balloons. The first FU-GO was launched Nov. 3, 1944. If all went as planned, heat from the sun's rays would cause the hydrogen to expand, raising the balloon to an altitude of about 39,000 feet. The strong winds would send it along at about 300 knots.

At night, the gas contracted and allowed the balloon to drop to 3,000 feet. Then a specially developed altitude-control device (a barometer)

Footprints in history

would discharge enough ballast to lighten the balloon and raise it to 30,000. This would be repeated the next day until all of the 32 sand bags were dropped.

The altitude mechanism would then begin discharging bombs instead of sandbags. The estimated time to the U.S. was 60 hours. The payload was four incendiary and one fragmentation device.

A battery was used to power the sandbag release circuits. The ejection of the bombs would activate a 64.5-foot fuse that would set off explosives to destroy the balloon and barometer. Thus, evidence of the cause of the explosion would remain a mystery.

BECAUSE OF wartime priorities, the balloons were made of conventional materials. The shell was a specially laminated mulberry paper that was shellacked with a peraminon jute sealant. The tough skin could withstand the temperatures and pressures experienced on its flight. When inflated, the balloon was 30 feet in diameter.

The goal was to unload 15,000 anti-personnel and 60,000 incendiary bombs on the U.S. and Canada; 360 were documented as having reached the continent. A few caused fire damage; one actually killed six Americans near Ely, Ore., on May 9, 1945. It seems a member of the Mitchell family discovered an object and upon investigation, the bomb exploded and killed all in the family.

On that site today sits a stone

monument with an inscription that reads: "The only place on the North American continent where death resulted from enemy action during World War II."

A stress on the wartime economy and the public did exist. The balloons represented a facelike mysterious enemy of unpredictable attacks. Even though the balloons failed to inspire widespread panic, they did succeed in stirring the U.S. government in producing counter measures.

SOME SCIENTISTS and government officials believed the balloons were for spreading biological warfare. They would cause germs and bacteria to descend upon the public. Health officials, veterinarians and agricultural agents were mobilized under the code name "Lightning Project." People were trained and procedures established. Fortunately, the Japanese feared retaliation of the same and no "bacteria-bombs" were employed.

A special smoke-jumping group was established by the Army. This task force, part of the Firefly Project, was trained to extinguish any fires produced by this balloon threat. This all-black 555 Parachute Infantry Battalion was disappointed about not going to the front but did fight several non-balloon-related fires in 1945.

On the whole, the FU-GO project was a failure. The damage to the American landscape and morale

never happened. The fear from above never materialized due to four reasons:

1. Even though, according to the Japanese, Americans were gossipy and prone to panic, the censorship of the American military and press suppressed any news of the existence of or damage done by the balloons. (UFU's today are handled in the same way.)

2. B-29 raids were destroying hydrogen-producing facilities in Japan.

3. The battery didn't work right. Even though it carried anti-freeze, it was too weak and didn't prevent the battery from freezing. Thus there was no power to activate the dropping of the sandbags. Most of the FU-GO weapons descended into the Pacific.

4. The forest-fire potential of the

Northwest was great during the war. Logging practices left large amounts of left-over twigs and limbs. However, since the jet stream is strongest during the winter months, the Japanese sent the balloons only from Nov. 3, 1944, to April 30, 1945. Fortunately, of the 285 FU-GO weapons discovered during the war, most landed in a frozen and snow-covered environment. (3,000 balloons were launched, and a little more than 300 have been discovered during and since the war.)

Next week, we will look at the second sighting in Michigan, the one in Farmington. I will also list some sources for this article and for further reading. In the meantime, beware of any strange looking balloons.

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