

AT WAR IN ASTORIA

BY PAUL BARKMAN

Paul Barkman was a 20 year old U.S. Coast Guardsman stationed in Astoria when America was suddenly catapulted into World War 2.

Sunday, December 7, 1941, was a bright clear day in Astoria, scrubbed clean and fresh by rain the night before. I had spent Saturday night on liberty, wading through mud from Tongue Point to the highway and walking into town. It was an average liberty and would have been nothing to remember. I got a shoeshine and a beer to start the night. I probably would have gone to one of the soda fountains to look at pretty high school girls but their parents usually had them home by supertime, or watched a movie at the Riviera or Liberty. No matter what was playing I usually went to see it to forget about being homesick. Later drop into the Fiesta on 12th St. to hear Wanda belt out *The Wabash Cannonball*. Then head down the street to the Schooner Tavern. Some of the guys would travel around to the Green Front on Duane to pick up a bottle of liquor and cross the street to Club '13, deposit the bottles with the bartender who would charge them a quarter to pour a drink out of their own bottle. Hardly anyone went to Amato's. Too expensive. 50 cents cover charge just to get inside, which was the price of three beers in other places, or 10 Cokes. And always the hope, like in the movies: Lonely sailor meets beautiful girl. Always hoping but never really believing it would happen. Astoria before Pearl Harbor mirrored the overall society in its dislike of servicemen. Young women just did not go out with men in uniform.

I woke up Sunday morning and heard one of the guys saying about a friend who had said something he thought was absurd: "He's been listening to one of those Orson Welles scare programs..."

Then another man shouted from the galley, "You guys come here. Listen to the radio."

We straggled into the galley and listened.

"This is not a drill. Repeat. This is not a drill," the voice said urgently. "Japanese aircraft are bombing military and naval installations at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. *This is not a drill...*"

None of us believed it at first. Americans blown to bits by Japanese bombers at that exact moment? Some of my friends were in the Pacific Fleet and on ships at Pearl Harbor. I stared out the windows at the sunshine on the Columbia River and tried to imagine what was happening to them on ships that were being bombed and torpedoed. Everybody in the barracks crowded into the galley, unable to make the instant transition from peace to war. Our chief petty officer came in and made it real. All liberty and leaves are canceled, he said. All over the country soldiers, sailors, Marines and pilots were being pulled out of movies, bars and cathouses and ordered to their stations, ships or planes. Trains and buses were jammed with men getting back to their outfits. The chief told us to paint every window at Tongue Point because from that night on we were on official blackout. The mood got quiet and somber. All of us asked ourselves about the possibility of being invaded in Astoria, Oregon.

Of course the Japanese Navy never appeared off Tongue Point, but six months later a Japanese submarine surfaced offshore and shelled Fort Stevens. That first night of the war we all were jittery and waited for an attack. All day reports came in from everywhere on the west coast about invading troops, enemy airplanes bombing cities and hostile warships offshore. I walked guard that night. One of my friends got nervous when I stumbled a couple of times on a dock and cocked his pistol at me. That was the closest I came to getting shot during World War 2.

The next few weeks the river filled up with vessels of every kind. Ships anchored below Desdemona Light that had escaped Japanese submarines. A couple of ships were torpedoed just off the coast but most managed to get across the bar and safely into harbor. Everything was painted wartime gray. The Coast Guard vessels *Fir*, *Manzanita* and *Rose* took on a



HANS ALEXANDER MUELLER

drab appearance. Seabags began to stack up at all naval and Coast Guard stations as floods of new enlistees took berths aboard the huge fleet of small craft that were taken over for the duration of the war. Yachts from the Astoria and Young's Bay clubs, tugboats and fishing boats of every sort were all pressed into service and painted gray. Each received numerical designations based on the length and most were mounted with guns.

The first six months of the Pacific War were bad for the United States and its allies. From almost everywhere came reports of defeats and losses, and it was not long before families in Astoria and the Pacific Northwest starting counting their own losses. Even after Midway, which changed the course of the war, a look at the map showed anyone that it was a long way to Tokyo and that thousands more would die before we got there.

I spent most of those months on a small boat that escorted ships through a minefield that had been placed from Buoy 14 almost to the bar. Three nights after the Pearl Harbor attack I was on guard at the south jetty watching a ship that had plowed into the beach at full speed a few miles south of the river mouth. A PBV flying patrol boat crashed at the Tongue Point seaplane anchorage and we joined the search for survivors; only a single body surfaced from the wrecked plane a couple of days later. One night a small Army vessel swamped near the minefield and my boat rescued the crew. The water was wild and we were almost swept into the jetty. We could not get the last soldier aboard and were about to cast off from the sinking craft when one of our crew, a huge Swede, yanked the line the soldier was clinging to and jerked him aboard like a landed fish. The Coast Guard anchored a barge off Fort Stevens and checked every vessel that went in and out of the river. Russian ships started coming in for cargo at ports upriver in large numbers, thrashing water on the way in and almost awash at the gunwales on the way out. It was a great shock at first to see women aboard the Soviet ships as members of the crews.

On the night of June 21, 1942, a Japanese submarine appeared offshore and slammed a few shells at Fort Stevens. Everyone waited for Battery Russell to reply but there was only silence. Afterward the sub moved down the coast and shelled California.

In August I got stuck with shore patrol duty for three months. Most of the time Astoria was a pleasantly quiet liberty town but later, when the jeep carriers started coming downriver from the Kaiser shipyards in Portland and Vancouver, large numbers of shore patrol and local police were called out because too many of the crews aboard the "Kaiser Koffins" were not optimistic about their futures and decided to tear up Astoria, which was their last American port.

I received letters from friends from all over the world who were in combat, and girls who had earlier been aloof and stayed away from servicemen wrote us letters and dated us in a burst of patriotism that lasted until the end of the war.

One day in 1944 my patrol boat, which was about 50 miles offshore, spotted a large troopship that had come out of the Columbia River and was heading across the Pacific. We could see hundreds of soldiers at the rails staring at us or looking back at the land many of them would never see again. I thought I knew how they felt and how they must have yearned to be in my place aboard a Coast Guard patrol boat that never left the United States or ever had a shot fired at it.

I was transferred soon afterward and spent the rest of the war aboard various craft that escorted ammunition ships through Puget Sound into the Pacific Ocean.

I never was sent into combat. Most people who become involved in wars seldom experience battle, even during world wars. Whatever might be said of World War 2, I do not believe that Americans will ever be so united again.

Paul Barkman followed his World War 2 Coast Guard service with 20 years of teaching high school in California and also worked on cattle ranches. He returned to Astoria in 1984 and spent a few years at the Columbia River Maritime Museum aboard the decommissioned Lightship *Columbia*. He wrote the above article for the Times Eagle 10 years ago, commemorating the 40th anniversary of the end of World War 2. His whereabouts are currently unknown to the editor of this newspaper. If anyone who reads this rag knows where Paul is, his address/phone number will be warmly appreciated.

HOPE L. HARRIS

LICENSED
MASSAGE
THERAPIST

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ELEGY FOR 'FITZ' (KILLED IN VIETNAM)

These woods are not for you
Who now know only shade;
Moss, maid and berry
Once trembled at your touch.

Your seed is spent on alien ground
Far from the Boston Common
As was you summer here
When you walked invisible
in the green, Olympic forest light
Of bracken spore and lady fern.

Once you were peninsular
But the isthmus of your thought
is severed in some far Eastern estuary
Where it is dusk forever.

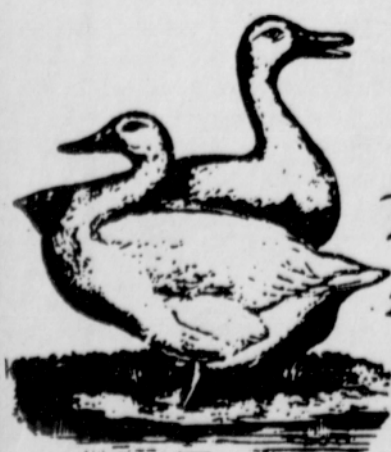
Never will you give birth to song
Nor will you discover
The musky poetry of being a lover.

~J. R. ROONEY

J. R. Rooney lives in Lake Quinalt, Washington. This poem is in memory of a friend who was on his USFS fire crew on the Olympic Peninsula.



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