

AT WAR IN ASTORIA

BY PAUL BARKMAN

Paul Barkman was a 20 year old Coast Guard sailor stationed in Astoria, Oregon, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor 65 years ago. He wrote the following account for the NCTE in 1985.

Sunday, December 7, 1941, was a bright, clear day in Astoria, Oregon, 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 Street to hear Wanda belt out "The Wabash Cannon Ball." Then head down the street to the Schooner. 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 the Club 13, deposit the bottle 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. Fifty cents cover charge just to get inside, which was the price of three beers in other places, or ten 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 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 transformation 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 appeared 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 the war.

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



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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 surfaced just 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 many of the crews aboard the "Kaiser Koffins" were not too 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 fifty miles offshore, spotted a large troopship that had come out of the Columbia 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 that war, I do not believe that Americans will ever be so united again.

After service in the Coast Guard during World War 2, Paul Barkman taught high school for more than 20 years and worked on cattle ranches in California. He returned to Astoria in 1985 and worked for the Columbia River Maritime Museum and was a 'Green Thumb' activist for the elderly. He died in California in the late 1990s.

TOTAL WAR

Astoria, Oregon is the oldest city in the American West. Its history is rough and stormy on both land and sea. Its myth-like 'Golden Age' is perceived to have been in the late 19th century when its riverfront ten miles inland from the Pacific Ocean was crowded with ships from all over the world that exchanged the fineries of Victorian era civilization for Columbia River salmon, timber from the bountiful forests and wheat from farms along the lower river. Yet World War 2 might also be considered a period of great prosperity for the city, though it refrains from acknowledging war profiteering as part of its history.

Astoria was hot during World War 2. Thousands of sailors came from all over the USA to fill the crews of ships built upriver in Portland and Vancouver. They were young to war, aware they might be killed, their ships sunk, so they partied in Astoria like there was no tomorrow, which for many there were few tomorrows left.

To be understood and reachable to the individual sensibility, the war's enormous scale must be scaled back, focused on the microscopic but very personal involvement. Astoria exemplified the war's urgent claim of total commitment of every city and nation swept into it, though its role was minor and supplementary compared to the large shipbuilding efforts 100 miles upriver in Portland and Vancouver, and of course like every other city in the USA, it was untouched by actual combat. Merchant Marine "Liberty" and "Victory" ships and Navy warships such as the infamous 'Kaiser Koffins', small thinly-armored escort aircraft carriers, were commissioned, made sea-ready and filled up with crews in Astoria and steamed out into the vast Pacific to fight in the colossal oceanwide war of annihilation against the Empire of Japan, thousands to never return.

Although fishing was a priority occupation in Astoria, not to be interrupted by drafting local fishermen away from their important effort of supplying food to the armed forces, hundreds of local mariners flocked to enlist after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, two years after the war began with Nazi Germany's attack on Poland, and six months after its massive invasion of Russia in June.

The initial effect of Pearl Harbor on Astoria was anxiety that the Japanese would attack the West Coast of the USA, as so many rumors claimed. A severe blackout was imposed. Mines were laid at the entrance to the Columbia River to stop enemy ships and submarines, and incoming/outgoing friendly vessels were escorted through the minefield by small Coast Guard patrol

boats. Tongue Point-based Navy PBY seaplanes patrolled the North Coast from San Francisco to the straits of Juan de Fuca. (The PBYs were later replaced by Navy blimps that operated from Tillamook). Astoria's young men and women enlisted or were drafted into the armed forces (many joining the naval and maritime services) and were sent to all theaters of the war: Europe, Asia and the Pacific. A National Guard unit from Astoria saw action in New Guinea and the Philippines. The Navy built a 500-bed hospital for wounded servicemen in Astoria and Fort Stevens and Camp Clatsop (renamed Rilea) trained troops sent to Alaska and the Aleutian Islands.

Like the rest of the country, the Oregon North Coast settled into a war routine of rationing (food, gas, sugar and shoes), war bond drives and blood banks; and very soon the War Department began sending telegrams to local families reporting the deaths of sons, brothers, husbands and lovers.

Compared to cities worldwide that were shattered by World War 2, their populations decimated by bombs, fire, disease, starvation, forced removal and extermination, Astoria's postwar problems were minor. It did not have to rebuild or recreate its reasons for being a city. Its countryside, though blistered by forest fires during the war years, had not been obliterated by savage combat or bombs. The war's end provoked an economic dislocation that was a microcosm of the early postwar years nationwide. Astoria was without a manufacturing base and did not profit from the reconversion to consumer goods (though some of its markets and shops did). The Korean War caused a flurry of activity, but afterward the Navy abandoned its Tongue Point base. Even back then there were signs of the imminent collapse of the region's resource based economies. Perhaps that is why Robert S. Lovell, writing a reminiscence of wartime Astoria in the Summer 1995 *Cumtux*, Clatsop County Historical Society's quarterly, ended on a dismayed note: "Our population still has not returned to the level of the 1940s."

Many more wars have killed many more millions since World War 2, and for half a century afterward it seemed almost inevitable that humanity would obliterate itself by nuclear holocaust, and it is not certain yet that it eventually won't. World War 2 is a war of a previous century; the world has changed and soon the remaining survivors will be as dead as those who died in the war. Yet the war burnishes the far horizon like a persisting afterglow of a sunset long after other more recent wars have slipped past memory.

—MICHAEL McCUSKER

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