

# Fort Stevens: ‘We’ll never know the true story. It’s kind of a mystery’

Continued from Page 1A

David Lindstrom, a Friends of Old Fort Stevens member, has researched and analyzed the attack for nearly 30 years. For him, the intrigue comes more from the attack’s mysteriousness rather than its place in history.

“I began to realize there were some serious discrepancies in the story,” Lindstrom said.

## Firing line

The 3-mile firing line of 5 1/2-inch shells began hitting the southern edge of Fort Stevens at about 11:30 p.m. on June 21, 1942, and gradually shifted north.

“First a flash of light; then a distinct explosion was followed by an echo across the waters,” Lindstrom wrote in a book about the attack, “instantly there was the whistle of incoming shells spinning through the air, followed by a larger explosion and a bright flash of light as the shells detonated on impact.”

While many in the area heard the commotion, only those situated along some of the southern beaches of Clatsop County could view the action due to the natural layout of the North Coast.

Gloria Linkey saw the scene firsthand from her childhood home on the Prom in Seaside.

Just 12 years old at the time, Linkey, her sister and her friends were telling ghost stories during a slumber party.

Upon hearing the noises from the ocean, Linkey and her friends opened a blackout curtain and glimpsed at the lights sailing through the night sky. Though a curfew prohibited residents from being on the Prom after 8:30 p.m., the girls decided to go outside to see the show.

While outside, a military patrol in a Jeep drove by them.

“Get back in the house! Get back!” one of the soldiers yelled. “We’re under attack from a Japanese submarine!”

This surprised the girls, who figured the commotion likely came from U.S. soldiers training at the fort.

“Never in our wildest imagination did we think it could be a Japanese submarine,” Linkey said. “It was just inconceivable.”

Estimates soon after the attack had the total number of exploded shells at nine. More shells that didn’t explode have been found since — including one in the backyard of a home. The total number is now believed to be 17.

The Imperial Japanese Navy, just two weeks removed



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian  
Several of the reinforced-concrete bunkers of the Battery Russell site at Fort Stevens State Park remain intact 75 years after an attack by the Japanese Navy.

from a devastating loss in the Battle of Midway, likely wanted to send a message to their enemies and possibly take out a tower that could track submarines off the coast, Lindstrom said.

“I don’t think they were expecting much out of it,” he said.

The submarine, for still unknown reasons, remained stuck underwater a for four hours after the attack. It had run aground either during its

retreat or in the final moments of the shelling. While the commander of the Japanese submarine later told a U.S. newspaper reporter that it was caught in the sand during the shelling, Lindstrom speculates that may have been the least embarrassing of the two explanations. Finally at about 4 a.m., the submarine resumed its retreat from the area.

Linkey’s father eventually ushered the girls back into the house. He called the next morning from his job site in Vancouver, Washington, to confirm that it indeed was a Japanese attack. The news allowed the girls to understand the seriousness of what they had just witnessed.

“We were talking about it, and it wasn’t too smart,” Linkey said. “For all we knew, they could have been landing troops outside our house.”

## ‘Face-saving excuses’

As confounded onlookers viewed the light show from a few miles south, soldiers at the fort assumed their positions at Fort Stevens’ four different batteries and waited for the order to fire upon the submarine. But that order never came.

The commander at the fort and others in the U.S. Army insisted after the attack that

the submarine was out of range and firing on the invader would have revealed the locations of battery guns. But Lindstrom believes the explanation was intended to keep the public from knowing how close enemy submarines could actually get to the coast.

“I think that’s foolishness,” Lindstrom said. “They knew there was not an armada, and everyone knew where the guns were. Those are just face-saving excuses.”

Lindstrom believes based on his research that the submarine was roughly 3 miles off the coast, and many of the guns at Fort Stevens had a range of 8 miles. Furthermore, Japanese intelligence — through maps and civilian photographs — of the West Coast was strong enough that the commander likely had a good understanding of the fort’s layout, Lindstrom said.

Lindstrom spoke to several veterans, none of whom are still alive, who said they were livid about the decision not to return fire. More than 20 men went absent without leave after the incident, and the military did not press charges against them.

“These men were trained for years to protect the coast, and they were angry,” Lindstrom said.

## Precise facts unknown

The precise facts and motivations for various decisions made during the Japanese attack likely will never be known. Lindstrom at one point hired a private investigator to track down the Army’s official report, but he was unable to find it.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had taken place six months earlier in Hawaii, and battery guns at coastal forts near the Columbia River had not been updated since the beginning of that century. As a result, the U.S. government likely did not want to engage in a large battle that would worry people and highlight the coast’s defense weaknesses, Lindstrom said.

Linkey, though noting she admires the restraint of soldiers

at the fort, agrees.

“It was fight or surrender. We were reminded constantly of why we were fighting,” she said. “The government did not really want the people to know how unprepared we were.”

The answer to that question, along with a host of others, continues to occupy those who lived through the attack or have studied it.

Lindstrom will be at Battery Russell, where a large number of the shells landed, from noon to 4 p.m. today to offer his interpretation of the attack and exhibit some of his findings. But firsthand memories have largely faded into history. Large memorial events, such as the 50th anniversary attended by hundreds of American and Japanese veterans of the attack and their families, are no longer held, a result of the declining number of World War II veterans still alive.

“A lot of people don’t know about it,” said Mike Phillips, a Vietnam War veteran with Clatsop Post 12 American Legion. “It’s one of a lot of things people have forgotten about.”

But the attack’s place in history is an interesting footnote compared to the real intrigue, Lindstrom said.

“We’ll never know the full story,” he said. “It’s kind of a mystery.”



Historian David Lindstrom points out the site near Fort Stevens State Park where a shell launched from a Japanese submarine during World War II landed.



A monument now stands near the site where, during World War II, a shell launched from a Japanese submarine landed near where Fort Stevens State Park now sits.



Historian David Lindstrom explains some of the history of Battery Russell and the attack that took place here 75 years ago to the day.



Battery Russell was the site of several explosions from incoming fire launched by a Japanese submarine during World War II. More photos online at DailyAstorian.com

**‘These men were trained for years to protect the coast, and they were angry.’**

**David Lindstrom** historian, speaking about the veterans and their feelings about not returning fire

# Gillnetters: Fishermen haven’t found an adequate replacement for gillnets

Continued from Page 1A

Gillnets were, back in 2013, likely to be phased out of legal use on the lower main stem of the Columbia by entities other than tribes. The bill followed an agreement with Washington state brokered by former Gov. John Kitzhaber.

But new regulations adopted by the Fish and Wildlife Commission in March differ from Washington’s. Oregon will allow commercial fishermen to harvest a greater share of fall Chinook than Washington, for example.

Cameron Smith, acting deputy director for administration at the Department of Fish and Wildlife, says an accounting error at the agency meant the first installment of \$500,000 for the transition fund was reverted back to the general fund after the 2013-15 budget biennium, which ended in June 2015. But that issue wasn’t discovered until recently.

Fish and Wildlife was supposed to move the money to the Columbia River Fisheries Transition Fund, but failed to do so

in time, Smith said, leading it to get automatically reverted to the general fund after the biennium was over.

After the agency caught the error earlier this year, Smith said analysts from the Legislative Fiscal Office and the Department of Administrative Services told Fish and Wildlife the \$500,000 couldn’t be returned because the sum had already been included in fund-balance projections.

“It was our mistake, and we had to pay for it, I guess,” Smith said of the issue. “But, also, they knew that none of the funds were being used, so that, I think, was the real big driver. The funds weren’t being used, hadn’t been used and at that time there was no indication that they would be used.”

## No replacement

Matt Markee, a lobbyist for Salmon For All, an association of gillnetters, processors and fish buyers, said that the \$500,000 that did make it to the fund in 2015-17 wasn’t yet spent because fishermen hadn’t found an adequate replacement

for gillnets.

Fishermen also have to go through individual counties to apply for funds. And commercial fishing equipment comes with a hefty price tag.

“Nobody applied for any money, because what would they spend that money on if there’s no new gear?” Markee said.

However, he added it was possible that there were fishermen and counties who might apply for some of the \$500,000 that remains in the fund in the near future.

The 2013 legislation also created an extra fee for sportsmen angling for Chinook, steelhead and salmon in the Columbia Basin.

Money collected through that fee was intended to help pay for the transition. It went to an “enhancement fund,” which was set up for administrative expenses associated with the transition, separate from the fund that was intended to make payments to commercial fishermen through counties, according to Smith.



## About the Relay For Life Movement

The American Cancer Society Relay For Life movement is the world’s largest fundraising event to end cancer, uniting four million people around the world to celebrate survivorship, remember lives lost, and fight back against this disease. Teams camp out and participate by taking turns walking around a track or path. Symbolizing the battle waged around the clock by those facing cancer, the event empowers communities and individuals to take a stand against the disease and take action by supporting the Society’s lifesaving mission.

## Join us for the Relay For Life of Clatsop County!

Saturday, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Astoria High School Track

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Register your team today!

RelayForLife.org/ClatsopcountyOR

- Learn about American Cancer Society programs and services.
- Join others in fighting back against cancer!

For more information, contact:

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