



Offbeat Oregon History: Aircraft warning service

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

One day, if you're lucky, you might stumble across an interesting little item in the toy section while browsing through a thrift shop: a small hard-rubber toy airplane.

This airplane will have no paint or trim of any kind, and no details like windows and landing gear. But if you know your World War II airplanes, you'll recognize it right away. It will be a perfect likeness of a Dornier Do.17, or maybe a

Mitsubishi G4M.

Before you toss it back on the shelf and move on, take a second look. You're holding in your hand an artifact of the Aircraft Warning Service, the U.S. Army operation staffed with civilian volunteers who watched the skies for enemy aircraft 24 hours a day throughout most of the Second World War.

The "toy" planes were made to help observers recognize incoming aircraft from their wing shapes. Along with such three-dimensional models, observers had charts and flashcards to bone up on their aircraft recognition skills — and, on long shifts spent watching the skies for enemy bombers, they had plenty of time to get good at it.

The Aircraft Warning Service got started about six months before Pearl Harbor. The idea was to draw volunteers from the civilian population — people who were too young, too old, or too female for combat service in the Army — and train them to watch the sky and recognize the aircraft that flew overhead, be they American or foreign. Army officials, by that time, were all but certain that the U.S. would end up involved in the war soon. When that happened, they wanted to have some defenses in place. The Germans, who were not much of a naval power, were less worrisome than the Japanese — who very much were.

It's not much remembered today what a uniquely alarming threat the Japanese were at the outset of the war. Every country in the world that used aircraft carriers, at that time, stocked them with second-rate aircraft. Every country, that is, except Japan, whose carriers were crammed with Mitsubishi A6M Zeroes — arguably the best all-around fighter plane in the world at the time, and certainly the most long-legged. Zeroes had a range of nearly 2,000 miles, so they could accompany bomb-

ers all the way to any target within a 10-million-square-mile area around their home carriers. As late as 1942, no country in the world, not even Nazi Germany and certainly not the U.S., could project half as much force half as far afield as Imperial Japan.

The Army brass might not have been aware of all this in July of 1941 when it was forming the AWS. But it certainly became aware of it five months later, when Japan used that force-projection capability to come out of nowhere and hit Pearl Harbor harder than anyone had dreamed was possible.

Immediately after that, the entire West Coast realized it was on the front lines. Sure, the Nazis might come up with some new secret weapon that would make it possible to strike East Coast American cities; that was why AWS watchers were on the East Coast, just in case. But nothing the Nazis were flying in 1941 could reach American soil, not even on a one-way mission.

Japan was another matter. If a handful of Japanese carriers should slip up unnoticed to within 750 miles of, say, Astoria, or Newport, or even San Francisco —

Many people on the West Coast, perhaps most of them, fully expected something like that to actually happen. They of course did not know that the U.S. had cracked the Japanese military code, which almost totally negated that force-projection advantage. They only knew that the Japanese had appeared out of nowhere and left Pearl Harbor a smoking ruin, and seemed eager to do it again. The West Coast seemed like a logical next target.

So the AWS volunteers in Oregon and Washington took their duties particularly seriously as the Second World War got under way.

Not that it was all grim determination and studious scanning of the horizon, of course.

"Several instances have recently been called to our attention where observers have been 'partying' while on duty," the Portland regional AWS bulletin noted in summer 1942. "The noise and distraction prevent the efficient operation of the post ... It is very undesirable to have more than two people on a post at one time."

This admonition was probably unnecessary in 1942, when the wolf was still very much at the door. That was the year when, in early September, AWS volunteers in Curry County became the only watchers in the country to actually spot an enemy warplane. A tiny seaplane, launched from the Imperial Japanese submarine I-25, had come to the Brookings area to try to start a forest fire

with a pair of 170-pound bombs. It was the only air attack on the mainland United States in history, before or since.

But by the following year, the thrill was gone for many of the AWS watchers. It was becoming increasingly clear that Japan was not going to win, and the U.S. Navy was keeping the little island country's remaining aircraft carriers very busy far away in places like Midway and the Marshall Islands. No Japanese strike force would be coming, and with each passing day it seemed more and more clear that no AWS observer was going to see another Japanese airplane flying over Oregon soil.

That knowledge was one thing on a fine sunny day, when a person might enjoy sitting out under the shade of a tree overlooking the sea, idly scanning the horizon for aircraft. It was quite another on a blustery November night, shivering in an unheated shed with the window open to listen for planes.

Still, the real value of the AWS did not fade with the fortunes of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

As America's eyes on the ground, watching the sky and reporting every sighting with telephones and radios, the AWS became a lifesaver for dozens, perhaps hundreds, of distressed American aviators.

Remember, this was before navigation aids like LORAN. Pilots generally had to rely on landmarks to guide themselves in flight. A pilot caught in sudden bad weather, or in one of the Central Oregon Coast's notoriously fickle fog banks, could get hopelessly lost; and radio communication was of limited value if Ground Control didn't know where the pilot was.

However, if an AWS observer had spotted and reported the plane and its location and direction of flight earlier in the day, the tower staff could plot out its likely location on a map and tell the pilot exactly where to go to find a safe landing.

And then there were the more dramatic cases, in which an AWS observer saw an aircraft in obvious distress. In one particularly notable case, an AWS volunteer reported an American bomber ditching in the ocean off Seaside. The Navy got there in time to rescue one of the two surviving crew members (the other swam to shore).

Rather like the Coast Guard "Sand Pounder" beach patrol, the AWS is not much remembered today when historians start talking about the Second World War. But like the beach patrol, its contribution was more significant than most people realize.

A word from the Editor

We are your hometown newspaper. What we say matters and how we say it counts. We want you to trust that what you hear from us is true. When we make an allegation, we have several qualified sources to back it up. We don't engage in gossip, even if it means we don't have the viral story this week. We'll have the true and accurate one next week.

No public official in Cottage Grove gets a free pass from us. We don't play favorites and we don't hold grudges. But the facts have to be there and when they're not, we'll wait.

We'll dig deeper and ask more questions because we will never give you half an answer or ask you to draw a conclusion without presenting you the facts in their entirety. We'll always give you all of the facts and when there's one to be had, an answer as well. If that means other publications are the first to have a Cottage Grove headline on their front page, that's ok by us.

We'll wait to get it right.

And we hope you'll wait with us because we don't care if we publish or post first. We care that what we publish and post is correct, sourced, fair, honest and carries the weight of facts. Not sensationalism.

It's called journalism. And we hope you continue to subscribe to it.

As always, I'm happy to explain our decisions, hear your concerns and tell your stories. Stop by, call or email through any of the contacts listed below. It is a privilege to serve this community and we will continue to do so by upholding the standards and policies of journalism.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Unsatisfied with Wyden answer

I didn't know much about Ron Wyden before I attended his "Town Hall" in Cottage Grove on May 5th in Cottage Grove. Now I know that he is one of the reasons that in the 2016 election, the Democrats lost ground in every area of government.

The vast majority of the questions at the event revolved around

health care. And even when questions weren't around health care, Senator Wyden's answers were around health care. Alright, fine. Let's talk about health care.

A huge number of people support the United States joining the rest of the civilized world in creating a single payer health care system. One of the first questions asked of Senator Wyden was whether he supported that idea. His answer dodged the question, and boiled down to the fact that he supports state's rights in creating their own single payer systems, and that it was hopeless to get such a system past the Republican controlled Federal government. Fair enough, but the question was whether he supported the idea. Following this, another questioner expressed disappointment in the Senator's answer and asked again if he supports a single payer system. Again, the Senator dodged the question, and the young person who asked was left muttering to himself, dissatisfied.

If we want solutions to the looming problems of our times, this dodgy, mealy-mouthed politics has got to stop. It gets us nowhere, and it makes people disinclined to be involved in our democracy. Not only that, people see through it. The Senator was obviously speaking to a crowd that wanted to hear him say that he supports a single payer system. His repeated dodging of the issue made it pretty clear to everyone that he doesn't.

Attention, politicians. People want to hear more than just "I'm going to fight the other team." They want to know that you understand the problems we face and that you're not afraid to talk about the real solutions.

Ivan DelSol
Cottage Grove

Support for Yoncalla school bond

Yoncalla voters are being asked to support a local bond in the amount of \$3.95m for much needed repairs to Yoncalla High School. If approved the district is in a very favorable position to receive a state matching grant ranging from \$2.9m to \$3.95m. Additionally, the Yoncalla School District has just been awarded a \$2.84m seismic grant. Combining the grant funds with our local bond could give Yoncalla School District as much as \$10.74m for high school repairs....ensuring a viable and healthy high school for decades to come. I can't stress strongly enough the importance of passing this bond. The long term future of our high school and community depends on it. The potential of turning a \$3.95m investment into \$10.74m is an opportunity I hope we will not pass up as it does not appear that the state will be making matching funds available

after 2017. But what happens if not enough funds come together to extend the life of the high school beyond the bond? Will the bonds still be sold? The answer is no! Oregon law does not allow it. Your current administration and school board believes this is the best and least expensive plan going forward. Even less expensive than merging. They have worked very hard to piece together different funding sources so they could ask local citizens for as little as possible. If approved this bond comes in at 83cents/\$1,000 of assessed value on district property. That's \$83 per year on a \$100,000 property, or \$6.92/month. When you consider the decline of economic activity and property values that would surely take place should we one day lose our high school, I truly believe passing this bond will cost less.

Carl R. Van Loon
Yoncalla School Board Chair.

Thanks for lunch

On April 8 my friend and I had dinner at Stacy's Covered Bridge restaurant in Cottage Grove. At the end of our meal, we asked for the check and were informed that a group of 4 young people, who had already left the restaurant, had paid for our meals! They were all dressed up, perhaps for a prom, and looked splendid. We didn't get a chance to thank them, and would like to do so through your newspaper. That was very thoughtful! We hope they had a wonderful evening, and wish them all the best for their futures. By way of showing our appreciation, we are paying forward their generosity.

Antonia Lewis

Eugene

Affordable housing in Cottage Grove?

We have a far worse housing problem Right Now than we understand. What are we to do when people get old and cannot take care of themselves anymore? Both Magnolia Gardens and Middlefield Oaks cost about USA\$5000/month.

We cannot seem to house able bodied adults Right Now, never mind take out a long-term insurance policy for a retirement home.

Do we even have a future?
Charles Ames

Cottage Grove Sentinel

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