

# Firefighters save monument to people killed by World War II bomb

■ Bootleg fire threatened the monument at the site where a Japanese balloon bomb exploded on May 5, 1945, killing five children and a pregnant woman

By Douglas Perry  
The Oregonian/OregonLive

Deep in the woods outside Bly stands a stone monument to a unique and terrible moment in U.S. history — a Japanese bomb attack during World War II that killed five Oregon children and a pregnant young woman.

Firefighters this week saved that monument from the Bootleg Fire.

The blaze that's raging across more than 400,000 acres, started by lightning strikes, is what the Japanese military hoped to accomplish 76 years ago when it strapped crude bombs to balloons and released them into the jet stream over the Pacific Ocean.

On May 5, 1945 — with the end of the war in Europe looming, portending more Allied resources being directed to the Pacific Theater — the Rev. Archie Mitchell and his pregnant wife, Elsie, took five children from his Sunday-school class on a picnic in what is now part of the Fremont-Winema National Forest. One of the children noticed a large, shiny object resting in a snowbank and approached it. The object was a Japanese balloon bomb.

Archie Mitchell was pulling lunch out of the car when the explosion happened.

"I ran up there," the 27-year-old pastor later said. "And they were all dead."

Mitchell's wife and the children would be World War II's only U.S. mainland casualties



Fremont-Winema National Forest/Contributed Photo

The Mitchell Monument features the names of the people killed by a Japanese balloon bomb on May 5, 1945, near Bly, in Klamath County.

from enemy action. The war ended three months later with Japan's unconditional surrender.

In 1950, Oregon Gov. Douglas McKay dedicated the Mitchell Monument. The stone tower features a bronze plaque that memorializes the victims:

- Edward Engen, 13
- Jay Gifford, 13

- Elsie Mitchell, 26
- Dick Patzke, 14
- Joan Patzke, 13
- Sherman Shoemaker, 11

The U.S. Forest Service calls the monument "the pivotal attraction of the Mitchell Recreation Area."

The stone memorial is surrounded by picnic tables and fire grills. There's also the "Shrapnel Tree," a Ponderosa

pine that bears scars from the long-ago bomb explosion and in 2005 was designated an Oregon Heritage Tree.

Elsie Mitchell's parents attended the monument's 1950 dedication, but their son-in-law wasn't able to do so. He was in Vietnam spreading the gospel. In 1962, he and two other Christian missionaries were kidnapped by the Viet Cong and disappeared.

It's not known what became of them.

At the end of last week, seeing where the Bootleg Fire likely was headed, crews headed to the Mitchell Monument to create "defensible space" in and around it, firefighting operations spokeswoman Sarah Gracey told The Oregonian.

This included cutting tree limbs back to the trunks and raking the area to take away potential fuel for the fire. The team also wrapped the Shrapnel Tree and the monument's signs and picnic tables in a material that is similar to what they use for fire shelters. Finally, planes dropped retardant on the area.

And it worked.

The Bootleg Fire recently passed through the area — and the Mitchell Monument survived.

"It's one of the successes so far," Gracey said — with more soon to come, she believes.

"We feel like we have a huge challenge," she said, "but we're hoping to make progress and turn a corner."



Wes Morgan/Contributed Photo

Two men were injured early Friday, July 23, when their car crashed into a ponderosa pine tree beside Highway 7 near Sumpter. The impact started a fire that engulfed the car and spread to a small section of forest nearby.

## CRASH

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Morgan said the crash was reported at 3:51 a.m.

The site was near Milepost 28, about 21 miles west of Baker City and about three miles east of the Sumpter junction. Morgan said the crash happened just east of where Huckleberry Loop meets Highway 7.

Morgan, who lives about two and a half miles from the crash site, said the car was engulfed in flames when he arrived, but both the driver and passenger had gotten out.

He said he used the hose from his truck, which carries 100 gallons of water, to knock down the fire, and tended to the two men.

Morgan said the driver appeared to have sustained more severe injuries.

He said other volunteers from his department, the Powder River Rural Fire Protection District, arrived to fight the fire, while volunteers from the Sumpter Fire Department prepared a helicopter landing spot along Hudspeth Lane, about two miles to the

east, for a LifeFlight helicopter.

That helicopter picked up the driver and flew him to a Boise hospital, Morgan said.

A Baker City Fire Department ambulance brought the passenger to Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Baker City, where a second helicopter took him to Boise, Morgan said.

"Volunteers from Powder River and Sumpter are fantastic," Morgan said.

He said the fire didn't spread far from the car, in part because there was some green grass near the base of the ponderosa pine.

Morgan said it was "brisk" in the predawn — a weather station near the Sumpter junction recorded a low temperature of 37 degrees Friday.

Steve Meyer, wildland fire supervisor at the Oregon Department of Forestry's Baker City office, said an ODF crew checked the fire later Friday morning to make sure it's out.

Meyer said the fire likely would have spread much faster had the crash happened during the afternoon, given recent temperatures in the 80s and gusty winds.

## FIRE

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While the Holiday Farm Fire was impacted heavily by wind, it's been the terrain, he said, that has been difficult at Elbow Creek.

"Every fire is different just based on the environment and weather conditions," he said. "You look at Holiday Farm last year, it was wind-driven, a very significant wind event, which is challenging in itself because of the rate of spread, but you knew where it was going. The wind's blowing from one direction and pushing on the fire. Here, what's challenging about it is it's fuel-driven and (you face) smoke, and drainages. You don't know which way the wind is going to blow up these drainages."

He said that the deep, steep drainages and canyons in the area where the fire is burning makes trying to attack it difficult.

"The Holiday Farm Fire, you could reach everywhere," he said. "These canyons are so deep, it's really challenging to get people down into them."

The canyons' depth and steepness have even limited one of the tactics Smith likes to employ — fighting fire at night.

"It's a really good time to catch a fire, but it's too steep and too danger-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A bulldozer navigates Sloan Point Road on Thursday, July 22, 2021 while working the Elbow Creek Fire near Promise.

ous to put firefighters in a draw at night time here, so that takes away one of our typical strategies simply because of geography," he said.

In explaining firefighting and tactics, he said there is a benefit to having air support, but manpower

on the ground is what matters.

"People like to think 'just bring in more helicopters or air tankers.' They slow the fire, (but) you have to have boots on the ground to really put it out," he said. "Even if it rains, it buys you an opportunity. I like to tell

people we take advantage of opportunities. If we can get an air tanker in there and slow it down, maybe we can chip away at a line. It's all about containment, and in this country it's hard to contain a fire."

A contained portion of a fire, he

said, is where a border containment line is holding to the point the crew feels confident they could leave that portion and it would no longer spread.

"We're estimating if we walked away from it, we're estimating 15% of that line we have in, it wouldn't expand," he said when explaining the containment at the time, which was 15%. "The rest of the fire could. As we continue to strengthen those lines, the containment goes up. Before we leave here it will be at 100%."

The terrain, he said, dictates what strategy is put in place, but he added the team will "chisel away" putting a border around the fire until it's handled.

"What's your first priority? Maybe it's a little section of line, but you have to button that up. We have people throughout the fire, we'll really put an emphasis on one of those fronts, catch that one, and (then) we'll put emphasis on another one, and just chisel away at it."

The blaze Smith worked on last year was the largest he had ever been on, yet he's stunned by the current fire situation.

"It's crazy the size of fires right now. Never seen anything like it," he said. "It's more fires, and they're all big fires."



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