

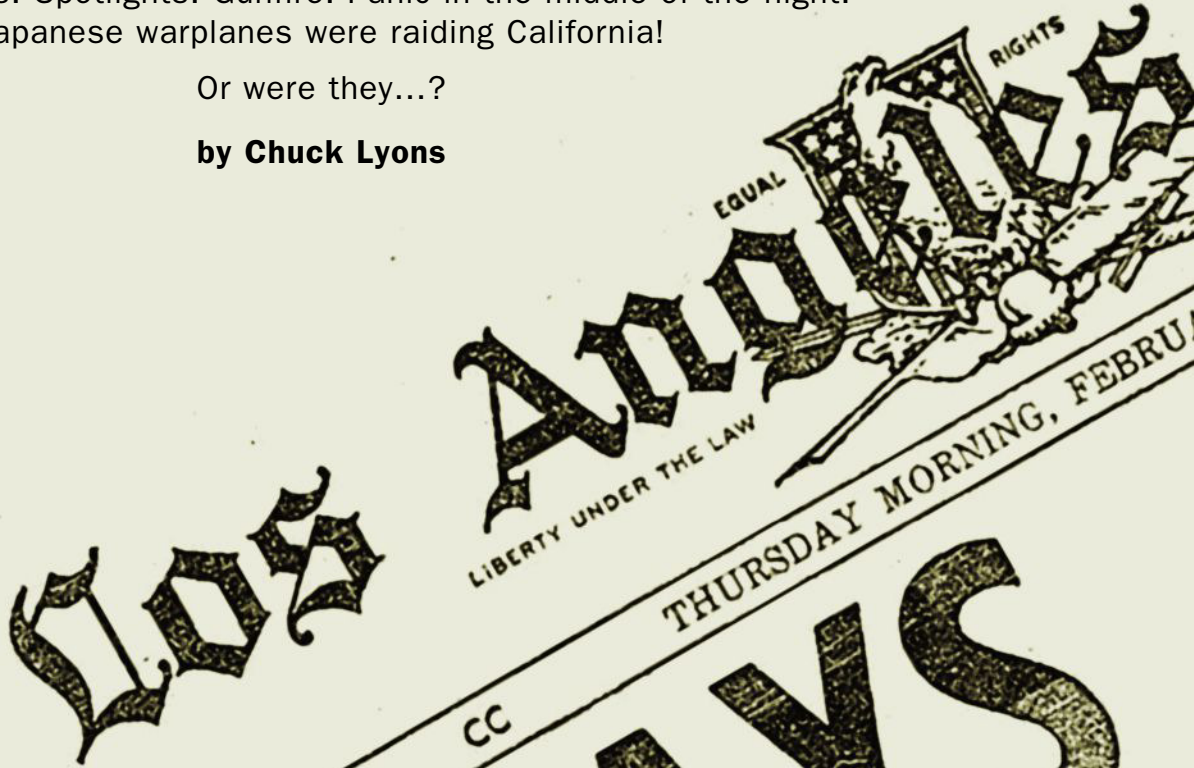
THE BATTLE

of Los Angeles

Air raid sirens. Spotlights. Gunfire. Panic in the middle of the night.
Japanese warplanes were raiding California!

Or were they...?

by **Chuck Lyons**



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(Editorial)
 A considerable public excitement and confusion by yesterday morning's supposed enemy air attack on this area and its spectacular official accompaniment to The Times that more specific public information should be forthcoming from government sources, if only to clarify their own so-far conflicting statements about it.
 The five-hour blackout was ordered by the Army's 4th Fighter Command and the ensuing heavy and long-continued anti-aircraft firing was also on official Army orders. It seems clear, then, that the responsible Army officials in this area were convinced that enemy aircraft were overhead and that no effort should be spared to shoot them down before they could attack, by bombs or otherwise. An official statement, made public yesterday from its San Francisco headquarters, the Western Defense Command, that "unidentified aircraft were reported in the area was a considerable amount of anti-aircraft fire. No bombs were dropped and no reports are conflicting as to ascertain the facts."
 The Navy Knox told us indicated that over Los Angeles.

Five Deaths Laid to Raid Blackout

Traffic Accidents and Heart Attacks Take Lives of Quintette

Deaths of five persons—three in traffic accidents, two as victims of heart attacks—were listed as directly attributable to the five-hour blackout in Los Angeles County yesterday morning.
 The inky blackness also resulted in injuries to scores of other persons.
 Mrs. Zeulah Klein, 48, of 1097 Mayflower St., Arcadia, was killed when an automobile in which she was riding collided during the blackout with a milk truck driven by Mrs. Goldie Wagner, 50, of 2510 S. 10th St., Arcadia, during the early morning hours at 1600 S. 10th St.

Roaring Guns Mark Blackout

**Identity of Aircraft Veiled in Mystery
 No Bombs Dropped and No Enemy
 Civilians Report Seeing Planes**

Overshadowing a nation-wide rumors and conflicting reports, the Defense Command yesterday morning in Los Angeles' early morning action were the result of a five-hour blackout. In two official statements, the Navy Knox in Washington confirmed a false alarm and "jittery" Southland of unidentified aircraft. Relayed by the second area for the second time. Insistence came as the episode.



THE BATTLE of Los Angeles by Chuck Lyons

SIRENS WAILED THROUGH LOS ANGELES in the wee hours of February 25, 1942. Air raid wardens ran to their posts. Shell-bursts, sweeping searchlights, and the bright streaks of tracer bullets split the dark sky. This was not a drill. Civilians crowded the hills around the city and stood on rooftops, scouring the night sky for Japanese planes. Cars crashed amid the confusion. The City of Angels, it seemed, was under attack.

As dawn crept in, the firing had stopped and soon the morning newspapers hit the streets. “L.A. Area Raided!” shouted a half-page headline on page one of the *Los Angeles Times*. “Jap Planes Peril Santa Monica...,” read the subhead. The *Los Angeles Examiner* reported that civilian witnesses had seen as many as 50 enemy planes over the city. Three had been shot down over the ocean to the west, it said.

But the light of morning showed there had been no attack, and no enemy planes had been shot down. Various descriptions of a case of war jitters, a false alarm, and even a UFO attack, what history came to call the Great Los Angeles Air Raid—or the Battle of Los Angeles—ended with some 1,400 anti-aircraft shells fired, seven people dead, and area residents and military authorities scratching their heads. What really had happened?

Real Japanese Bombs

AFTER THE December 1941 attack on the US Pacific Fleet in Hawaii’s Pearl Harbor, communities along America’s West Coast feared they might fall within striking distance of Japan’s sea and air forces. They began suffering from what historians have called “invasion fever,” a general uneasiness and fear that first showed itself a day after the Pearl Harbor attack. That day, December 8, 1941, military officials terrified San Francisco residents by calling a sudden air raid alert. The decision was based on reports of incoming Japanese planes and an aircraft carrier offshore, reports that were later called into question.

Adding to the unease in those early months of the war, it was

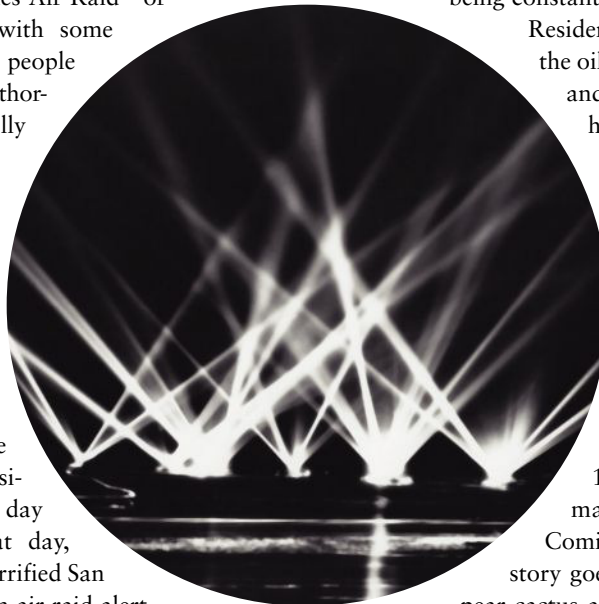
common knowledge that Japanese submarines routinely patrolled off the West Coast and were responsible for sinking several merchant ships in the area. On February 23, 1942, one of those submarines, *I-17*, entered the Santa Barbara Channel and shelled the Ellwood Oil Field, about 12 miles offshore from Santa Barbara and just north of Los Angeles. The attack came while President Franklin D. Roosevelt was delivering one of his Fireside Chats to the nation via radio. During the talk, Roosevelt warned that “the broad oceans which have been heralded in the past as our protection from attack have become endless battlefields on which we are being constantly challenged by our enemies.”

Residents of the Santa Barbara area witnessed the oilfield attack. “We heard a whistling noise and a thump as a projectile hit near the house,” recounted John Hollister III, who was 10 years old at the time. After about 20 minutes, the *I-17* ceased firing and withdrew. “We knew we were at war before then,” resident Ruth Pratt later said. “And after that we definitely knew it.”

A story persists that *I-17*’s skipper, Commander Kozo Nishino, shelled the Ellwood facility to avenge a humiliation he had suffered there in the late 1930s. At that time, Nishino had commanded a tanker that stopped there.

Coming ashore from his docked tanker, the story goes, Nishino slipped and fell on a prickly pear cactus and was laughed at. But the truth, argue some historians, is that Nishino bombed the Ellwood facility because it was an undefended strategic target.

The *I-17*’s shelling of the oilfield was the first hostile fire directed against the American homeland since the War of 1812. But



PREVIOUS SPREAD: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

TOP: AMERICA IN WWII COLLECTION; LEFT & OPPOSITE: NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Previous spread: “ARMY SAYS ALARM REAL” shouts the *Los Angeles Times* on February 26, 1942. Early on the 25th, army guns lit the sky, shooting at Japanese planes. But were the planes real? Above: Lights rise from LA’s harbor in a wartime show of readiness. The city was on edge early in the war. When a Japanese sub shelled a California oil field on February 23, navy officials decided an attack on LA was next. The army put LA on alert. Top: Air attacks were unlikely, but neighborhood air raid wardens—with helmets like this—kept Americans ready, enforcing alerts and drills. Opposite: A warden shows how to hide interior light during blackouts, which made towns invisible.



THE BATTLE of Los Angeles by Chuck Lyons

damage was slight. The sub fired only 16 or 17 shells. Some landed on the beach. Others struck and damaged a pier and destroyed an oil derrick and a pump house. But the attack's real impact was on local morale. Some Santa Barbara residents fled. Rumors spread that the Ellwood was just a prelude to a larger attack against Los Angeles.

LOYAL JAPANESE AMERICANS in the region had predicted an attack would be made during FDR's radio address, according to historian William A. Goss's 1948 analysis "Air Defense of the Western Hemisphere," a chapter in the first volume of *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, the US Army Air Forces' official history of the air war. Japanese American sources believed a larger attack would be made on Los Angeles shortly thereafter. Blinking lights and even flares had been seen near LA's vital aircraft and defense plants, some people said. Were these signals from secret operatives to would-be attackers? "Los Angeles was darn near in a panic," wrote US Army Lieutenant Donald V. Bennett, a future general whose field artillery battalion had just been sent to California. "...An armada was expected to be off Long Beach within a day or two."

At least one witness claimed, erroneously, that *I-17* had headed south toward LA after shelling the Ellwood oilfield. Other area residents claimed they had seen what they called "signal lights" from out at sea. As a result, a blackout—the mandatory nighttime extinguishment or concealment of all light to make a community invisible to enemy aircraft and, in coastal areas, to ships and submarines offshore—was declared for the Los Angeles area until morning.

A Stage Set for Panic

IN THIS ATMOSPHERE OF FEAR and uncertainty, Goss writes, the US Navy announced its belief that an attack was imminent on Southern California and Los Angeles, which was then the fifth-largest city in the United States with a population of about 1.5 million people. At 7:18 P.M. on February 24, military officials put LA's air defenses on alert, only to cancel three hours later. Then, at about 2:15 A.M. on February 25, radar picked up something over the Pacific about 120 miles west of the city. Anti-aircraft units went onto high alert, and a blackout was ordered at 2:21 A.M. By then, the mysterious object had disappeared from radar, but anti-aircraft batteries in and around Los Angeles were put on ready-to-fire status. Emergency centers were already receiving a trickle of telephone calls about enemy planes being spotted.

Air raid alarms sounded and air wardens scurried to their posts. At about 3:15 A.M., the 37th Coast Artillery Brigade began responding to the reports of enemy planes by firing .50-caliber machine guns and 12.8-pound anti-aircraft shells. Planes from the air forces' 4th Interceptor Command were readied to meet incoming enemy aircraft, but they never took off. "The next three hours produced some of the most imaginative reporting of the war," the official air force history says.

Pandemonium in LA

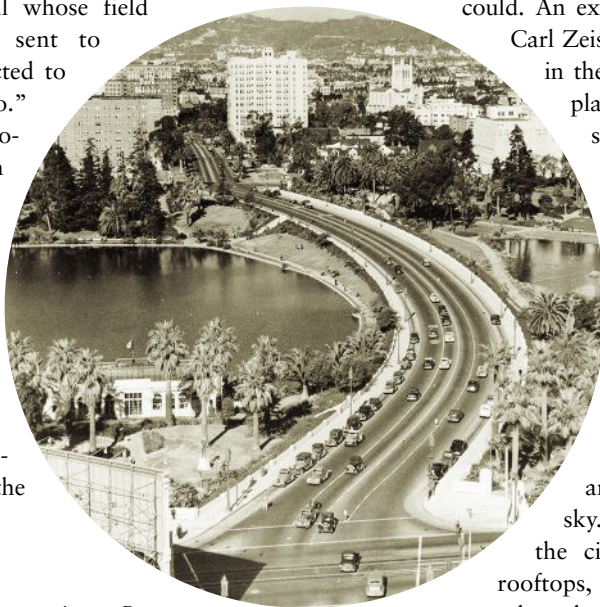
HUNDREDS OF PLANES were reported over the city, and searchlights played across the sky, highlighting the bursts of anti-aircraft shells, which may themselves have been mistaken for more enemy planes. A coastal artillery colonel reported having spotted "about twenty-five planes at 12,000 feet." Long Beach Police Chief J.H. McClelland said, "I watched what was described as the second wave of planes from atop the seven-story Long Beach City Hall. I

did not see any planes but the younger men with me said they could. An experienced Navy observer with powerful

Carl Zeiss binoculars said he counted nine planes in the cone of the searchlight. The group (of planes) passed along from one battery of searchlights to another, and under fire from the anti-aircraft guns, flew from the direction of Redondo Beach and Inglewood on the land side of Fort MacArthur, and continued toward Santa Ana and Huntington Beach. Anti-aircraft fire was so heavy we could not hear the motors of the planes."

Shortly after 3 A.M., reports of a balloon carrying a red flare over Santa Monica came in, and four batteries of anti-aircraft artillery opened fire at the sky. Area residents stood on the hills around the city, in front of their homes, on the rooftops, and in the city's streets, watching the spectacle and swapping stories they had heard of planes crashing into the sea and around the city. There were actual reports of four enemy planes being shot down, including one from the 77th street police station that had a Japanese plane crashing in flames at a Hollywood intersection. "There were sirens, searchlights, even anti-aircraft guns blamming away," recalled Arthur Ralph Blum, who was nine years old when he witnessed the spectacle. "...I went out onto the upstairs balcony.... It was after three in the morning. Searchlights probed the western sky. Tracers streamed upward. The racket was terrific." Another eyewitness reported, "The air over Los Angeles erupted like a volcano."

Finally, at 7:21 A.M., the all-clear sounded. Local children spent the morning picking up pieces of shrapnel in the streets and on the city's beaches. But there were no enemy planes. Daylight proved



Above: Wartime Los Angeles, home to 1.5 million people. After a tense alert on the evening of February 24, all seemed calm. But at 2:21 A.M. sirens screamed as the army imposed a blackout. Radar had detected something offshore. Opposite: Around 3:15 A.M., anti-aircraft guns opened fire. In this photo, the bright blob left of center is a shell-burst. The other bright spots are stars, doubled by double exposure.



ATTACKS

Real and Imagined

If Japan or Germany had decided to attack the US mainland in World War II, Americans would have been ready. Along the nation's east and west coasts, and even in the Midwest heartland, civil defense officials made sure civilians practiced and drilled until they knew exactly what to do if enemy bombers appeared overhead.

Such an attack was extremely unlikely, of course, considering how far enemy planes would have to fly to reach their targets. Most reports of imminent Japanese or German attacks on the US mainland came early in the war and turned out to be spurious. New York City, for instance, was ready for the worst on December 9, 1941, two days after the Pearl Harbor attack. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, newly appointed director of the federal Office of Civilian Defense, had made an unsettling national radio address the previous day. "...I want to be realistic," he said regarding the potential Axis threat to the mainland United States. "The situation is serious."

Into this tense atmosphere, reports came in at noon on December 9 that German planes had been spotted off the East Coast and would reach New York City in about two hours. Defense officials called an air raid alert. Radio stations fell silent, schools closed, and police sirens wailed to signal the public (civil defense sirens had not yet been installed). It was a false alarm. No one died as a result of it.

It was perhaps wise that Americans kept at least some degree of caution about enemy attacks, however, because on a few rare occasions, attacks—like the Japanese submarine *I-17's* shelling of the Ellwood Oil Field near Santa Barbara, California, on February 23, 1942—were quite real. Later in 1942, for example, the Japanese sub *I-25* made a pair of small air attacks in Oregon that were dubbed the Lookout Air Raids. In June, it used its guns to bombard Fort Stevens, at the mouth of the Columbia River—to little effect.

Then, in September, the sub launched its Yokosuka E14Y seaplane (a "Glen" in US parlance) on a failed bombing raid that was meant to start a forest fire in the Siskiyou State Forest near Brookings. Howard "Razz" Gardner, manning a fire lookout tower on Mount Emily, saw the plane fly in and saw smoke afterward. He and another lookout-tower man contained the fire until a larger crew arrived and extinguished it. Little damage was done. The bombing attempt was repeated on the 29th, but with no success.

Later in the war, in 1944 and 1945, Japan released more



Almost as fanciful as enemy bombers soaring over America was the government's advice on what citizens should do if a bomb actually landed. This comic-book intro to bomb disposal, by Honolulu artist E.J. Stephenson, spells out the process frame by frame.

than 9,000 bomb-laden paper hydrogen balloons into the jet stream. Air currents carried the balloons across the Pacific to at least 17 US states and to Canada and Mexico. On May 5, 1945, at Bly, Oregon, a pastor's pregnant wife and five Sunday-school children 11 to 14 years old noticed one of these balloons on the ground near a site where they planned to picnic. As they approached it, the balloon's bomb went off, and all were killed. The other potentially deadly balloons caused no harm.

On the East Coast, in addition to infiltration of German spies sent to create chaos and damage war production, there was the very real danger of U-boats. These German submarines posed no real threat to shore communities (except to deliver spies). But from January through August 1942, before the United States organized a successful defense of its coastal waters, U-boats sank more than 600 merchant ships just off American shorelines, sometimes within view from the beach.

THE BATTLE of Los Angeles by Chuck Lyons

that none had been brought down in Hollywood or in the Pacific west of the city. No bombs had been dropped, either.

Several buildings in the city had been damaged by anti-aircraft shell fragments, however, and there had been numerous auto accidents on the blacked-out streets. Five people had died from falling shrapnel and accidents. One of them, 59-year-old police sergeant E. Larsen, had been killed en route to an air raid post. Two others, including a 63-year-old state military reservist at the wheel of an ammunition truck, had died of apparent heart attacks during the confusion.

Three Japanese people, two men and a woman, were arrested at Venice Beach on suspicion of signaling with flashlights near the pier and were turned over to the FBI.

Looking for Answers

MILITARY AND CIVILIAN officials were as confused as anyone about what had happened. A morning edition of the *Los Angeles Times* blared “Army Says Alarm Real.” The newspaper published a picture of a local resident holding a pillow that had been shredded by shrapnel. Another photo showed a resident holding an unexploded 12-pound anti-aircraft shell.

As the city slowly settled back into its normal routine, questions emerged. “Attempts to arrive at an explanation of the incident quickly became as complicated and mysterious as the ‘attack’ itself,” wrote Goss. Some simply blamed “war nerves,” which had certainly played a part. But what had triggered the mass hysteria?

US Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox announced that the “attack” had begun with the sighting of what was actually a weather balloon. Once anti-aircraft fire began, shell-bursts were themselves mistaken for additional enemy planes. The whole thing was, he said, a “false alarm.” At the same time, he admitted that attacks were always possible and urged defense industries to move inland.

Army brass in the area at first declared that “most previous reports had been greatly exaggerated,” but then said that one to five “unidentified planes” had been flying over Los Angeles. Secretary of War Henry Stimson seemed to accept the latter explanation and suggested that the “unidentified planes” had been launched from secret Japanese airfields or Japanese submarines. In either case, he said, the planes had been attempting to locate defensive anti-aircraft batteries in the Los Angeles area or simply trying to demoralize the city’s population.

Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall suggested the “attack” might have begun with a faulty recognition of commer-

cial aircraft, but was possibly part of a psychological warfare campaign. He wrote a secret memo to Roosevelt trying to explain what had happened.

FOR YEARS AFTERWARD—and even today—people have claimed the so-called Battle of Los Angeles was started by a UFO sighting. To some eyes, a photo in the *Los Angeles Times* on February 26, 1942, shows a UFO caught in crossing searchlights. Hundreds of witnesses claimed they had seen the object, which reportedly remained motionless over the city and then began moving slowly away. The photo has spawned countless websites and blogs.

As the army and navy fumbled around trying to explain what had happened, newspapers began attacking them, accusing them of a cover-up or outright incompetence. “There is a mysterious reticence about the whole affair and it appears some form of censorship is trying to halt discussion of the matter,” said the *Long Beach Independent*, voicing a belief that has further fueled the UFO theory.

US Representative Leland Ford of Santa Monica called for a congressional investigation. The *New York Times* chimed in on February 28, saying that if the city’s guns had been firing at nothing at all, it was a sign of “expensive incompetence,” but if they had been firing at actual enemy planes, why had none been hit? “What would have happened if this had been a real air raid?” the newspaper asked.

In time the recriminations and furor died down. At the end of the war, the Japanese officially claimed that they had never sent any planes over the area on the night of the Great Los Angeles Air Raid.

The most logical explanation of what triggered the event appears to be the weather balloon theory first mentioned by Knox. Goss writes, “A careful study of the evidence suggests that meteorological balloons—known to have been released over Los Angeles—may have caused the initial alarm. After the firing started, careful observation was difficult because of

drifting smoke from shell burst.... It is hard to see, in any event, what enemy purpose would have been served by an attack in which no bombs were dropped.”

So, weather balloons were reported as enemy planes, guns started to fire, and fear and confusion took over. Sightings multiplied and rumors spread in a city that already “was darn near in a panic,” as young Lieutenant Bennett had written. Panic bred panic. ★

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Daylight showed that the casualties and damage of the “air raid” were caused by accidents, panic—and shrapnel from friendly fire. This LA resident points out holes in his car caused by a shell that exploded near his garage.

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