

JOHN B. (JACK) SMITH
USFS RETIREES REUNION 2000
LIVING HISTORY PROJECT
AUGUST 18, 2002

ADDENDUM: Oregon Balloon Bombings

I am John B. (Jack) Smith, a U.S. Forest Service Retiree, having retired in Denver, Colorado in 1970. The subject of this tape is "Reunion 2000 – Oral History Project". I made a tape for Larry Cron, the Project Chairman, following the Missoula reunion in 2000. However, there are two incidents which happened on the Fremont National Forest, which I failed to include, but which are important enough that they should be included.

I was working in Timber Management on the Umpqua with headquarters at Roseburg, Oregon during the early World War II years. In November 1943, I was transferred to the Bly Ranger District on the Fremont National Forest as Assistant Ranger, where I was also employed primarily in Timber Management work. Ivory Pine Company and Crane Mills were at Bly, and Weyerhaeuser also had a large railroad logging operation at Camp Six cutting primarily Weyerhaeuser timber, but also cutting National Forest timber sales. Most of the National Forest timber harvested was going into the war effort.

Spike Armstrong was the District Ranger on the Bly Ranger District and both of us were working primarily in timber. Spike administered the District as well. Everything went well on the District; Spike was a joy to work with. We got many things done. The timber work was similar to what I had done on the Umpqua. The timber types were, of course, much different.

On Saturday, May 5th, 1945, six people were killed by a Japanese bomb on the Bly Ranger District. Spike and I happened to be at the ranger station in the morning of May 5th when Jumbo Barnhouse, the forest road grader operator, drove hurriedly into the ranger station and bailed out of his pickup. He said, "There's been an explosion on Gearhart Mountain and several people are hurt."

Spike and I gathered up sheets, blankets, and first aid kits, and notified the Supervisor's Office that we were headed to the site. The accident scene was on the shoulder of Gearhart Mountain, perhaps five miles or so from Bly. As we approached, Reverend Archie Mitchell pointed the way for us to hike to the site that was a short

safeguarding the corpses. While waiting, I dug a jagged piece of shrapnel from a pine tree and I still have it as a memento of this tragedy.

To explain more about the situation: The balloon canopy, which I thought was made out of rice paper, was laminated together in several layers and was tough. It was filled with hydrogen gas, was launched in Japan, and came over the Pacific Ocean on the jet stream. We knew that these balloons were arriving in Klamath and Lake Counties. When they worked as intended, they exploded in the air and we found pieces of this type of paper from other balloons scattered over some of the forest and rangeland areas in both Klamath and Lake County. The bits of paper from these other balloons were mostly hand size and smaller. Since they arrived with winter winds and storms, they did not set fires. The intent of the Japanese was to set the forests on fire, but they arrived at the wrong time of year when the outdoors was wet and sometimes covered with snow. Perhaps a month earlier, on a clear April day, I reported one of the balloons by code to the military. Within minutes, the word came back that I (and others) had reported the planet Venus.

This particular balloon had not functioned as intended. The canopy had partially deflated and there was a snowdrift partially covering it. It was a pleasant day with daytime temperatures probably in the 50's or 60's °F and the nights below freezing. Apparently, the group, except for Rev. Mitchell, was gathered around the cogwheel that suspended under the gasbag. That is where the explosive was located. They were in a tight circle around it. The powerful explosion and the shrapnel from it killed every member of the group. We had received the first report from Jumbo around 9 a.m. It was late in the afternoon, almost dark, when the Navy people arrived. They took only a few minutes, but examined the site quite thoroughly with instruments. They said there were no hazards, so the bodies could be removed. My memory is that a part of the cogwheel assembly contained an aneroid barometer, several pounds of high explosive in metal containers, and an array of small cotton bags filled with sand, each containing 2 or 3 pounds of beach sand. If the balloon descended to a certain level, the cogwheel would turn, a bag of perhaps 2 to 3 pounds of sand would be dropped, and the canopy would ascend. The final act, if the balloon was working as intended, was that the explosion would set off some primer cord, which would go into the hydrogen gas-filled balloon and

explode it. That was the reason we saw lots of small pieces of paper at other places where balloons had worked as intended.

Mrs. Mitchell was a few months pregnant and the youngsters were 12-15 years old and they were local neighbor kids, so this was hard to take. It was a great shock to the Bly community. We had held community meetings in Bly to inform the citizens. This was wartime, so it was hush-hush to keep the news from getting back to Japan that the bombs were getting to America.

The people who died were Richard Patzke, Joan Patzke, Jay Gifford, Edward Engen and Sherman Shoemaker, as well as Mrs. Elsie Mitchell.

More than 400,000 Americans, mostly military, died in World War II. These six fatalities were the only civilian deaths directly attributable to enemy action in the 48 contiguous United States.

Ranger Armstrong and Jack Smith were commended by the Forest Supervisor for their timely and effective action with regard to this tragedy. I heard no criticism from the public, and we did receive personal thanks from members of the community.

I understand there a sign and a monument have been placed at the location where the bomb exploded. It is on Weyerhaeuser land and Weyerhaeuser Timber Company put up the sign and monument.