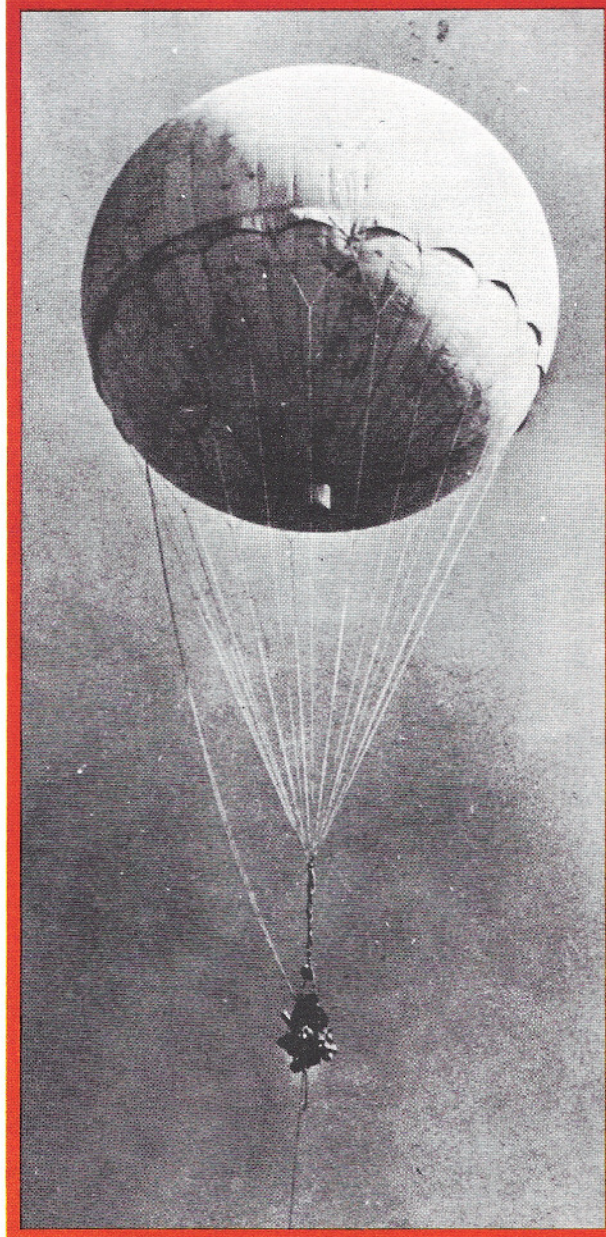


REMEMBERING WWII:

JAPAN'S BALLOON BOMBS

BY JAMES W. HARRIS



Below, the characters meaning "Fu-Go-Weapon," the name the Japanese gave to the balloon project.

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One of the most bizarre
and obscure chapters in modern warfare
aimed – but failed –
to hurt and demoralize America.

At 5:00 A.M. on November 3, 1944, a strange chapter in military history began: Japanese soldiers at three secluded coastal sites on Honshu Island, Japan, began inflating huge balloons – over 32 feet in diameter – with hydrogen gas. One by one, the balloons were released. Like some giant child's escaped toys, the balloons rose silently, drifting eastward until they vanished in the sky.

These were no toys, however. They were lethal weapons of war. Each balloon was equipped with deadly incendiary and high-explosive bombs. Their target: United States territory!

During the following three months almost 10,000 of these bizarre, seemingly absurd weapons were sent aloft. Riding the wind currents at 30,000 feet, nearly 1,000 would reach America. They would bring with them death, destruction, and an unprecedented challenge to U.S. defense forces.

The Japanese conceived this idea in 1942. James Doolittle's daring air raid on Tokyo had damaged morale and humiliated the Imperial military. Unable to respond by plane, and desperate to bring the war to American shores, the Japanese hit upon the idea of launching bomb-laden balloons against the U.S.

The proposal seems almost outlandish at first. Yet, there was sound logic behind it. Strong winds of 100 to 200 miles per hour swept from Japan to North America, thus making delivery a real possibility. Millions of acres of forests along the Pacific Coast were highly flammable, and a few incendiary bombs could well engulf huge regions in flame, with enormous costs in life and property. Even more important, Japan felt that the specter of thousands of silent, death-dealing balloons floating over the U.S. would deal a tremendous blow to American morale.

Constructing the balloons themselves was a formidable task. Except for a few hundred rubberized-silk models designed by the navy, the balloons were made of 600 patches of paper that had to be carefully glued together, by hand. Thousands of Japanese schoolchildren and other

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Navy personnel (above) inspect part of the mechanism of a balloon bomb, similar to the one that killed six Americans near Bly, Oregon, where the Weyerhaeuser Company dedicated a monument (below) to their memory.



BOMBS *Continued*

U.S. military personnel reinflated this Japanese balloon – recovered intact near Alturas, California – to study its components.

home-front workers pieced them together.

Despite the vast numbers of workers involved, secrecy was easy to keep. Although rumors that the balloons were to carry bombs to the U.S. were occasionally heard, no one took them seriously – it was too fantastic to believe!

From November 3, 1944 until early April 1945, about 9,300 balloons were launched.

American forces learned of the attack two days after the first launching, when a Navy patrol craft recovered the remains of one balloon off the California coast. More fragments were found later. Proof of their deadly potential came on December 6, when newspapers reported an exploding balloon over Thermopolis, Wyoming.

Following that incident, the American government asked all news media to suppress voluntarily any news of the balloon bombs. It was hoped that this silence would confuse and discourage the Japanese.

The news blackout was a complete success, thanks to the total cooperation of the media.

The blackout had at least one tragic consequence, however. On May 5, 1945, picnickers in woodlands near Bly, Oregon, discovered a fallen balloon and went to investigate. The bomb exploded, killing five children and a woman. The Weyerhaeuser Company of Klamath Falls, Oregon, later turned the site into a recreational area. A monument stands there today as a memorial for the victims – the only Americans killed by enemy action on U.S. soil during World War II.



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Considering the time and money invested in the weapons, their impact was virtually insignificant.

After these tragic deaths, the War Department issued warnings about the balloons. By this time, however, the Japanese had abandoned the effort, and the strange weapons had become history.

Considering the time and money invested in the weapons, their impact was virtually insignificant. Balloon fragments were found in Canada, Mexico, Alaska, and Hawaii. The balloons reached 17 American states, as far east as Michigan. Yet, the only known damage (besides the six tragic deaths described above) were a couple of insignificant brush fires.

There was one bizarre bit of irony, however. One balloon momentarily interrupted electrical power at an atomic energy plant in Hanford, Washington, and caused a three-day delay in the plant's operation. It would be hard to imagine a more perfect target for the balloon: the plant was producing materials for the atomic bombs that later would devastate Hiroshima and Nagasaki!

While the balloons were a military failure, their destructive potential should not be dismissed lightly: They posed a very real threat to American lives, property, and morale. And had they been carrying biological or chemical weapons – which the Japanese were researching – their consequences could have been calamitous.

Too, if the Japanese had continued producing the balloon weapons, they would doubtless have refined them, and perhaps improved their accuracy and destructive power. One Japanese propagandist even announced plans to launch a fleet of *manned balloons*, each carrying an armed soldier! The U.S. military took this threat seriously enough to calculate that a balloon 62 feet in diameter was quite capable of carrying a fully armed soldier, plus food, clothing and oxygen for breathing at high altitude. Luckily, this bizarre invasion never took place.

Today, remnants of these artifacts can be seen on display in the Balloons and Airships section of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and in the U.S. Air Force Museum at Wright Patterson, in Ohio.

Balloon bombs were a failure, despite their potential. They hold a permanent place in military history, however, as the world's first intercontinental weapons. 