

A History Lesson

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Our first "long weekend" of summer is almost upon us and for most of us it will be a time of remembrance as well as a time for parades and picnics. What we now celebrate as Memorial Day was originally known as "Decoration Day". It was the time when flowers were carried to the grave sites of loved ones, and fallen comrades were eulogized in thoughts and words. There are the less well known who have fallen, war victims for sure, but wearing no uniform, like the uncounted heroes who lost their lives in industrial accidents in our defense plants. The ones who have been on my mind for the past several weeks wore no uniforms and did not die in a defense plant accident either. They were a long way from Brillion, but I want to go there anyway.

Some of you may not know much about Bly, Oregon; others may not know there is a Bly, Oregon. It is located about 60 miles east of Klamath Falls, small town America in every sense, population less than 500 in 1945, could be about the same now. Reverend Archie E. Mitchell was pastor of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church in Bly, and on Saturday 5 May 1945, he took his pregnant wife Elsie and five members of his Sunday School class, ages 11 to 14, on what was supposed to be a picnic and fishing outing. Thirteen miles northeast of Bly, near Leonard Creek, his wife and the youngsters hiked through a meadow while he took the car around a horseshoe bend and parked. As he was getting the picnic supplies from the vehicle, he heard one of the children shout something about what he had found. That was followed by a loud explosion, and then silence. His immediate investigation disclosed that all six were dead, casualties of World War II, victims of our adversary in the Pacific Theater, the Japanese.

There are still some who proclaim that the attack on New York City was the first ever on our American Homeland, but they are wrong. There were many attacks on the continental US during WWII, but none was as devastating as the one that killed the group of picnickers near Bly, Oregon. On 9 September **1942**, a Japanese submarine surfaced near Brookings, Oregon, a coastal town way down in the southwest corner of the state and launched a small seaplane that was armed with two incendiary bombs. Piloted by Nobuo Fujita, the seaplane took off and flew inland northeast of Brookings where it dropped the incendiary devices on Mount Emily. Post-war studies disclosed that the goal was to start a major forest fire, hopefully one that would destroy not only Brookings, but many other urban areas as well. Nobuo Fujita is not exactly a household name, but perhaps it should be, because he was the first to use an airplane to drop a destructive device on the continental US. Later that same month, a submarine surfaced in the Columbia River, near the mouth, and launched a shell into Fort Stevens on the Washington side of the river. Damage was sustained on the fort baseball field when the backstop was hit. These blows were believed to have been delivered in retaliation for the Colonel Doolittle raid on the Japanese mainland in April 1942.

But what about the bomb that killed Elsie Mitchell? Where did that come from? During the latter part of 1944 and well into 1945 the Japanese launched nearly 1,000 balloons, hydrogen-filled paper canopies, that carried two incendiary devices and one anti-personnel explosive device. The balloons climbed to more than 30,000 feet, then rode the jet stream across the Pacific Ocean to North America. The trip across took only about 70 hours and most of the devices descended on Western US and Canada. The intention was to ignite vast forest fires that would require so much manpower to suppress them, that our war effort would be hampered significantly. The fires were started sure enough, but never got out of control. Some records show that these devices came down in 17 states; one source says 26 states. At least one made it as far as Michigan and one landed in Iowa. I never heard of one being found in Wisconsin. For those who wonder how a paper balloon can hold hydrogen gas, let me hasten to advise you that Japanese umbrellas were made of shellacked paper, and they are watertight. I have one that I bought in 1955 and it is still watertight, so it is readily apparent that a paper balloon would work well, and be much cheaper to make than one of latex.

This little history lesson is provided in the hope that, while enjoying the weekend celebrations, you will pause at least once to reflect on those countless souls who gave their all that we might remain free. Freedom is not now, nor has it ever been, free. Some pay more than others.

Epilogue: The Reverend Archie E. Mitchell's incredibly bad luck may have started near Bly, Oregon, but 17 years later it was existent still. While doing missionary work at a leprosarium in Vietnam, on 30 May

1962, he was taken prisoner by the Viet Cong. He was heard from off and on for a few years as negotiations went on to obtain his release, but in 1969 all communications ceased, and Archie Mitchell has not been heard from since.

Freedom Is Not Free

Frenchy Sends with Warm Regards