War on the Coast

On January 23, 1942, a Japanese submarine surfaced off the coast north of Santa Barbara and fired its 5.5-inch deck gun at an oil storage facility at Ellwood. This was the first time that an enemy had attacked the U.S. mainland in 130 years, since the War of 1812. The target was oil tanks that the submarine missed altogether, although there was minor damage to some pumping equipment.

This attack was an effort by the Japanese to deceive the Americans into thinking that there was going to be a large assault on the coast, as this was just six weeks after Pearl Harbor. What this attack did was set in motion the deployment of troops at a number of sites along the California coast, including Santa Cruz, in an effort to protect the mainland from any potential threat from offshore. The attack at Ellwood would have a significant and long-lasting effect on the entire United States, but also impacted what was then the small town of Santa Cruz. This raid directly or indirectly led to Executive Order 9066 and the forced internment of over 112,000 Japanese Americans into camps, but soon was also to place serious restrictions on the Italian Americans living in the Santa Cruz area at the time.

The month before the Ellwood incident, and little known to most of us alive today, nine Japanese submarines were positioned off the west coast of the United States to attack American merchant ships. Over a seven-day period, from December 18-24, 1941, these submarines, firing a combination of torpedoes and deck guns, attempted to sink eight different ships, of which two were sunk and two others were damaged. Six seamen were killed in these incidents.

These submarines were all launched months before the war began and were strategically positioned, based on Japanese intelligence, to provide the best opportunity to attack west coast shipping lanes. Four of these were sent to what were determined to be the most important locations: off Los Angeles Harbor, off the Golden Gate, at the mouth of the Columbia River, and off the Strait of Juan de Fuca leading into the port of Seattle.

The other five were assigned to areas that were determined to be less critical, but that would still see be able to inflict damage to shipping: off Cape Blanco, Oregon; off Cape Mendocino; in our backyard off Monterey Bay; Estero Bay offshore of Morro Bay, and off San Diego. Detailed accounts of each of the attacks that took place during that week in December of 1941 are described in a HistoryNet article—“Japanese Submarines Prowl the U.S. Pacific Coast in 1941”.

On December 20, one of the Japanese submarines, I-23, had been stalking an American oil tanker, Richfield Oil Company’s Agwiworld, about 20 miles off Monterey Bay. At 2:15 that afternoon, an explosion off the stern of the ship sent Captain Frederick Goncalves racing to the bridge, where he could see what appeared to be a submarine about 500 yards to the west. While there hadn’t been a lot of experience with merchant ships attempting to outsmart submarines, the
captain ordered the pilot to turn hard to port (left) to head straight for the sub, in order to present the smallest area for any shelling.

After a second shot, the helm was put hard to starboard (right) so the stern was facing the submarine and the tanker was now heading towards the coast.

Although the sub was much faster than the tanker, Captain Genichi Shibata faced a dilemma. Seas were large at the time, and he knew if he attempted to chase the tanker with the swells washing over the submarine’s deck that he would both be risking some of the gun crew and would also have less accuracy with his deck gun.

Captain Goncalves later reported that the tanker zigzagged around in attempts to present the smallest target possible. The sub dodged and circled, trying to get broadside of the ship, but never was successful. As the Agwiworld got closer to the Monterey Peninsula, the submarine fired the last of its eight shots, four of which splashed water on to the deck of the tanker, and then it submerged. The tanker had made a distress call to the U.S. Navy, requesting assistance, which was believed to have been intercepted by the sub, leading them to retreat.

There was one additional interesting local part of this episode. There were a number of golfers playing on the Pebble Beach course that afternoon that noticed the tanker zigzagging wildly as it steamed for Santa Cruz, belching large clouds of smoke from its stacks. They thought little of it, however, and went back to more important things on the golf course.

There is more to come with Santa Cruz at War in two weeks. Many of the details included above are drawn from the HistoryNet website.