The War Comes to Santa Cruz

In 1941, prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, there were already protective measures being taken by U.S. west coast communities, including Santa Cruz. There was a sense that war was inevitable and that it was better to be prepared than surprised. Blackouts became a standard evening practice in coastal towns and cities. I recall my parents, who lived near Los Angeles at the time, telling me about shades being drawn at dusk, no streetlights on, and automobile headlights masked off so the lights were directed downward to the street.

The police chief in Santa Cruz at the time, Al Huntsman, ordered practice blackouts, even before Pearl Harbor. By turning off street lights and covering windows at night, the intent was to greatly reduce the visibility of coastal cities to potential enemy ships and planes. There were also lookout stations established along the coast, including at least one a few miles north of Santa Cruz.

Following the submarine firing at oil tanks north of Santa Barbara (58 years ago last Sunday), there were a series of artillery stations established along the California coast. What was to become the 54th Coast Artillery Army Regiment was activated February 10, 1941, just two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The 54th was the first and only all African-American regiment and was made up of soldiers from Texas, Kansas, and Missouri who were originally assembled at Camp Wallace, Texas. After training in Camp Davis, North Carolina, the soldiers were sent 2,500 miles west to guard the California coast.

Two-hundred men from the 54th Regiment arrived on the evening of Easter Sunday in 1942 and set up camp at Lighthouse Point. The existing black population of Santa Cruz totaled just 18 at the time, and grew ten-fold overnight. It wasn’t a smooth transition, and was reported that the city leaders tried to make parts of Santa Cruz off limits to the soldiers. In response, the local military chaplain threatened to boycott “the whole damn town”, which lead the local businesses to put aside their racism.

These black soldiers were fighting two wars, one against the enemy and one against racism, as described in Frank Perry’s book on Lighthouse Point. The soldiers were given left over World War I uniforms and their army stripes were actually painted on their sleeves. They were given blue denim work clothes that looked like prison uniforms, and hobnail boots (with nails inserted in the soles to make them last longer). These were not good times for these soldiers charged with protecting the Santa Cruz coast.

Other minority groups also suffered from racism and the fear of enemy attack. As war broke out with Japan, Germany and Italy, President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the arrest of all enemy “aliens” (which primarily included those of Italian, Japanese and German origins) who were
“dangerous to American security”. Based on this order and the fears of many Americans, nearly 4,000 “aliens” from across the United States were arrested in three days.

As the war expanded, Roosevelt’s orders became more far reaching. Designated zones were established in Santa Cruz that were completely off-limits to Japanese, Germans and Italians. At that time, the Monterey Bay area had a large population of farmers and fishermen of Italian and Japanese descent, who had curfews as well as residence and travel restrictions placed on them. By January 25, 1942, those who did not have U.S. citizenship were forced to leave all areas west of Highway One in Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties.

The Italian fishermen who worked from the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf could no longer practice their livelihoods. While many of those fishermen had sons fighting in the war, sadly, that didn’t really matter. The farming community was impacted heavily as well, because at that time many of the farm managers and workers were Italian, who then had to move inland and couldn’t work in the fields west of Highway 1.

Roy Vigliecca, a lifelong resident of Santa Cruz County, told me that his parents had migrated to the Watsonville area from northern Italy in 1910. They eventually bought a small farm on the ocean side of Highway 1. Roy’s father and brother became American citizens, but for some reason his mother had not. She realized that she also needed to declare her allegiance to the country she had grown to love, and enrolled in a citizenship class in late 1941. But it turned out to be too late for the federal government.

In March 1942, she received notice that because their farm was located on the ocean side of Highway 1, she could no longer live there. Instead, she had to relocate to the east side of Freedom Boulevard, away from the possibility she could become a saboteur by signaling any submarine entering local waters. So Roy’s 54-year old, 5 foot 1 inch tall gentle mother had to rent a house on Stanford Street in Watsonville, where Roy moved also. In June 1942, she passed her citizenship test and was no longer considered an enemy alien. Fortunately, within two weeks they were able to move back to their farm.

Long-time resident and local attorney, Bob Bosso, recounted to me that his grandparents lived during the wars years on River Street (about where Bay Federal is now) and couldn’t cross Water/Mission Streets. Bob’s grandfather had a big vegetable garden, fruit trees, made his own wine, and raised chickens, rabbits and pigeons. For all of their other grocery needs, there was the Red & White Market (what is now Zoccolli’s) and the owners would deliver to Bob’s grandparents.

Don’t give up, there is more to come.