

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

JAPAN BOMBS AMERICA

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Forest Fire

Japan faced significant difficulties in planning for the Pacific War. Their radio direction-finding skills were quite good, but nothing beat visual observation for reconnaissance and planning. Potential targets near the home islands or existing bases were one thing, but reconnoitering farther out than that required aircraft observations that could not be safely conducted from an aircraft carrier, which would be too vulnerable to counter-attack. They had enough trouble projecting power at places like Pearl Harbor and Midway with front-line ships; observing activity at bases in Hawaii after that, or in places like Australia, Alaska, or the American West Coast was simply not possible. They tried long-range flying boats, but the American code-breakers caught wind of such plans and placed a defending ship where refueling would have to take place, thwarting the plans.

If conventional observation planes flying from an aircraft carrier or other surface ship was not feasible, what could they do? Their answer was still an aircraft carrier, but not one that operates from the ocean's surface...

DOOLITTLE RAID DID A LOT

America was stung by the Pearl Harbor attack, and immediately began planning for some type of attack on Japan, necessarily smaller in scale but on the home islands themselves. The result was a non-conventional aircraft carrier attack, using Army medium bombers flown off the deck of two fleet aircraft carriers. The raid, led by famous aviator Jimmy Doolittle, did little military damage, but resulted in two important outcomes. Japanese naval leaders were grossly embarrassed that their expensive naval forces could not prevent the home islands from being bombed, reducing their prestige, especially compared to that of the Japanese Army, their competing force. Second, the Doolittle attack caused many emergency radio messages that were intercepted by the Americans, which gave the codebreakers a lot of help in deciphering future messages to the great detriment of Japan.

The Imperial Japanese Navy's loss of face to the public was also severe, and they immediately went to work on plans to retaliate in kind. The only way they had to project power from great distances without exposing their aircraft carriers to counter-attack was by submarine. But the deck gun of a sub was small and short-ranged. Surface ships could not get close to American

naval bases without exposing themselves to counter-attack, and subs offshore could conduct little meaningful reconnaissance.

The solution was an aircraft-carrying submarine, already in the works. The Japanese were building the B-1 type, *I-15* class of subs with a deck hangar and catapult needed to launch a light floatplane for reconnaissance, and the system worked pretty well. Subs in this class displaced over 2500 tons and were longer than a football field, and had a range of over 14,000 miles without refueling. The class also had six bow torpedo tubes and carried 17 of the very-effective “Long Lance” torpedoes, far superior than their American counterparts and would remain so for the first two-plus years of the War. A total of twenty B-1s were built.

Some of the B-1s were very successful with their torpedoes. The most destructive sub of the class was the *I-19*. On September 14, 1942, its skipper encountered a task force built around the aircraft carrier *Wasp* (CV-7), which was a bit smaller than earlier carriers in order to comply with pre-War treaties. A spread of six Long Lances was loosed. Three of them hit *Wasp*, sinking it. The three that missed hit and sank the destroyer *USS O'Brien* (DD-415) and damaged the battleship *North Carolina* (BB-55). It was Japan’s most destructive torpedo salvo of the War.

The *I-26* crippled the carrier *USS Saratoga* (CV-3) on August 21, 1942, sending it back to the Bremerton Navy Yard for extensive repairs. On November 13, 1942, it sank the cruiser *USS Juneau* (CL-52), earlier damaged in the Naval Battle for Guadalcanal, killing all five of the [five Sullivan brothers](#) aboard.

Seventeen of the B-1 subs would be lost in action.

The light floatplane that the Japanese came up with for use on the B-1s was the Yokosuka E14Y, given the American codename, “Glen.” Flying it was dangerous duty. Glens were lightweight, hence fragile, and weakly armed, OK because their primary mission was reconnaissance, not air superiority.

The sub crew needed several hours on the surface to move the airplane components from the deck hangar and assemble them, and a similar amount of time to recover and stow the airplane after its reconnaissance flight. The sub could not dive during these evolutions and would be very vulnerable to attack, so most such missions started well before dawn. That cut the time of vulnerability by half.

SHELLING FROM SUBMARINES

Remember [1941](#), the weird WWII comedy from 1979 with John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, and John Candy? [It was actually nominated for three Academy Awards!] The movie lampooned the panicky response to a submarine gun attack on the oil fields at Goleta, in Santa Barbara County. America was still reeling from the Pearl Harbor attack, when submarine *I-17* surfaced and lobbed a few shells from its deck gun. Japan had deployed several subs to the West Coast to sink shipping and attack targets of opportunity. The gunners on the *I-17* didn’t shoot particularly straight; they missed the refinery, then they missed the oil storage tanks nearby,

before finally hitting one of the piers from which oil tankers could be filled. The total damage was less than \$500. But fear and panic ensued.

The Japanese would have been better served to ring Hawaii with blockading subs. There were very few targets that could be damaged significantly from a small gun on a sub offshore. Further, shelling a target on shore revealed the sub's position, a downside that led to one such sub (the [I-73](#)) being ambushed on its way home, sunk by the *USS Gudgeon* (SS-211) on January 15, 1942, the first Navy combat victory over a Japanese warship.

FIREBOMB THE FOREST!

The Glen pilot on the *I-25* was Chief Flying Officer Nobuo Fujita, a ten-year veteran. Mechanical issues with his plane precluded him flying at Pearl Harbor, even though the *I-25* was there, no doubt a great frustration. He knew the value of the Glen in reconnaissance, and he knew that his sub's deck gun might help sink a smaller merchant ship but was of little additional military value. The *I-25* continued to patrol off the West Coast after the December 7 attack, but did not encounter any worthwhile targets, and it returned to the base at Kwajalein.

The *I-25*'s second patrol, in February, was more successful. Fujita successfully overflew Melbourne, Sydney, and other military places in Australia, and Wellington and Auckland, New Zealand, providing some useful military information. *I-25* then went to Yokosuka for a refit. It was in the drydock next to the one containing the light carrier *Ryūhō* when the latter was damaged during the Doolittle Raid.

FO Fujita was able to overfly Kodiak Island in the Aleutians on *I-25*'s third patrol on May 21, gathering intel on American shipping and defenses that was used in the Battle of Midway. The sub then patrolled off the northern coast of Oregon, and made a desultory deck gun attack on Ft. Stevens, causing negligible damage on June 21.

The fourth patrol of the I-25 is the focus of this Item of the Week.

The Japanese High Command knew that submarine deck guns were pretty useless against a shore target, as demonstrated at Ft. Stevens and other places. But what if a sub could launch a plane that could carry a bomb or two, instead of just scouting?

Most targets could not be damaged significantly by two lightweight bombs, all the Glen could carry. Some planners suggested hitting a target like the locks of the Panama Canal, but the approaches to the Canal were too well patrolled for that to be successful.

The Japanese High Command then developed a plan to use a Glen to fire-bomb the forest in Oregon, hoping to divert men and materiel but more importantly, affect civilian morale.

The scheme wasn't as hare-brained as you might think. The Japanese were aware of the tremendous damage a large forest fire could cause, from events like the [Peshtigo Fire](#) on October 8, 1871, which killed about 2000 people in Wisconsin; the [Big Burn](#) of 1910 that destroyed 3 million acres of timber in Montana, Idaho, and Washington, killing 85 people; the

first two of the set of four fires collectively called the [Tillamook Burn](#) in Oregon in the 1930s; and the destruction of the town of [Bandon, Oregon](#) by a wildfire on September 26, 1936.

FO Fujita and the *I-25* got the call for what the Americans would later call the “Lookout Air Raids.” They sailed for the waters off Brookings, Oregon, departing Japan in August, 1942. The weather was terrible when the *I-25* surfaced in the pre-dawn hours of **September 9, 1942, eighty-one years ago this week**. The Glen was prepared for flight, and two 168-pound incendiary bombs were loaded aboard. Fujita and his gunner, Petty Officer Okuda Shoji, took off and headed toward Mt. Emily’s Wheeler Ridge. They dropped their bombs and high-tailed it back to their sub.

It was the first time that the Japanese bombed the United States (remember, Hawaii and Alaska were territories, not States, at this time.)

There was a fire tower on Wheeler Ridge, manned that morning by Howard Garner. He saw the Glen flying over, and after it flew out of visual range, he saw a smoke plume come up. Garner immediately reported the fire and headed for the plume, joined by Fire Lookout Keith Johnson from the next fire tower over. They found a tiny crater and a small fire, which they quickly contained, aided by the fact that the forest had been soaked by the bad weather the sub had encountered.

Undaunted, Fujita tried again, dropping two fire bombs on September 29, with equally ineffective results. The FBI got involved, finding bomb fragments and other evidence that proved that the two events were, in fact, a Japanese bombing attack. *They were the only bombing attacks on the continental U.S. during WWII.*

The *I-25*’s patrol was not entirely unsuccessful. After the attempted fire-bombings, it sank the 6600-ton tanker [SS Camden](#) off Coos Bay (10/4) and the 7000-ton tanker *SS Larry Doheny* off Cape Sebastian on 10/8. One last victory marred the patrol as *I-25* was returning to Yokosuka. On October 11, the captain of *I-25* spied what he thought was an American submarine and made a torpedo attack. Down went the Soviet submarine [L-16](#). The USSR and Japan were not at war at the time. Oops!

CODA

The *I-25* did not escape the fate of so many of the B-1 class submarines. On September 3, 1943, it was sunk by a hunter-killer group comprising the destroyers *USS Patterson* (DD-392), *USS Ellet* (398), and the *USS Taylor* (DD-468) escorting a convoy off the New Hebrides. Some sources claim *Patterson* got the kill, but others are less sure, giving credit to the trio collectively.

No intact Glen floatplanes survive, but the remains of two of them [were discovered](#) in the hulk of the 4000-ton cargo ship *Akibasan Maru*, sunk off the coast of Kwajalein by American carrier planes on January 20, 1944. The wreck was examined on March 28, 2008, and found to contain the remains of two Glens.

Chief Flying Officer Fujita continued service after the fourth patrol of the I-25 until 1944, when he began training kamikaze pilots, a job he was lucky to survive. He opened a small hardware business after the War and settled back into civilian life.

Things really thawed between the U.S. and Japan in the 1950's, and in 1962, the city of Brookings invited Fujita to come visit. He was eager to go, but the Japanese government was concerned that he could be brought up on war crimes charges. His visit was a bit controversial with some of the locals, and he carried his family's 400-year-old samurai sword to commit suicide if he was about to be arrested, but it was for naught. Goodwill reigned. He promised to bring some Brookings students to Japan, and delivered in 1985, receiving a dedicatory letter from President Reagan in the process. He came back to visit three times in the 1990s and planted a redwood "peace tree" at the bomb site. He helped raise funds for the city's new library, and donated his family sword to it. He was made an honorary citizen of Brookings on the day he died in Japan (10/30/1997). His daughter would visit the bomb site in 1998 and spread some of his ashes there.

The U. S. Forest Service built an [interpretive center](#) and [nature trail](#) near the bomb site in 2008.

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