Attacks on North America during World War II

Attacks on North America during World War II by the Axis Powers were rare, mainly due to the continent's geographical separation from the central theaters of conflict in Europe and Asia. This article includes attacks on continental territory (extending 200 miles [370 km] into the ocean) which is today under the sovereignty of the United States and Canada but excludes military action involving the Danish territory of Greenland and the Caribbean.

Although not an attack on North America, the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor which drew the United States into World War II was the precursor to a number of Japanese assaults on the North American mainland. At the time, Hawaii was a United States territory and not a state; the Territory of Hawaii did not obtain statehood until 1959.

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Ellwood shelling

The United States mainland was first shelled by the Axis on February 23, 1942, when the Japanese submarine I-17 attacked the Ellwood oil production facilities at Goleta, near Santa Barbara, California. Although only the pumphouse and catwalk were damaged, I-17 CAPTAIN Nishino Kozo radioed Tokyo that he had left Santa Barbara in flames. No casualties were reported and the total cost of the damage was officially estimated at approximately $500-1000.

Battle of the Aleutian Islands

Main article: Battle of the Aleutian Islands

On June 3, 1942, the Aleutian Islands, running southwest from mainland Alaska, were invaded by Japanese forces as a diversion to deflect attention from the main Japanese attack on Midway Atoll. Having broken the Japanese military codes, however, the United States military knew it was a diversion and did not expend large amounts of effort defending the islands. Although most of the civilian population had been moved to camps on the Alaska Panhandle, some Americans were captured and taken to Japan as prisoners of war.

In what became known as the Battle of the Aleutian Islands, American forces engaged the Japanese on Attu Island and regained control by the end of May 1943, after taking significant casualties in difficult terrain in which hundreds died. A large invasion force, mainly US, but including some Canadian troops, assaulted Kiska Island on August 7, 1943, but the Japanese had already withdrawn, undetected, ten days earlier.

Although Alaska was a U.S. territory and not yet a state (statehood was not granted until 1959) it was part of the North American continent. This battle also marks the only time since the War of 1812 that U.S. territory in North America has been occupied by a foreign power.
Estevan Point lighthouse attack

On June 20, 1942, the Japanese submarine I-26, under the command of Yokota Minoru, fired 26-30 rounds of 5.5-inch shells at the Estevan Point Lighthouse on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada, but failed to hit its target. This marked the first enemy shelling of Canadian soil since the War of 1812. Though no casualties were reported, the subsequent decision to turn off the lights of outer stations was disastrous for shipping activity.

Fort Stevens attack

In what became the only attack on a mainland American military installation during World War II, the Japanese submarine I-25, under the command of Tagami Meiji, surfaced near the mouth of the Columbia River, Oregon on the night of June 21 and June 22, 1942, and fired shells toward Fort Stevens. The only damage officially recorded was to a baseball field's backstop. The Fort Stevens gunners were refused permission to return fire, since it would have helped the Japanese locate their target more accurately. American aircraft on training flights spotted the submarine, which was subsequently attacked by a US bomber, but escaped.

Lookout Air Raid

Main article: Lookout Air Raid

The Lookout Air Raid occurred on September 9, 1942. The first aerial bombing of mainland America by a foreign power occurred when an attempt to start a forest fire was made by a Japanese Yokosuka E14Y1 seaplane dropping two 80 kg (170 pound) incendiary bombs over Mount Emily, near Brookings, Oregon. The seaplane, piloted by Nobuo Fujita, had been launched from the Japanese submarine aircraft carrier, I-25. No significant damage was officially reported following the attack, nor after a repeat attempt on September 29.

Fire balloons

Main article: Fire balloon

Between November 1944 and April 1945, Japan launched over 9,000 fire balloons toward North America. Carried by the recently-discovered Pacific jet stream, they were to sail over the Pacific Ocean and land in North America, where the Japanese hoped they would start forest fires and cause other damage. About three hundred were reported as reaching North America, but little damage was caused. Six people (five children and a woman) became the only deaths due to enemy action to occur on mainland America during World War II when one of the children tried to recover a balloon from a tree near Bly, Oregon in the United States and it exploded. Recently released reports by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Canadian military indicate that fire balloons reached as far inland as Saskatchewan. A fire balloon is also considered to be a possible cause of the final fire in the Tillamook Burn.

German assaults

German landings

**UNITED STATES**

**Duquesne Spy Ring**

Main article: Duquesne Spy Ring

Even before the war, a large Nazi spy ring was found operating in the United States. The Duquesne Spy Ring is still the largest espionage case in United States history that ended in convictions. The 33 German agents that formed the Duquesne spy ring were placed in key jobs in the United States to get information that could be used in the event of war and to carry out acts of sabotage: one person opened a restaurant and used his position to get information from his customers; another person worked on an airline so that he could report allied ships that were crossing the Atlantic Ocean; others in the ring worked as delivery people so that they could deliver secret messages alongside normal messages. The ring was led by Captain Fritz Jesper Duquesne, a colorful South African Boer who spied for Germany in both World Wars and is best known as "The man who killed Kitchener" after he was awarded the Iron Cross for his key role in the sabotage and sinking of HMS Hampshire in 1916. William G. Sebold, a double agent for the United States, was a major factor in the FBI's successful resolution of this case. For nearly two years, Sebold ran a radio station in New York for the German intelligence (Abwehr). In June 1942, eight agents were recruited and divided into two teams: the first, commanded by George John Dasch, with Ernst Burger, Heinrich Heinck and Richard Quirin. The second, under the command of Edward Kerling, with Hermann Neubauer, Werner Thiel and Herbert Haupt.

On June 12, 1942, U-Boat U-202 landed Dasch's team with explosives and plans at East Hampton.
Long Island, New York.[7] Their mission was to destroy power plants at Niagara Falls and three Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA) factories in Illinois, Tennessee and New York. However the team was observed following landing by a Coast Guardsman who immediately raised the alarm. After being captured Dasch and Burger gave a full confession to the FBI and obtained more lenient treatment.

Kerling’s team landed from U-584 at Ponte Vedra Beach (25 miles [40 km] south-east of Jacksonville, Florida), on June 17. They were tasked with laying mines in four areas; the Pennsylvania Railroad in Newark NJ, canal sluices in both St. Louis and Cincinnati, and New York City’s water supply pipes. The team made their way to Cincinnati, Ohio and split up, with two going to Chicago, Illinois and the others to New York. However, the Dasch confession led to the arrest of all of the men by July 10.

All eight were tried and convicted by Military Commission. President Roosevelt approved the sentences. The constitutionality of the military commissions was upheld by the Supreme Court in Ex parte Quirin and six of the eight men were executed by electrocution on August 8. Dasch and Burger, were given thirty-year prison sentences. Both were released in 1948 and deported to Germany.[8] Dasch (aka George Davis) who had been a longtime American resident prior to the war, suffered a difficult life in Germany after his return from U.S. custody due to his cooperation with U.S. authorities. As a condition of his deportation, he was not permitted to return to the United States, even though he spent many years writing letters to prominent American authorities (J. Edgar Hoover, President Eisenhower, etc) requesting permission to return. He eventually fled to Switzerland and wrote a book, titled Eight Spies Against America.[9]

Operation Elster
In 1944 there was another attempt at infiltration, codenamed Operation Elster (“Magpie”). Elster involved Erich Gimpel and German American defecter William Colepaugh. Their mission objective was to gather intelligence on the Manhattan Project and attempt sabotage if possible. The pair sailed from Kiel on U-1230 and landed at Hancock Point, Maine on November 30, 1944. Both made their way to New York, but the operation degenerated into total failure. Colepaugh turned himself in to the FBI on December 26, confessing the whole plan; Gimpel was arrested four days later in New York. Both men were sentenced to death but eventually had their sentences commuted. Gimpel spent 10 years in prison; Colepaugh was released in 1960 and operated a business in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania before retiring to Florida.

CANADA
At about the same time as the Dasch operation (on April 29), a solitary Abwehr agent (Marius A. Langbein) was landed by U-boat (possibly U-217) near St. Martins, New Brunswick, Canada. His mission was to observe and report shipping movements at Halifax, Nova Scotia (a busy departure port for North Atlantic convoys). Langbein changed his mind, however, and moved to Ottawa where he lived off his Abwehr funds, before surrendering to the Canadian authorities in December 1944.

In November, the U-518 sank two iron ore freighters and damaged another off Bell Island in Conception Bay, Newfoundland, en route to the Gaspé Peninsula where, despite an attack by a Royal Canadian Air Force aircraft, it successfully landed a spy, Werner von Janowski, at New Carlisle, Quebec on November 9, 1942. He was soon apprehended after Earl Annett Jr., manager of the New Carlisle Hotel, at which Janowski was staying, became suspicious and alerted authorities to a stranger using obsolete currency at the hotel bar.[10] The R.C.M.P. arrested Janowski on a CNR passenger train headed for Montreal. Inspection of Janowski's personal effects upon his arrest revealed that he was carrying a powerful radio transmitter, among other things. Janowski later spent some time as a double agent, sending false messages to the Abwehr in Germany, while gathering valuable intelligence for the Allies.

NEWFOUNDLAND
Accurate weather reporting was important to the sea war and on 18 September 1943, U-537 sailed from Kiel, via Bergen (Norway), with a meteorological team lead by Professor Kurt Sommermeyer. They landed at Martin Bay near the northern tip of Labrador on 22 October 1943 and successfully set up an “Atlantic weather station” (“Wetterstation Atlantik”, “Weather Station Kunz”).[11] The station, in addition to providing accurate forecasts, was intended to observe shipping movements at the canal sluices in both St. Louis and Cincinnati, and New York City’s water supply pipes. They landed at Martin Bay near the northern tip of Labrador on 22 October 1943 and successfully set up an “Atlantic weather station” (“Wetterstation Atlantik”, “Weather Station Kunz”).[11] The station, in addition to providing accurate forecasts, was intended to observe shipping movements at the canal sluices in both St. Louis and Cincinnati, and New York City’s water supply pipes. The team’s mission objective was to observe and report shipping movements at the canal sluices in both St. Louis and Cincinnati, and New York City’s water supply pipes.

U-Boat operations
UNITED STATES
The Atlantic Ocean was a major strategic battle zone (Second Battle of the Atlantic) and when Germany declared war on the U.S., the East Coast of the United States offered easy pickings for German U-boats (referred to as the Second happy time). After a highly successful foray by five Type IX long-range U-boats, the offensive was maximised by the use of short-range Type VII U-boats, with increased fuel stores, replenished from supply U-boats or “Milchkuft”. From February to May, 1942, 348 ships were sunk, for the loss of 2 U-boats during April and May. U.S. naval commanders were reluctant to introduce the convoy system that had protected trans-Atlantic shipping and, without coastal blackouts, shipping was silhouetted against the bright lights of American towns and cities. Several ships were torpedoed within sight of East Coast cities such as New York and Boston; indeed, some civilians sat on beaches and watched battles between U.S. and German ships. The only documented World War II sinking of a U-boat close to New England shores occurred on May 5, 1945, when the U-853 torpedoed and sank the collier ship Black Point off Newport, Rhode Island. When the Black Point was hit, the U.S. Navy immediately chased down the sub and began dropping depth charges. The next day, when an oil slick and floating debris appeared, they confirmed that the U-853 and its entire crew had been destroyed. In recent years, the U-853 has become a popular dive site. Its intact hull, with open hatches, is located in 130 feet of water off Block Island, Rhode Island.[11]
Once convoys and air cover were introduced, sinking numbers were reduced and the U-boats shifted to attack shipping in the Gulf of Mexico, with 121 losses in June. In one instance, the tanker Virginia was torpedoed in the mouth of the Mississippi River by the German U-Boat U-507 on May 12, 1942, killing 26 crewmen. There were 14 survivors. Again, when defensive measures were introduced, ship sinkings decreased and U-boat sinkings increased.

The cumulative effect of this campaign was severe; a quarter of all wartime sinkings—3.1 million tons. There were several reasons for this. The naval commander, Admiral Ernest King, was averse to taking British recommendations to introduce convoys, U.S. Coast Guard and Navy patrols were predictable and could be avoided by U-boats, poor inter-service co-operation, and the U.S. Navy did not possess enough suitable escort vessels (British and Canadian warships were transferred to the U.S. east coast).

CANADA

From June 10, 1942 until December 1944, sinkings took place in the St. Lawrence River. Although this area was never a prime target for U-boats, it did offer easy pickings until late in the war, due to the state of the Canadian defenses and their naval commitments elsewhere. The period is sometimes referred to as the Battle of the St. Lawrence.

NEWFOUNDLAND

Three significant attacks took place in 1942 when German U-boats attacked four iron ore carriers serving the DOSCO iron mine at Wabana on Bell Island in Newfoundland’s Conception Bay. The ships S.S. Saganaga and the S.S. Lord Strathcona were sunk by U-513 on September 6, 1942, while the S.S. Rosecastle and P.L.M 27 were sunk by U-518 on November 2, with the loss of 69 lives. However, one of the most dramatic incidents of the attack occurred after the sinkings when the submarine fired a torpedo that missed its target, the 3000 ton collier Anna T, and struck the DOSCO loading pier and exploded. As a result of the torpedo missing its target, Bell Island became the only location in North America to be subject to direct attack by German forces during World War II. On October 14, 1942, the Newfoundland Railway ferry SS Canibou was torpedoed by the German U-boat U-69 and sunk in the Cabot Strait south of Port aux Basques. Canibou was carrying 45 crew and 206 civilian and military passengers. 137 lost their lives, many of them Newfoundlanders.

CARIBBEAN

German submarines shelled a Standard Oil refinery on Dutch-owned Aruba on February 16, 1942, causing no damage.[18]

A German sub shelled the island of Mona, some 40 miles from Puerto Rico, on March 2. No damage or casualties resulted.

An oil refinery on Curacao was shelled on April 19.

MEXICO

Although not an attack on Mexican territory, the sinking of the Mexican tanker Faja de Oro by the German U-boat, U-160, on May 21, 1942 off Key West, prompted the entry of Mexico into World War II.

False alarms

The Battle of Los Angeles

Main article: Battle of Los Angeles

In an incident now known as The Battle of Los Angeles, the U.S. Army fired several thousand anti-aircraft shells into the air over Los Angeles, California during the night of February 24–February 25, 1942 at two stationary unidentified flying objects, in which none of the targets were intercepted or damaged at all. The target was later officially determined to be a lost weather balloon.[14][15]

The San Francisco Bay Area on alert

In May and June 1942, the San Francisco Bay Area underwent a series of alerts:
- May 12: A twenty-five minute air-raid alert.
- May 27: West Coast defenses put on alert after Army codebreakers learned that the Japanese intended a series of hit-and-run attacks in reprisal for the Doolittle Raid.
- May 31: The battleships USS Colorado and USS Maryland set sail from the Golden Gate to form a line of defense against any Japanese attack mounted on San Francisco.

Radio silences

On June 2, 1942, a nine-minute air-raid alert, including at 9:22pm a radio silence order applied to all radio stations from Mexico to Canada.

Notes

8. ^ See [details http://www.uboatwar.net/1ufbkagents.htm]
9. ^ [2]
Campaigns & Theatres of World War II

Europe
- Poland – Phoney War – Finland – Denmark & Norway – France & Belgium – Britain – Eastern Front –
  North West Europe (1944–45)

The Mediterranean, Africa and The Middle East
  Balkans (1939–41) – Middle East – Yugoslavia – Madagascar –
  Italy

Asia & The Pacific
- China – Pacific Ocean – South-East Asia –
  South West Pacific – Japan – Manchuria

Other Campaigns
- Atlantic – Strategic Bombing – North America

Contemporaneous Wars
  Anglo-Iraqi – Invasion of Iran – Greek Civil – Sino-Japanese –
  Ecuadorian-Peruvian

See also
- Black Tom Explosion – Possible German sabotage in World War I
- Bell Island, the only location in North America to be subject to direct attack by German forces in World War II
- Weather Station Kurt

Further reading
- Mikesh, Robert C. Japan's World War II Balloon Bomb Attacks on North America Smithsonian Institution Press, (1973)

External links
- American targets
- Japanese submarine attacks
- German Sabotage operations
- the bay area at war
- army responses
- Details of German secret agents landed in North America
- Red White Black & Blue - feature documentary about The Battle of Attu in the Aleutians during World War II
- Defense of Americas
- The Battle of the St. Lawrence

COMMENTARY

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Attacks on North America during World War II from the Axis Power were quite uncommon. This was because of the separation from Asia and Europe where the conflicts were generally taking place. The attacks generally began from the attack on Pearl Harbor, which technically was not an attack on North America, as Hawaii was not yet a United States territory. The United States was first attacked by the Axis on February 23, 1942. The conflict began when the submarine I-17 assaulted the Ellwood oil field in