

This Day in History... February 23, 1942

First Attacks on US Mainland During WWII

On February 23, 1942, millions of Americans were gathered around their radios listening to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chat. At almost the same moment — 7:15 p.m. Pacific time — a Japanese submarine surfaced one mile off the California coast and began shelling an oil field near Santa Barbara. The war had just arrived on the American mainland.

The vessel was the Imperial Japanese Navy submarine I-17, a 365-foot Type B1 long-range sub commanded by Commander Kozo Nishino. It had sailed from Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands with a specific mission: strike the American coast on the same night Roosevelt addressed the nation, a deliberate act of psychological warfare ordered by the Japanese government.

Nishino chose the Ellwood Oil Field, a producing facility 12 miles north of Santa Barbara along the Gaviota Coast. Discovered in 1928, the Ellwood field stretched roughly five miles long and up to a mile wide, with storage tanks, a pier, pump houses, and a Richfield aviation fuel tank visible from the water.



The attack was specifically timed to coincide with FDR's fireside chat.

The I-17 surfaced, cleared its 5.5-inch deck gun, and took aim. The first rounds landed near a storage facility. The crew then shifted fire toward the Richfield aviation fuel tank — a high-value target that, if ignited, would have lit up the California coast. They missed. The barrage lasted roughly 20 minutes. Estimates of shells fired ranged from 12 to 25. The results were remarkably underwhelming. A wooden oil derrick was destroyed. A pump house was wrecked. The Ellwood Pier and a catwalk suffered minor damage. Total property damage: approximately \$500.

Most of the Ellwood workers had gone home for the day. A skeleton crew on duty heard the explosions and initially thought there had been an internal accident — until one man spotted the I-17 on the surface.

No one was killed. One US soldier was later injured trying to defuse a dud shell recovered from a nearby ranch. The unexploded round was shipped to Aberdeen, Maryland, for study by the Army.

The physical damage was minimal. The psychological damage was not. Air raid sirens wailed in Santa Barbara. The city went dark within minutes. A blackout stretched 25 miles of coastline from Carpinteria to Goleta. Radio stations across Southern California went silent on order of the Fourth Interceptor Command at 7:58 p.m.

Hundreds of residents fled inland, fearing a full-scale invasion. Witnesses reported signal lights flashing offshore and on shore. Four Japanese and one Italian national were taken into custody by Ventura



The Office of Civilian Defense was established by executive order in May 1941, just eight months before the Bombardment of Ellwood put it to the test. More than 11 million Americans volunteered for civil defense roles.



California's petroleum fields supplied aviation fuel critical to the US war effort in the Pacific. Disrupting that supply, even briefly, was a strategic goal. The Ellwood field alone produced hundreds of barrels daily.

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County authorities shortly after the attack. The following morning, the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* read, “Shell California! Enemy U-boat sends many shots into oilfields near Santa Barbara, entire area is blacked out.”

That night, the panic intensified dramatically. Reports of unidentified aircraft over Los Angeles triggered what became known as the “Battle of Los Angeles.” Anti-aircraft batteries across the city opened fire, expending over 1,400 shells into the sky. No enemy aircraft were ever found. Five people died — three in car accidents during the blackout and two from heart attacks. A 1949 Army investigation concluded the “aircraft” may have been a weather balloon.

The Ellwood shelling was the first — but not the last — direct Japanese attack on the continental United States during the war. On June 21, 1942, the submarine I-25 sailed up the Columbia River and shelled Fort Stevens, a coastal defense installation in Oregon. It was the only Axis attack on a continental US military base during the entire war. The fort’s commander chose not to return fire, not wanting to reveal the position of his guns.

Then, in September 1942, the I-25 returned to Oregon with a more unusual weapon. Fitted with a small aircraft shelter and catapult, the submarine launched a Yokosuka E14Y floatplane piloted by Nobuo Fujita. His mission: drop incendiary bombs on the thick forests near Brookings, Oregon, and trigger a massive wildfire. The bombs landed near Mt. Emily. The forest was too damp to ignite.



The “Avenge Ellwood” bond drive, led by the American Women’s Voluntary Services in early 1943, raised enough money for the US Army Air Corps to accept a P-51 Mustang fighter named the “Ellwood Avenger.” The plane never fired a shot in combat. Assigned to the 337th Base Unit at Venice Army Air Base in Florida as a trainer, it reportedly ended its career by colliding with another aircraft on the runway.



Ordinary people buying war bonds and war savings stamps helped keep America’s war machine running. Events like the Bombardment of Ellwood made the war feel uncomfortably close to home, and gave those small purchases an even bigger sense of purpose.

Japan tried again. Later in the war, the military launched over 9,000 Fu-Go balloon bombs — paper and rubite balloons carrying incendiary payloads — across the Pacific jet stream toward the US West Coast. Most landed harmlessly. One killed six civilians in Oregon in May 1945, the only known wartime casualties from enemy action on American soil.

The Ellwood attack carried consequences far beyond its modest physical toll. It deepened the West Coast invasion hysteria that was already gripping the country after Pearl Harbor. One week after the shelling, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the forced relocation of over 120,000 Japanese Americans — most of them US citizens — into inland internment camps. Historians consider the internment one of the gravest civil liberties violations in American history.

Today, the site of the Ellwood Oil Field is a golf course. A plaque marks what happened there on an otherwise quiet February evening, when the war crossed an ocean and came ashore — 20 minutes of shellfire that shook a nation.

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