

Japan's attack on B.C.

In a little-known side action to the Second World War, the Japanese war machine unleashed bomb-laden balloons against the west coast of North America. They caused little damage, but they could still be lying in the bush around Prince George. Now, a Prince George man tells his role in this story.

White Paper: Japanese Balloons of World War II, by Captain Charles A. East (College of New Caledonia Press, 1993)

You are out on a wilderness trek. You spot something suspended from a tree. Shrouds of white paper and some kind of basket hanging from it. Watch out! You may be looking at the remnants of a 1945 Japanese balloon bomb.

According to reports, balloons were still being found around here in the late 1960s and some may still be there today! It's a part of our history but not many people know about it and little has been written about it.

The balloons were classified "Top Secret" during the Second World War.

White Paper, a new book by Captain Charles East, fills a gap in our knowledge. It also gives us a unique local perspective on the war. As a Bomb Disposal Officer stationed in Prince George, Captain East was responsible for searching out and disarming the balloons that were found in this area, and readers will be fascinated by his account.

ATTACK BY AIR

Late in the war, the Japanese came up with a new strategy of attack on North America. Armed, unmanned balloons were sent out from Japan and carried by trade winds to our continent, where they were expected to randomly bomb and demoralize the population.

Apparently, the balloons were inexpensive to produce. They were inflated with hydrogen gas. Balloon envelopes were "made of five ply laminations of very fine rice paper, pieced together in more than a hundred tapered segments...giving the impression in flight that they were striped," East writes.

"Shroud lines, amounting to about 1500 feet of rope, were attached to a skirt band just below center and at the bottom there was a large pressure relief valve. The shroud lines carried a chandelier type of rack from which 32 sandbags of ballast and four incendiary bombs were suspended, while under the center an anti-personnel

type of bomb was attached."

A complicated control mechanism was used to re-arm and drop ballast until all ballast was gone, causing the bombs to drop. At the time of launching, the balloons weighed a total of 240 pounds, and carried 74 potentially explosive charges in addition to the bombs and demolition charge.

A large number of balloons were sent over. Close to 300 were sighted — all the way from the Northwest Territories to as far east as Michigan — but very few were ever recovered.

As a war strategy, the balloons were not very effective. The author speculates that "had one in twenty struck a populated area, they would have been classified as a success, but in our vast and sparsely populated land mass, the gamble was enormous." Many bombs exploded harmlessly in mid-air. Some started forest fires. Only one case of fatality was ever reported.

The balloons that were found by East and his men had all become grounded because of some malfunction in the dropping sequence. In this state, they were particularly dangerous, especially when the battery remained active. To add to the drama, it was feared the Japanese would use the balloons for germ warfare. Although this never happened, it led to extra precautions and a real sense of dread on every mission.

TAKLA LAKE BALLOON

East's first operation was in February 1945 when a balloon was sighted north of Takla Landing. The trip involved a harrowing flight in a Norseman aircraft through sleet storms and winds — a trek through the snow with a dog team — an overnight camp-out with wolves — and a long trudge on snowshoes.

"The trail led through a series of swamps and beaver dams and finally, there it was, shimmering in the sunlight...The mass of the balloon was draped over the top of sixteen trees. The upper part lying from a dead snag about 80 feet from the ground. Shattered pieces of bakelite, with numerous wires attached, hung from the chandelier and a smashed plastic box still remained in the frame above."

An explosion had demolished the electrical control system and parts of the chandelier that carried the ballast and bombs.

Wearing coveralls, anti-gas boots, rubber gloves and a surgical mask, East went to work with his men. A great deal of effort went into getting the chandelier and balloon down. The envelope was burned and the rest was taken back to the aircraft, for shipment to Ottawa.

FORT BABINE BALLOON

An impressive balloon was recovered at Fort Babine.

"The balloon was hung in a group of tall poplar trees, with the relief valve and a maze of rope trailing in the snow below. The chandelier and control gear were missing and had evidently been torn away in treetops somewhere along its course." The balloon's valve, rope, and samples of snow and debris were recovered and the remains were burned.

The trip back provided an extra measure of excitement. On treacherous ice, the ski-equipped airplane couldn't get airborne. The men had to cut poles and lay them across the runway strip. Once the plane "bounced free" it promptly ran low on gas. The pilot faced an empty fuel tank when he landed, on glassy ice, at Prince George.

In his words, "If I ever fly you fellows again, I'm going to get myself a rabbit foot!"

CEDARVALE BALLOON

"Of all the incidents we were involved in, this one was the most exciting, perhaps from the challenge of all the problems encountered, or from that moment when I gripped that bomb in my arm and my life in my fingers."

The problems on this trip began early, when the crew couldn't get air or train transport to Cedarvale, out past Hazelton in the Skeena Valley. They decided to take the jeep, in spite of road conditions.

After a hazardous journey, complete with engine breakdowns, the jeep was abandoned at Kitwanga, where they took a ferry across the river, and a CNR gas speeder to Cedarvale.

"The balloon was suspended between three big trees, forming a huge canopy. Part of it still billowed outward so that it looked like some monstrous form of mushroom. A maze of ropes trailed down from it to the chandelier, which appeared to rest on the flat top of a 50 foot high hemlock tree. Two bombs were suspended opposite each other below, and we could count twelve bags of ballast still intact. Evidently there had again been a malfunction of the electrical system."

East spent an hour with binoculars, trying to trace circuits and evaluate the risk of dropping the bombs without firing the demolition charge. As he walked around the debris, he found a piece of the battery box, and almost tripped over the tail fins of a bomb buried in the snow.

"A cold chill ran up my back when I discovered what I had almost tripped over."

Knowing there was great risk of explosion, they headed back across the river and

phoned headquarters. "Everything must be brought down" was the order. Research departments of both the Canadian and American forces wanted a balloon intact.

In great detail, East describes how they cut down the tree, freed the ropes and let the chandelier down to where they could reach the bombs. They then unhooked each of them carefully, laid them in the snow, untaped the demolition charges and cut the fuses leading to the detonator. The bomb and blow-out plugs of the chandelier were defused without further incident, and everything was packed onto a packhorse and transported to the train.

The crew travelled back by jeep and arrived home late at night, after being without sleep for 38 hours.

The Cedarvale balloon ended up in Defense Research Headquarters in New York where it was rebuilt, released, lost and finally shot down. "All our efforts ended in the ocean."

OTHER OPERATIONS

If you have enjoyed the story so far, You will want to read about some of the other operations East was involved in. He describes balloon recoveries at Rauch Valley, Dome Creek, Collins Lake, Vanderhoof, and Chilko Lake; and investigations at Pinchi Lake, Quesnel and Mount Robson.

He also entertains us with stories of false reports — balloons that turned out to be American weather balloons or simple optical illusions. A balloon at Goat River, for example, turned out to be a large piece of bark waving in the wind. This was the author's last investigation, which took place in October 1945 after the war was over.

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HISTORY



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