

Central Coast: | Past, Present, Future

# When a submarine attacked Goleta



By Mark James Miller, May 6, 2017

On the evening of Feb. 23, 1942, Americans were listening to their radios as President Roosevelt gave another of his "Fireside Chats." World War II, raging in Europe, Asia and Africa, seemed far away, despite America's entry into the conflict less than three months earlier. But in Goleta, that sense of security was about to be shaken.

At 7 p.m., a Japanese submarine, the I-17, surfaced about a mile off the coast and began firing its 5.5-inch deck gun at the Ellwood Oil Refinery. Over the next 20 minutes the I-17 fired between 16 and 27 shots, then vanished into the vast Pacific.

The shelling did little damage. But over the years a tantalizing question has lingered — was a fall into a cactus patch prior to the war the cause of the first attack upon the American mainland since the War of 1812?

The captain of the I-17, Kozo Nishino, was no stranger to the Central Coast. Before the war he had commanded a merchant ship that frequently came to Ellwood to take on a cargo of oil, without which the Japanese war machine would grind to a halt. In fact, it was America's decision to embargo all sales of oil to Japan in August 1941 that had been the deciding factor in Japan's decision to open war on the United States on Dec. 7, 1941.

According to local legend, Capt. Nishino, on one of his visits to Goleta in the late 1930s, came ashore to attend a reception. On his way there he had the misfortune of losing his balance and tumbling into a patch of prickly pear cactus. While sailors picked cactus spines out of his derriere, workers in the nearby Ellwood oil field laughed uproariously. Nishino was not amused, and it may have been this humiliation and a desire to avenge it that brought the I-17 to Goleta that night in February 1942.

Whatever the reasons for the attack, the shelling sent shock waves up and down the West Coast. Phone lines were jammed as people tried to find out what was going on. Stories circulated of suspicious lights being aimed at the submarine from the shore, and of armed Japanese driving around the area. Four local Japanese and one Italian were arrested. By 8 that night a blackout was in effect from San Diego to Monterey, and cars were being stopped on Highway 101 to make certain the blackout was total.

"Submarine Shells Southland Oil Field," trumpeted the Los Angeles Times the next day. The New York Times echoed, "Submarine Shells California Oil Plant," noting that "Axis shells fell on the United States mainland for the first time in World War II." Time magazine also chimed in: "A submarine

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emerged from the sea about seven miles north of Santa Barbara, and for 20 minutes lobbed shells at an oil refinery." Radio Tokyo told its listeners that "Santa Barbara, California, was devastated by enemy bombardment."

Two days later the "battle of Los Angeles" took place. Believing enemy planes were overhead, nervous anti-aircraft gunners opened fire in the early morning hours, frightening two residents of the city so badly they died of heart attacks. But no enemy planes were actually seen, let alone shot down.

Today a sign commemorates the Japanese attack on Goleta. Titled "Goleta Historical Marker 3," it is on the beach near the Bacara Resort. A building marked "Beach House" stands nearby, and the sign looks out at the Pacific Ocean where an enemy submarine once surfaced and reminded Americans there were, indeed, at war.

Mark James Miller teaches English at Allan Hancock College. He can be reached at [mark@pfaofahc.com](mailto:mark@pfaofahc.com).