

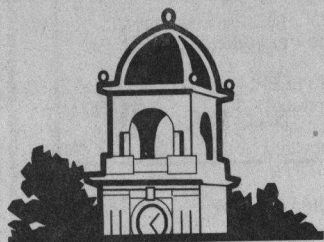
was World War II

When invasion fears haunted the Santa Cruz coast

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Special to the Mercury News

WORLD WAR II transformed every aspect of our community for its duration. The threat of Japanese invasion was a driving force, and victory was not a foregone conclusion. As this Memorial Day celebrates the 50th anniversary of Victory in Europe, let us also recall conditions on the Santa Cruz home front.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, gave Santa Cruz its first war casualty.



SANTA CRUZ
Historic Perspective

Then on Dec. 20, a Japanese submarine surfaced off Santa Cruz and attacked an oil tanker, which then sought refuge by anchoring less than a mile

off the Santa Cruz wharf. The Japanese sub continued on down the coast, attacking 10 ships and a Southern California oil field. It was believed the invasion of the mainland had begun.

The news from the European theater was hardly reassuring, as the United States' belated entry into the war found that Britain was Hitler's last major opponent and grossly under-equipped. A Tokyo newspaper predicted Britain would fall by September, beginning the German-Japanese invasion of the United States.

Blackout regulations helped

make Santa Cruz invisible to enemy ships or planes. Sky-lights were painted black, windows had blackout shades and headlights were masked down to a small slit. A mile-long curtain was installed along the boardwalk to hide it from seaward view. A night ride on the roller coaster felt more like flying, when you couldn't see the track ahead.

Air raid sirens were installed in every town, to signal strictest blackout conditions. Block wardens checked neighborhoods for "light leaks." Before switching to compressed

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In '42, Santa Cruz braced for the worst

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air, sirens were powered by Model A Ford engines. On windy days, the one north of Soquel could be heard in Highland, Bean Creek and Twin Lakes — but not Soquel.

Residents were told not to turn off gas during blackouts, unless bombed. The giant gas storage tank downtown was said to be harmless if bombed, as long as it was kept full. It was the presence of oxygen in the tank that could pose a danger of explosion under fire.

"For all intents and purposes," the paper reported, "Santa Cruz has no weather." Because weather reports might aid an enemy invasion, the paper only reported rain a day later, and snow two days later. "If the San Lorenzo overflows, just ignore it," the paper continued. No weather-related disaster reports were permitted, until after the problem was cleared up.

Those of Japanese ancestry were shipped off to internment camps. But Italian and German nationals were also affected. The Italians were required to

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live inland of Mission and Water streets, so they couldn't assist any coastal invasion. Yet locals protested that the Italians were among our most patriotic residents, with numerous sons in the U.S. armed forces.

Authorities required local fishermen to keep their boats out of the water when not in use, to inconvenience potential invaders. But it was the seafood market that suffered because Italian immigrants had made up most of the fishing workforce.

Mountain railroad tunnels were dynamited to prevent them becoming invaders' bunkers and ammo dumps. This required transportation alter-

natives. Under the federal Strategic Roads Act, Soquel Drive was improved into a highway, and highways were built between Santa Cruz and Los Gatos, and on the north coast. These were designed as military transport corridors. But now that Santa Cruz had the new roads, there was little traffic because scrap metal shortages ended all new-car construction or sales during the war. Gas was rationed with coupons, increasing bicycle use.

The new highways were partly designed to aid evacuation, though only constant bombardment would lead to an evacuation order. Children were the first evacuation priority. San Francisco officials, looking for places to evacuate their residents, cataloged Santa Cruz County's numerous vacant summer homes and resort cabins.

But another danger loomed. Japanese incendiary balloons had fire-bombed timber reserves in the Pacific Northwest. In case the Santa Cruz Mountains became a similar target, children were taught in their gym classes how to put

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out forest fires. Watsonville served as the county's primary airport. But strategic planning — for air-lifts and such — called for another airport near the county seat. The prime candidate was Swanton Aerofield, West Cliff's abandoned 1920s airport. But it had 160 separate owners, so Capitola Airport was built instead.

In 1942, the all-black 54th Coast Artillery was stationed at Lighthouse Field. An automated beacon on a tripod replaced the manned lighthouse, so the cupola of the abandoned lighthouse was used for air-plane spotting.

The old Chaminade High School was originally considered for the Naval Academy that was ultimately established in Monterey's Del Monte Hotel. A submarine base once considered for construction at the wharf also failed to materialize. But the naval reservation was built at De Laveaga Park; the Casa Del Rey Hotel next to the boardwalk was converted into a naval hospital; and the Fort Ord Amphibious Brigade was encamped at Beach Flats in 1942.