

Hello my name is Ben Brown Director and Curator of the Clarke Historical Museum.

December 7th marked the 76th anniversary of the bombing of Pearly Harbor, which officially brought the United States into World War II. Fears of an attack on the Pacific Coast were widespread. Enemy planes were reportedly spotted heading north from San Francisco, and local residents claimed airplane and submarine sightings from Cape Mendocino to Ferndale, unconfirmed happenings which the local newspapers reported without hesitation. With reports such as these circulating, residents of Humboldt County sprang into action, with hundreds immediately volunteering for overseas deployment.

Those who could not or would not risk deployment eagerly embraced their Civil Defense duties. A network of 55 air raid warning posts was established immediately. These posts were manned by volunteers 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Each post was equipped with "airplane detector instruments" and a direct telephone line to an Army command center. The instruments had the capabilities to detect the altitude, speed, and quantity of any approaching enemy airplanes and wire the information to the Army command center.

The war effort in Humboldt was a thorough affair that required the development of infrastructure around the county. A Naval Air Station was built near McKinleyville at the present location of the Arcata-Eureka Airport. Pilots stationed there trained at a target range located at Big Lagoon Spit. Further north in Klamath, a radar station was fashioned to look like an unassuming farmhouse. Down the coast in Samoa, a blimp base was established not far from the Coast Guard station, at the present site of the Samoa Drag strip. The lookout tower there was part of a county-wide air raid warning system organized by the local Civil Defense team. Humboldt Bay was chosen by the Chicago Bridge & Iron Company as a prime location for a shipbuilding facility which supplied the Navy with dry docks for its Pacific Fleet. Over 7,000 local residents were employed at the facility over the course of just a few years. Humboldt County came to form an integral part of the nation's Pacific Coast defense during WWII, and those who helped defend our region and country should be remembered and honored.

The Japanese threat hit close to home less than two weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, when the Japanese I-17 long-range submarine attacked two U.S. merchant vessels off of the coast of Cape Mendocino, the S.S. Samoa and the S.S. Emidio. Though the Samoa and her crew escaped unscathed, the Emidio was struck by a Japanese torpedo, killing five of its crewmen. The war had actually hit Humboldt County, justifying the fears that local residents had been nursing since Japan had attacked Hawaii. Though no more action was to take place in Humboldt County during the war, the fear still lingered until the end of the war on September 2, 1945. In the end, along with the five killed in the attack on the Emidio, 234 Humboldt County residents lost their lives in service during the war.

This article was written by Jerab Pino and is part of the website the Museum hosts which documents WWII in Humboldt County and is part of the WWII memorial at the Humboldt County airport in McKinleyville. The website documents the local WWII military installations, the 234 veterans who gave their lives, and Kathrin Burleson's portraits of locals who served, and can be found on clarkemuseum.org under exhibits, or at the kiosk at the airport.

The Clarke Museum has a mission of preserving and presenting local history, where we honor and learn from the past. Please help us continue our mission by renewing or becoming a member today.