

THE WESTERN FRONT

**The War Years in
Santa Barbara County
1937 to 1946**

263

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Justin M. Ruhge".

by

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Western Front is an outgrowth of discussions with a group of local history buffs regarding the existence of a German prisoner of war camp along Highway 101 in western Goleta. In an earlier book, Goleta Pueblos de las Islas, two chapters dealt with the war years in Santa Barbara County. The Western Front expands each of these chapters and adds the results of new research into the German prisoner of war camp in western Goleta. The origins of Camp Cooke, the P-38 Army Base and the contributions of the Hancock College of Aeronautics to the war efforts are presented in Chapters 2, 9 and 10. Living histories of eyewitnesses to events in those four years of the Second World War are related throughout the book.

Santa Barbara County was a center of war preparation on the West Coast of California and, for a brief interval, literally the Western Front. Before the declaration of war, preparations for war were underway at Goleta and Camp Cooke. The Japanese Imperial Fleet brought the battle to our shores by the attack of its submarine on the oilfields at Ellwood. Marine and Army pilots were trained at Goleta and Santa Maria in the North County, and prisoners of war were kept at camps in several locations in Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. Many soldiers recuperated from battle wounds at the Hoff Heights General Army Hospital once located on the present Community Golf Course behind the Earl Warren Showgrounds and Loreto Plaza.

Santa Barbara was an R&R port for the fleet and the Army. The open roadstead of Santa Barbara harbor was often the scene of battle groups led by battleships like the Iowa or Missouri.

During the war years, troop trains and freights loaded with tanks, trucks, guns and airplanes steamed north and south through the County on Southern Pacific tracks, guarded by the Army, to show the flag and prevent any attempts at sabotage. Truck convoys rumbled north and south along 101 around the clock.

Several locations on the coast were spotted with 6-inch gun installations, called Panama Mounts, and searchlights. Other coastal spots, such as Naples, were protected by the Army with mobile gun emplacements.

As the war moved farther to the east and west from the United States, the guards and guns were removed. At the end of the war, the prisoners were repatriated and the Marine and Army bases deactivated. The wounded American soldiers were moved to hospitals near their homes or discharged. The Hoff Heights Hospital buildings were torn down or moved to new locations at Pilgrims Terrace to become Santa Barbara City low-cost housing units. The Marine Base became the Santa Barbara

men found a perfect alibi for overstaying passes. During one of Camp Cooke's infrequent fogs (??!) it would be almost impossible to find one's way back to the area.

"Landmarks were constantly shifting with the rapid advance of camp construction. A bewildering number of paths crisscrossed over the fields. Very confusing! But very convenient for the boy hard-put to explain a few hours AWOL.

"None of the original contingent remains at Camp Cooke, although many will remember Major Peterson, CWO Breton, and M/Sgt Moriarty who left here recently. These three came to Camp Cooke during the first few weeks of its life.

"On October 15, 1941, Lt. Col. John B. Madden assumed the duties of commanding officer. On November 20, the first flag-raising ceremony was held in Camp Cooke, with a eucalyptus tree serving as flag pole. In November Col. Madden moved into the half-completed Headquarters building with his staff. The Corps Area Engineers under Col. Bres moved into the building which now houses Civilian and Military Personnel. In December the enlisted men regretfully (?) left their well-ventilated home in Blue Gum Terrace and moved into barracks in Area 9. By then the detachment had grown to 80 men.

"Incidentally the first building completed in Camp Cooke was the present Supply Building, then occupied by building contractors. The present B & B Studio was then a first aid shack for construction workers.

"In November, building went on apace. So did world affairs. We were still racing against time. The 'final' offensive of the Nazi armies bogged down, ground to a standstill. Russia already was preparing for their first winter counteroffensive. Lend lease no longer trickled across the ocean, it began to assume the proportions of a respectable stream.

"Now time was turning against the Axis. Something had to be done to wreck 'the arsenal of the democracies.' Tension rose in the Far East. Japan occupied Indo-China. The sons of heaven were preparing themselves for world domination--or national hari-kari. Pearl Harbor was brewing."

The history by Sgt. Purkiss covers all aspects of the operations at Camp Cooke throughout the war until 1946. A large map of Camp Cooke accompanies the work.

As if the date was known ahead of time by Washington, every effort was made to be ready by the end of 1941, for war.

2.3 Coast Defenses

As a part of the Army's plan of defensive forts around cities and moveable railroad guns, there were also a number of smaller installations on the coast on

which were mounted pairs of 6-inch guns. These installations were referred to as Panama mounts. These were located at strategic spots on the coast with searchlights to defend the coast against day or night landings.

Between the Panama mounts were located mobile gun camps. One such installation of Panama mounts was on the coast on the west side of the Ventura River opposite Ventura. This installation and others like it are shown in Figure 2-4. The Panama mounts were constructed before the start of hostilities. The concrete structure still exists today. Mobile defenses were located at Carpinteria, Santa Barbara, Ellwood and Naples after the declaration of war.

Santa Barbara County was prepared on the Western Front for defense of the country and for offensive training on December 7, 1941.

Polk: Mrs. Wheeler, may we go back again to your dream? It fascinates me--and I remember that in your dream you said the men on the submarine wore strange red suits. Were there any men visible on the real sub and could they be seen from the shore?

Wheeler: Yes, Miss Polk, there were several men seen on the deck of the boat and believe it or not--the observers reported that in the glow of the sunset they appeared to be dressed in red. Just the reflection, I suppose. (At the start of the war, double daylight savings time was instituted. This is why the sailors could be seen at 7:00 p.m. in February.)

Polk: That sounds almost fantastic, Mrs. Wheeler. After the sub had moved north and submerged--what did you do?

Wheeler: Well, by that time the army had taken over. The blackout signals had waived their warnings and the coast was in complete darkness. The President's speech was over--in fact the radio stations were silent. We all felt sort of tired after all the excitement, so we went inside where the only light came from the flame under the coffee urn. We sat and just talked about what had happened and what might have happened.

Polk: Well, thank you, Mrs. Wheeler, for coming to the studio this afternoon and re-living that exciting experience for us. It has given me a thrill--as it has, I am sure, most of our listeners.

Wheeler: Miss Polk, I am grateful to have the opportunity to tell how fine and unafraid our people were and always will be in the face of real danger. Goodbye and good luck to the "Avenge Ellwood" campaign.

The mobile 6-inch gun emplacements at Ellwood had been removed just before the attack. This was Battery A of the 143 Field Artillery. As the attack began, this battery rushed back to Ellwood from Exposition Park in Los Angeles to defend the oil field, but it arrived too late. A detailed account of this activity was also located by the author in the News-Press file.

The type of submarine taking part in the attack was an I class shown in Figure 3-4. A number of these were dispatched to the West Coast of the United States early in the war to harass shipping and attack local installations. Larger submarines actually carried aircraft that were able to fly inland to bomb and start fires (18).

Chapter 8

EYEWITNESS TO HISTORY

Like lightning, seldom do historic events strike in the same place more than once. In the case of the Dos Pueblos Ranch area eight miles west of Goleta, history has not lived up to this axiom. What is even rarer is that someone has been present to witness the number of historic events that have occurred in this area. The eyewitness to history in this case was Benjamin F. "Shorty" Gates.

Mr. Gates' personal experiences with historical events were recorded on the Dos Pueblos Ranch in 1985. Shorty retired in 1971 as superintendent of the ranch. He started working at the ranch in 1928. Figure 8-1 records this late interview as Mr. Gates and the author discuss the location of these events using aerial photos at the Naples Railroad Depot site. Over the 43 years in which he was a resident of Dos Pueblos, history came to Shorty and happened around him. His comments in the following pages describe them and bear directly on the events reported in earlier chapters.

Den Adobe

Dos Pueblos is the site of historic Chumash Indian villages first discovered by Cabrillo in 1542. It was also the center of the Dos Pueblos Rancho Land Grant awarded to Nicolas Den in 1861. The Den Adobe, located on the western edge of Dos Pueblos Canyon, was the center of social life for many years during Den's heyday (15).

This pioneer property was acquired by H. G. Wylie and then torn down in 1931. The adobe was constructed in 1843.

"People didn't take a lot of pictures in the thirties. I helped tear down the adobe. There were hundreds of letters from all over the world lying on the floor. The stamps alone were valuable. I was pounding on the walls one day and hit a hollow space. A silver butter dish, herbal jar, crystal wine goblets marked with 'W' and a bottle of cognac liquor were found in the walls. These were placed there by Mrs. Williams. My daughter has the crystal. I drank the liquor--was good. Most of the adobe was pushed into the canyon, but a lot was taken to the Spaulding Ranch in Tecolote Canyon and used to build the stables."

Naples Station

Figure 8-2 shows the Naples Town Railroad Depot as it appeared in 1912. The Naples depot was some distance away from the town of Naples, which was located on the floor of the canyon.

"They all looked alike, just like the one in Goleta. When I was a kid in Colorado, they all looked alike. There was a siding here--trains would meet and pull over. During the war, troops would get off to stretch. During the war there were guards up and down the tracks, and on all the bridges. There was a water tower over in front of those sycamores for the steam trains. Water was pumped up to it from Dos Pueblos Canyon. The tank was about the last thing to go. Cattle and hay were loaded on cars at the siding. We took off a lot of gravel for road repair at Dos Pueblos."

Figure 2-2 shows the location today. Only the sycamore trees remain to mark the site.

14-Inch Railroad Guns

In the summer of 1937 two railroad guns described in Chapter 2 were moved into position on the Dos Pueblos Ranch almost in front of the Naples railroad station. Since the testing of these two guns took place on the Dos Pueblos Ranch, Mr. Gates was there and took an active part. In fact, the author learned of these tests through comments made by Shorty in an earlier conversation.

"They had ten heavy army tents set up out in the fields with one being a cook tent. About 60 people were there for about a month. I ate their food now and then. They took off from the siding toward where that group of cows are with a railroad spur and set up the two guns. The thing that amazed us was those big 16x16s or 12x12s [wood shoring] they put up there for angle braces. When they fired the guns they would make kindling wood of them from the recoil. Sure made splinters."

These guns were returned to Fort McArthur where they remained, fortunately without needing to be used to repel an attack from the sea.

Coast Defense Guns

A 6-inch sea coast battery was set up in 1942, about a quarter mile east of the test position of the 14-inch guns, according to Mr. Gates.

"The commander got after the men for driving through the grass and parking their trucks near the camouflaged gun. From the trail through the grass anyone could see the guns' location."

The Japanese Submarine Attack

In February of 1942 a Japanese submarine appeared off the Ellwood oil fields and began shelling the oil tanks near the Barnsdall tract. The location and route of the vessel is shown in Figure 3-1. Shorty Gates was an eyewitness to this first attack by a foreign power on American soil since the War of 1812. Mr. Gates' comments are as follows: