

THE SEA RANCH IN WORLD WAR II

By Harry Lindstrom

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THE DEL MAR ARMY BASE

“Mr. Ohlson indicated that there was a “top secret” radar station posted at Gualala. Mr. McNamee confirmed that there was a radar station there, and that it was the first one on the coast. He stated that the military men would take the children in the area around in jeeps and showed them the radar station. Mr. Ohlson was shown the 1945 Navy map of the area at Gualala Point which was owned by his family at that time. He pointed out an area on the map on the east side of Highway 1, approximately three quarters of the way between Gualala Point and Stewarts Point where he says the radar station stood. He stated that the structure containing the radar unit looked like a barn and had cement sacks piled three feet thick around it for protection. He was told by personnel stationed there that this was a radar station. He also stated that the military had constructed a guard house, a supply house, a mess hall, barracks for approximately 150 men, a fuel area, and kennels for the war dogs that were used while patrolling the area. He said the war dogs got loose and killed sheep on his family’s ranch.” (1, page 10)

The Ohlson family, long time sheep ranchers in the Annapolis area, acquired what is now The Sea Ranch from the Walter P. Frick estate on March 17, 1941 for \$100,000. The family owned and operated the 4819 acre ranch raising sheep until 1964 when they sold it to Castle and Cooke who then developed The Sea Ranch. Ed and Alice Ohlson, with their children, Russell and Pat, moved into the cottage (5, page 87) previously used by the Frick family. Ed’s brother Chester also moved in with them. The cottage stood on the north side of the current home/Del Mar Center (5, page 104). (4, pages 210-211)

Nine months after the Ohlsons purchased the ranch, our country entered World War II. One of the immediate actions taken by the military following the United State’s entry into the conflict was to acquire California sites both inland and along the coast for various military activities including patrols, radar installations, gun emplacements and practice bombing runs. The military purchased, leased, had the sites “donated”/loaned by landowners, received permits from other governmental entities or acquired sites through leasehold condemnation for the period of time the property was needed. Recordkeeping of these transactions was poor. Little or no information exists today about the circumstances surrounding these temporary acquisitions.

To this end the army arrived at the future Sea Ranch locale in 1942 seeking an advantageous site for a U.S. Army Air Forces aircraft control and warning station. The station was to be used in detecting and identifying aircraft entering the area and if necessary direct U.S. fighters to intercept possible hostile threats. There is little to no information about how the site was selected or what conversations or agreements may have transpired between the army and the Ohlsons. Never-the-less the base was established on 12.5 acres about a mile’s drive north of Annapolis Road off Timber Ridge Road on and around the Drover’s Close Cul-De-Sac. Some of the personnel stationed

here were from the Fourth Air Force's San Francisco Control Group. This operation specialized in what was referred to as "listening posts" or "tactical positions". The Fourth Air Force was based at Hamilton Field at the outbreak of the war.

Russell Ohlson; "They had a gravel road going to the base from the existing Annapolis Rd. It was approximately 1½ miles long. First you came to a guard house. Then came a supply house on the right. Further up the road you came to a grease pit (gas tanks etc.) You went around a right turn with three barracks on the left in a row (5, page 96). The mess hall and day room was across the road on the right." The barracks had capacity to house 130 men. Before making the right turn, on the right stood the water tank sitting on a rail enclosed platform, perched on top of a trestle type tower. Close by was the flag pole. (5, page 95) After turning right and just before the mess hall was the radio receiver building. Down slope from this complex of buildings stood the radar building, sitting above what is today Greencroft Close.

Because of the nature of its operation the base was constructed in secret. The remoteness of the area and the sparse population helped. Many people then and now never knew it was there. The buildings were built to look like ranch buildings. This was a tactic used at other observation posts. Further, most of these sites didn't appear on any of the military's station lists. All buildings other than the radar structure were set back far enough off the ridge so seeing them from the highway was difficult. Russell Ohlson; "There was nothing in sight from the ocean except the radar building that looked like a ranch barn from the outside." ". . . we continued to raise sheep around it as the Del Mar Ranch was an active sheep ranch. They wanted it to look as natural as possible." (2, page 13-8)

For the next two years the base operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week, monitoring the radar equipment and patrolling the beach with the 35 dogs they had at the camp. There are also reports the base had a 75MM mobile gun. It was mounted on a vehicle and used to patrol the beach along the highway. (4, page 237) In 1944 their status was reduced to semi-active. A year later they were back to full tactical status tracking Japanese balloon bombs. These devices were armed with incendiary and high explosive bombs by the Japanese, then released into the jet stream to float across the ocean, landing on the U.S. coast. Supposedly some 9,000 of these balloons were released. "He (Vernon McNamee) said the Japanese sent rice paper balloons over, which would be calculated to ignite and set the forest areas on fire. He said it actually worked. There were P-38s which would try to shoot the balloons down, but they were not very successful." (1, Confirmation Notices, page 40) Despite Mr. McNamee's observations, the Tetra Tech, Inc. report (2) indicated the base did detect several balloons which were ultimately intercepted.

For recreation the men had a recreation hall as part of the building which housed the mess hall. There was a pool table and they also showed movies, inviting the Ohlson family to join them. The Ohlson women would play the piano and sing for the men. (5, page 94) They could also go into Santa Rosa or Healdsburg for a movie or other diversions as well as the Gualala Hotel which has always been a social gathering place. "He (Vernon McNamee) said the military men stationed there were very open and friendly. They

would show war movies at the Gualala Hotel and they would take the kids around in jeeps and show them the radar station.” (1, Confirmation Notices, page 40) The soldiers would also visit the Ohlson family.

In 1946 preparations began to be made for the camp’s closure. The San Francisco Control Group removed all classified material and on July 24, 1947 the Fourth Air Force declared the site as surplus, a first step toward returning it to its owner. The site was transferred to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on March 28, 1948. From here it is assumed the Ohlsons again regained control of the property. The buildings were subsequently demolished by local residents. Some remnants still remain; broken concrete from the floor of the mess hall and the piers from the barracks, a section of the gravel road left from the original Timber Ridge Road where it ran into the camp, piers for the radar building and a cap over the well opening. Most are on private property and not accessible.

GUALALA BOMBING TARGET

Alameda Naval Air Station was the major Naval Air Center in the San Francisco Bay Area during World War II. It provided aviation support to all Naval activities in the area. Alameda commanded all Naval Auxiliary Air Stations (NAAS), one of which was Santa Rosa. NAAS Santa Rosa was commissioned on June 29, 1943. During World War II 21 air squadrons of fighters, bombers and torpedo planes received their last training before combat at NAAS Santa Rosa. Part of that training was practice in dive bombing and sites were needed to carry this out.

The military, this time the Navy, turned again to the remote sheep ranch in Sonoma County. The Ohlson family again responded by providing 350 acres at the northern end of their ranch. “He (Russ Ohlson) thinks his family let the Navy use the land without a lease as they needed it for target practice. His family had sheep grazing there and the sheep would have to be out of the way, but other than that, there was nothing else there.” (1, Confirmation Notice, page 21) The only written documentation for the land’s use, appears to be a lease prepared on April 3, 1946 and retroactively applied from May 2, 1945 to April 3, 1946. This appears to be supported by a military release document for the property indicating there was a “leasehold condemnation” superceded by a lease from 5/2/45 to 4/3/46. A November 21, 1944 memorandum noted, “Investigation reveals that the land comprising this target site is too expensive for acquisition. (1) Also a memorandum on gunnery ranges notes the Alameda Commandant requested a leasehold condemnation for this site on July 25, 1944. (7 – Appendix E-6, page E-24)

The target was set up south of Gualala Point, a small point of land west of the northern end of Rock Cod Road on today’s Sea Ranch. It is not the area owned by the County known as Gualala Point Park although practice bombs, about eight inches long with a flare and smoke tracer were found there during construction of the visitor’s center. (1, pages 10 and 14) The target area is marked by a large rock a short distance out to sea. The rock was used by pilots to identify the target area. The target area was known as “Stewarts Point, B.T. No. 30”. The target was used by Navy Pilots flying out of NAAS

Santa Rosa. This activity appears to have begun around July of 1944. Russ Ohlson whose family owned the property and Vernon McNamee, childhood friend of his both said they found “marker bombs”. (1, page 10) The practice bombs had a signal to indicate how close the pilot came to the target. The signals contained; “. . . a black powder expelling charge and a red phosphorous pyro-technic mixture. (7, Appendix C, page C-2) The Navy stopped using the target after April of 1946.

Today, from the coast trail, north of Post 71A, standing on the south side of the fence protecting a slide area, looking east one can see a large mound to the south and a large cypress to the north. According to Russ Ohlson the target stood near the cypress. It was a wooden target, 100 feet in circumference, painted yellow, with a white and red bullseye. Although not obvious from this vantage point, the mound is on the east side of Rock Cod Road, while the cypress is on the west side. Marker bombs have been found in the general vicinity of this area during construction of houses (see 2006 articles attached). If the observer turns around to face the ocean, the large rock used by pilots to guide them into the target is very obvious.

Other “bombs” have been found on The Sea Ranch, since it was built such as those pictured in the attached photo from Susan Clark’s 1990 thesis (4, page 236), the one discussed in a June 27, 1997 article from the Independent Coast Observer, the ones described in the attached 2001 and 2006 Press Democrat articles and the 2006 e-mail from an individual.

JAPANESE BALLOON BOMBS

“I just happened to look up and I saw this ball about so big floating in the air so we rushed home . . . and called the boys up at the radar station. They all came up here, laid around on the grass and watched it and in the meantime they drove half of the field. Hamilton Field sent out two P38s and they tried to suck it down by swooping down underneath it like this – and they couldn’t do it. So they shot it down around Calistoga. And it turned out to be a Jap balloon. And it was built just like a wagon wheel inside the mechanisms. . . . They could throw out an incendiary bomb as they went along. . . “ Ed Ohlson (Russ Ohlson’s father) in 1973, from Susan Clark’s thesis (4, page 239)

Before the devastating attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan’s cities had been battered by bombing attacks. In a last desperate effort to wreak terror on the United States mainland, they implemented a plan they had been working on for a couple of years. They launched balloon bombs into the jet stream destined for America where their incendiary bombs would set forests afire and their anti-personnel fragmentation bomb would kill or maim people.

The paper used to construct the balloons was made from mulberry tree roots and the paper was glued together by school children. The balloons were 33 feet in diameter and could lift 1000 pounds. On top of the deadly payload was a wooden box which contained an automatic altitude control device. If the balloon went too high this device would

release hydrogen gas from the balloon, so it descended. If the balloon went too low the device released bags of sand attached below the ordnance to lift the balloon.

700 balloons were launched in November, 1944. On November 5th the first one was found in the ocean off San Pedro in Southern California. Another 1200 were sent in December of 1944. Additional launchings were made in January 1945, 2000 balloons, 2,500 in February and again in March and finally 400 in April of 1945. 9300 balloon bombs in total. (9, page 4) It's been estimated 1,000 made it to the U.S. mainland. Reports (8 and 9) have indicated 285 bombs have been accounted for, mainly through discovery of remnants. Of the 285, 22 were in California. In Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino counties 6 were identified. Five identified by remnants were found in 1945 in Sebastopol on January 4th, Napa on January 5th, Cloverdale on March 12th, Big Bend (south of Sonoma) on March 14th and Guerneville on March 18th. A sixth one was the one Ed Ohlson saw, shot down by aircraft around Calistoga on February 23rd. Balloon remnants were found as far away as Michigan. (9, page 7) A 2009 "History Detectives" segment indicated 389 have been verified, suggesting there still may be remains undiscovered.

The bombs did cause some small forest fires. This threat led to the use of a highly trained group of paratroopers. The group was all African Americans. They never served in combat, but were sent on this clandestine mission to fight forest fires set by these balloons. The infantry battalion was stationed in Oregon with a detachment in Chico, California. The balloon threat never materialized to any great extent, but the group did see a great deal of action fighting forest fires in the Pacific Northwest caused by a hot, dry summer. They became known as "Smoke Jumpers".

The only known human casualties resulted from a tragic event near Bly Oregon. A minister and his wife took five children on a picnic in May of 1945. They found one of the balloons and in handling the remains it exploded killing the minister's wife and all five of the children.

The government kept the balloon bombs a secret as best they could so the Japanese would get no indication it may be worth trying again, perhaps with chemical weapons on board. So, in the end, the balloon bomb effort was a failure. On August 6, 1945 an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Three days later one was dropped on Nagasaki. On August 14, 1945 the Japanese Emperor indicated they would accept the terms of surrender and shortly thereafter, World War II ended.

RECOLLECTIONS

Patricia Ohlson Ashurst (Russell Ohlson's sister) from Susan Clark's thesis (4, page 238 to 239)

"The war made a big impression on me as I was in my early teens. There were many constant reminders that anyone living on the coast was in danger and many times there were rumors that the people would be evacuated twenty miles inland. We could never

turn on the lights unless we pulled all the special blackout shades. To drive on the coast in the fog and rain with dim lights is something else.”

“Every day there was an armored car that patrolled the entire coast line stopping at designated stops checking to see if there had been anything unusual happened since the previous day.”

“On the ranch itself there were many government activities. There was a bombing target for the planes from Hamilton Field. These planes came so low over our house that they often clipped the tops of the hedgerows.”

“The Coast Guard patrolled the beaches night and day with war trained dogs. Many times these dogs would get loose and chase the sheep killing the lambs and ewes or driving them over the cliff into the ocean. This caused problems as the sheep would have to be hoisted up the bank one at a time, the badly hurt ones shot and the others doctored. After much complaining the dogs were muzzled.”

“We were part of the ground observation crew and we reported every plane as to make, the direction it was headed and how many. Everything else that may have been an unknown object. There were many mysteries as the night we saw amber lights in both directions as far as one could see. The morning before Christmas that my brother was standing at the window and asked, “What is that funny black thing?” It turned out to be a Jap sub just taking a good look. It was sunk.”

POSTSCRIPT

In recent years a number of in depth investigations have been conducted by the government through the General Services Administration or the Army Corps of Engineers. These entities have made use of independent firms to do much of the research. The Bibliography lists the entities involved. The investigations have been done to address homeowner concerns and realtor disclosure concerns about the military activity and in particular any hazardous contaminants or explosives that may still exist. The studies have also addressed eligibility for The Defense Environmental Restoration Program for Formerly Used Defense Sites. This was a program established in 1986 by the Federal Government with the following goals:

- (1) The identification, investigation, research and development, and cleanup of contamination from hazardous substances, pollutants and contaminants.
- (2) Correction of other environmental damage (such as detection and disposal of unexploded ordnance) which creates an imminent and substantial endangerment to the public health or welfare or to the environment.
- (3) Demolition and removal of unsafe buildings and structures, including buildings and structures of the Department of Defense at sites formerly used by or under the jurisdiction of the Secretary. (6)

Del Mar Army Base Conclusions

“Former Del Mar Army Base was utilized by the DoD (Department of Defense) from 1942 to 1948. Three FUDS (Formerly Used Defense Sites)-eligible AOIs (Areas of Interest) remain. AOI 1-Former Grease Pit, AOI 2-Former ASTs (Above-ground storage tanks), AOI 3-Former Gun Emplacement. No further inspection is recommended for these AOIs, therefore no DoD action is indicated at this time. (2, page 10-2)

Gualala Bombing Range Conclusions

From the Site Summary Sheet (7, Appendix D, page 8) after the walk through recommended by the Preliminary Assessment Report (1, page 14)

“Based on the survey, no physical evidence of ordnance or former DoD activity was discovered. No evidence of UXO (unexploded ordnance) was detected; no subsurface ferrous anomalies were detected on the property surveyed, and no ordnance items or scrap was seen on the surface during this limited site visit. Only a small area was surveyed due to obscuring and dense vegetation restraints.” Survey completed on April 28, 1999.

From the February 6, 2001 Press Democrat; “A military bomb turned up Monday, the second explosive device in as many days, this one at The Sea Ranch. . . “ “Initial reports were that the aerial practice bomb appeared to be vintage World War II.

Representatives from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers St. Louis District visited the site on August 27, 2001. Their risk assessment was; “ Based on the documentation collected to compile the Preliminary Assessment for this site, which includes a map and correspondence, it is clear that the property was used for bombing practice during the period of 1944 to 1946. Although the area is utilized for recreational purposes and contains a number of residences in proximity to the former target area, there is no clear evidence that there is a risk of unexploded ordnance in the area. Documentation, interviews, and the results of the site visits show no remaining evidence of Department of Defense activity.” (7)

From the June 1, 2006 Press Democrat; “A World War II-era explosive device was unearthed Wednesday by contractors digging at The Sea Ranch . . .” “. . . by crews working on Rock Cod Street.”

OUTLINE

DEL MAR ARMY BASE

Ohlson Family

Acquired ranch 3/17/41

4800-5500 acres

Walter P. Frick/1916

\$100,000

Raised sheep until 1964

Cottage 69/104

Ed and Alice

Russ and Pat

Chester

America enters WWII 9 months later

Site acquisitions for military activities

Coastal concerns before and after Pearl Harbor 92

USAAF aircraft control and warning station

No information on how or why sites selected

Secrecy/Remote area/sparse population/blends in – Russ Ohlson's comments.

No information on conversations, agreements etc. with Ohlsons

Research firms had difficulty finding this info.

Site – Russ Ohlson again

12.5 acres off Timber Ridge Road around present day Drover's Close

Barracks 94/96/98

Recreation hall/mess 97

Water tower and flag 95

Duties

24/7 monitoring radar equipment and patrolling the coast

Dogs

75MM mobile gun

Recreation

Recreation Hall 97

Visits from or to the Ohlson family 94

Santa Rosa and Healdsburg for movies

Gualala Hotel 99

Closure

1946 Classified material removed

1947 declared surplus

1948 Transferred to USACE

1948 Ohlsons regain control and local residents tear down buildings.

Remnants

Defense Environmental Restoration Program for Formerly Used Defense Sites 1986

Goals – Identify and if necessary restore, remove or other wise handle pollutants, ordnance and other dangerous conditions.

First survey of army base is described in Bibliography 3 – 1/96

Concluded site should be eligible for 1986 program.

A second more detailed report involving site inspections and records research was done in 2006/2007 by an environmental firm hired by the Army Corps of Engineers. Bibliography 2

GUALALA BOMBING RANGE

Another military activity was training fighter pilots in dive bombing

Alameda Naval Air Station

Naval Auxiliary Air Stations

Santa Rosa – trained 21 air squadrons

So now the Navy turns to the remote Ohlson sheep ranch

Russ Ohlson told researchers in 1999 (See over)

Documents 7/25/44 Alameda Commandant requested leasehold condemnation.

Appears to have been approach after Nov. 1944 note indicates land too expensive for acquisition.

4/3/46 lease retroactive to 5/2/45

The target area

Stewarts Point, B.T. No. 30

350 acres

Gualala Point – discuss location

Practice Bombs

Signal – “a black powder expelling charge and a red phosphorous Pyro-technic mixture.”

Incidents and conclusions

Visitors Center

Susan Clark’s from Sea Ranch Golf Course

1997 at Del Mar Center

1999 Conclusions

2001 Press Democrat Article

2001 Conclusions

2006 Press Democrat article and Sea Rancher note

JAPANESE BALLOON BOMBS

Ed Ohlson’s 1973 comments

Before Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Balloon Construction

Mulberry

Children

33' diameter, lift 1000 pounds

Wooden box – automatic altitude control device.

700 11/44

November 5

1200 12/44

2000 1/45

2500 2/45

2500 3/45

400 4/45

9300

1000

285/22 Cal

6 in N/S/M

5 by remnants; Sebastopol, Napa, Cloverdale, Big Bend, Guerneville

Ohlson's in Calistoga

Little forest damage

Smoke Jumpers – 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion

Deaths

Secrecy worked, possible preventing chemical attacks

8/6/45 – H 8/9/45 N 8/14

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J. David Rogers, PH.D., P.E., R.G., C.E.G., C.HG.
Karl F. Hasselmann Chair in Geological Engineering
Department of Geological Sciences & Engineering
Missouri University of Science & Technology
129 McNutt Hall, 1400 N. Bishop Ave.
Rolla, MO 65409-0230
www.mst.edu/~rogerda/forensic_geology

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www.pbs.org
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Episode 3, 6/8/09.

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The California State Military Museum
1119 Second St.
Sacramento, Ca. 95814
916-854-1900
bill_davies@comcast.net

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