

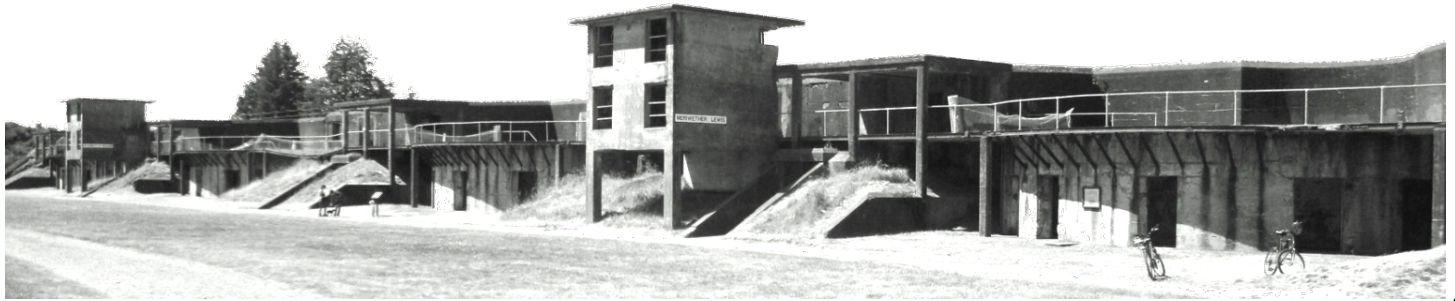
Fort Stevens Review

Published by the Friends of Old Fort Stevens, An Oregon 501(c)3 Organization

Helping to Preserve the History of Oregon's Fort Stevens State Park

(503) 861-1470 www.visitfortstevens.com foofs@teleport.com

Now on Facebook



Spring 2017

Three Issues: Winter, Spring, Summer

DON'T FORGET! THE ANNUAL FOOFs/FSSP VOLUNTEER'S PICNIC IS ON SEPTEMBER 16!!

A Tale of the Overzealous Commander

By D. Lindstrom

I've been sitting on a certain letter for twenty-five years now, and I've decided it's time to talk about some of it. I received it from my friend Jay Krom, now deceased. Jay's letter recounts the story of his encounters and interactions with the powers that be at Fort Stevens, Oregon. He was an important player in the events of June 21, 1942 when the Japanese submarine surfaced and shot up the beach in front of Fort Stevens.

The main purpose in talking about portions of Krom's letter is to illustrate and discuss the role of Col. Clifton Irwin during the months leading up to WWII and his actions after he became commander of the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia.

Irwin was a hard leader, drove his men, and for the decade leading up to WWII was the commander of the 249th Coast Artillery, Oregon National Guard. To illustrate his leadership, during the ten years leading up to WWII, he insured that his men attended meetings, practices, camps, and trainings. As a result, the 249th won several national Coast Artillery awards during the 1930's. These awards were granted on the basis of training hours, attendance at required meetings, and gunnery skills. For example, the 1933 trophy, awarded by the "United States Coast Artillery Association," was won by the 529th CA (AA). This was a little known antiaircraft unit was based in Portland, Oregon under the command of the 249th CA and Col. Irwin. The 1938 Knox trophy, was similarly awarded to the 249th for the excellence in training on the coastal guns of the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia.

With that brief introduction, let's look at a portion of Jay's letter which he wrote in the form of a play. This section details his first encounter with Col. Clifton Irwin, then commanding officer of the federalized 249th CAC, Oregon National Guard. The dialogue also illustrates the "gulf" between the regular army and the National Guard. Col. Irwin had yet to be appointed commander of the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia.

SCENE 1: HQ 249th CAC June 29, 1941 (Fort Stevens, Oregon)

PLAYERS: Col. Clifton M. Irwin C.O. 249th, Oregon National Guard
 Second Lt. Jay W. Krom AUS, Reserve Officer, Commissioned June 16, 1941
 First Lt. Jack Napier, Adjutant, 249th CAC, Oregon National Guard

KROM: Lt. Krom reporting for duty.

Napier HARUMPH, Col. Irwin is in his office. Why don't you knock on his door and give him your orders?

Irwin: HARUMPH, come in. HARUMP

KROM: Lt. Krom reporting for duty, sir. —with a snappy salute—

Irwin: So you're another one of these BLEEP BLEEP college boy reserve officers. Is that correct?

KROM: Yes, Sir.

Irwin: Napier, get in here and see what we've been handed. Another one of these BLEEP college boys that doesn't know his a__ from his elbow.

Napier: RUNNING INTO THE OFFICE: Yes, Col., I thought this would make our day!

Irwin: Krom, what do you know about guns?

KROM: Not much sir.

Irwin: How about Search Lights?

KROM: Not much sir.

Napier: COL., I see by his 201 card he's had four years of mechanical engineering at the U of W. Harbor Defense Headquarters had a request out for an engineer to work on the new gun batteries program. I'll phone and see if it's still open. Maybe we can get rid of him.

Irwin: Good! If it's still open send him up there but assign him to Captain Woods, Battery F. in addition, make sure he pulls line duty as well as staff duty with the West Pointers and Reserves. Lt. Krom, you better hope they can use you up there in the rarified atmosphere of HD Headquarters because I don't like BLEEP BLEEP reserve officers. HARUMPH

KROM: Yes sir and it's been nice to meet you sir!

Irwin: HARUMPH

Col. Irwin took command of the Harbor Defenses from Col. Lemmon prior to Pearl Harbor. Jay believed that Irwin's "intense dislike, distrust and displeasure with reserve officers, most of whom had some years of study in a university," prevented him from "conducting his duties in a manner somewhat less than perfect." The Colonel may have had similar feelings about West Pointers, but he didn't express them as vividly. Herein was the beginning of Irwin's downfall.

Col. Irwin had a "passionate distrust of the Japanese and the possibility of an invasion of the U.S. Continent. He was proven absolutely correct in his focus." While not known, it's likely that Irwin recognized that of all the Pacific Coast's Coast Artillery forts, Fort Stevens was the weakest, had the smallest caliber guns with little prospect of shoring up the defenses. It has also been pointed out that the mouth of the Columbia River is the closest point on the Pacific Coast to Japan...not that that had any bearing.

Krom continues, "when [Irwin] was C.O. of the Harbor Defenses he directed our training in the area of beach defenses. [I] remember one of his many fiery speeches to the troops; where he stated his fear of the flammability of the acres of scotch broom surrounding all the forest. Were he the C.O. of the Japanese invaders, he would set fire to this over abundant foliage and burn all of us out of our defenses." Back in the day when I visited with Fort Stevens veterans, many also recalled Col. Irwin's speeches and discussions of inadequate fire power to fend off an invader. There was even talk of how to form a redoubt at the Highway 26 tunnel in the Coast Range.

Prior to the Pearl Harbor attack on December 7, 1941 Krom was of the opinion that these “all-consuming invasion fears caused him to manifest his strong personality in...other ways like National Guard officers versus reserve officer conflicts.” Krom reported that “just after Pearl Harbor Col. Irwin was among a select group of very senior officers in the U.S. who were given a top secret briefing outlining the terrible loss of U.S. military power in Hawaii.” This had a powerful effect on the Colonel.

The war situation only solidified Col. Irwin’s views and concerns. All leaves were cancelled, and none were granted until Irwin’s replacement, Col. Doney arrived. Among Doney’s first orders were sign offs on as many leaves as he could responsibly grant.

Within military circles Col. Irwin had credibility, and when higher officials decided change was needed in the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia command, a most unusual approach was taken. (The author has no information as to whether or not this method was used in other places.)

Jay Krom continues his story:

On a given day Major Knapp sent out a memo that all Harbor Defense headquarters staff officers would present themselves at a meeting room to take a special mental aptitude test. At the time I was suffering from a terrible cold and asked Knapp if I could be excused and take the test later. He said no that a Stanford professor (reserve officer colonel) had arrived specifically to conduct this test and I must take it along with about a dozen others including COL. Irwin.

When asked what the exam would cover Knapp said it was a standard mental agility test like reading information as fast as possible and then tackle the multiple choice questions.

Shortly after this exam COL. Karl Doney arrived, took command and COL. Irwin left the area. After the war I heard the exam results were the reason.

This whole episode is even stranger when you consider that Col. Irwin was a graduate of Stanford University with a degree in Civil Engineering (1916). One can speculate that a test was chosen that might prove difficult for him. Beginning with World War I, these aptitude and intelligence tests were developed in the first place for the army. They were soon criticized for being “bias and unable to predict the success” of a soldier. Only later did the education world adopt them for their purposes.

Over the year’s different ones have told me they were unhappy to lose Col Irwin. Faye Stewart wrote to me that he was a good man and hated to lose him, while several others, including Jay Krom, referred to his dismissal as a tragedy. In the scheme of things, it was a minor one, but a tragedy none the less. Back in 1999 during the Coast Defense Study Group’s annual conference at the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia, one veteran allowed that Irwin died of a broken heart.

All this may sound overly dramatic, but let’s pause a moment and consider the situation. For the decade running up to Pearl Harbor, as commander of the 249th Coast Artillery, Oregon National Guard, Irwin built a reputation as a no nonsense military leader with the awards to prove it. He did his best to prepare his men for the worst possible scenario, a land attack in the vicinity of Fort Stevens. He was not happy unless his men on the coastal guns, inadequate as they were, were the best possible.

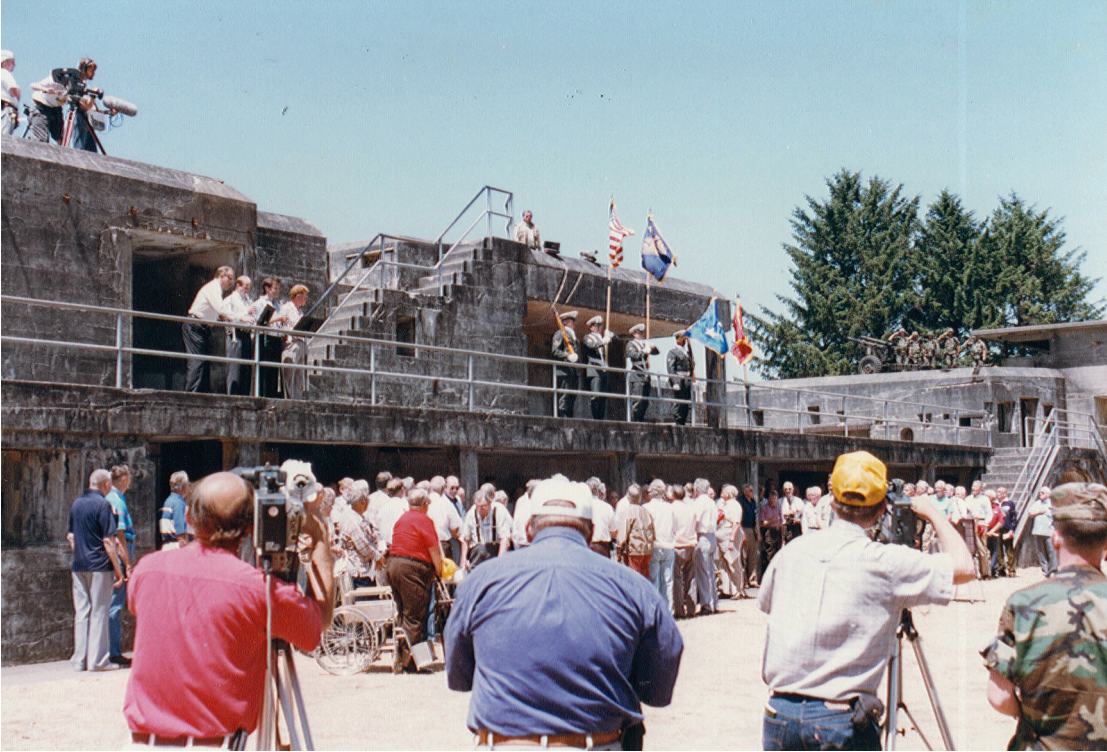
Irwin was relieved of his command not more than a month prior to the June 21, 1942 Japanese submarine attack on Fort Stevens. So, what would Irwin have done had he still been in command? You might say that the situation was tailored made for him. A hint was the response of the men of the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia. Those already posted at the “ready batteries” and those sleeping near their gunnery posts were ready in moments to rock n roll, waiting expectantly for the order to return fire. When it failed to come, they were crushed.

Upon first hearing the news, we can only imagine what emotions the Colonel felt.

To my knowledge, upon hearing about the attack, no one recorded his response. It’s not hard to imagine what it was. I’m sure that up to his final day he lamented that he was not there to give the command, “Return fire.” His fears were vindicated. Would he have kept his command? That’s hard to say. I’ve read that other continental United States (Coast Artillery) National Guard commanders were also replaced by West Point graduates. Were those dismissals as awkward as what happened at Fort Stevens? Hard to say.

In the next issue I explore more details about Col. Irwin’s life and military service.

The Japanese Attack On Fort Stevens 75 Years Ago



On Sunday, June 21, 1992, as revealed in the photo, a large number of Fort Stevens veterans participated in the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the shelling of Fort Stevens by the Japanese submarine, the I-25. In the photo the attendees are at attention as the colors are presented and the National Anthem rendered. After all the introductions and speeches were finished, the Pacific Rim Peace Memorial was unveiled.



Jay Krom is seen here assisting with the unveiling of the Pacific Rim Peace Memorial. It is situated adjacent to Battery Russell. The memorial honors the men of the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia and the Japanese I-25 submarine crew members. The memorial calls for everlasting peace between the America and Japan.

Several years after the 1992 dedication, I-25 submarine crew member Nobou Fujita visited the Peace Memorial with his daughter.

Not only was he aboard the I-25 when it shelled Fort Stevens, but in the fall of 1942 he was also the Warrant Flying Officer who flew the same submarine's aircraft over Brookings, Oregon attempting to set the forest on fire. Rain fell during the night before the dawn "catapulting" off of the submarine's deck. Thankfully, the forest was spared. In 1962 the City of Brookings invited Fujita to visit their city. He was ashamed of his war time behavior, and purposed in his heart to commit seppuku if he received a hateful reception. However, the City showed him "respect." Instead of committing seppuku he gave the city his 400-year-old samurai sword as a sign of friendship.