

Fort Stevens Review

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THE SAGA OF THE “CHRISTMAS SHIP” SS MAUNA ALA, AND MORE

NOTE: THIS STORY FIRST APPEARED IN THE SUMMER 2006 EDITION OF THE
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The story covers Donald Moy's first-hand account of the grounding of the SS Mauna Ala on the beach by Fort Stevens. The ship was taking a load of Christmas Trees and other cargo to Hawaii. The Hawaiians were very disappointed to hear that their “Christmas Ship” wasn't going to make it! Of course, in a way the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was also responsible for its grounding. The story also includes follow up research, by the author, about the inquest that followed.

The Donald Moy Story (Original Title)

By

David Lindstrom

Donald Moy began his World War II experience in the Army at Fort Stevens, Oregon as a draftee and finished the War at Iwo Jima. But that is getting ahead of our story. He says with pride that he is a third generation Oregonian of Chinese ancestry. In 1868, after a three month voyage, his grandfather, merely a teenager, arrived in Oregon from Southern China on the sailing ship *Jeannie Alice*. The family established themselves as dry goods merchants in downtown Portland. Donald attended Ladd and Shadduck Elementary schools. Then he graduated from Portland's Benson Polytechnic High School in the mid 1930's and continued his technical training at Multnomah College located in Portland. Donald continues to live in his boyhood home.

In the mid to late 1930's the Nation experienced a depression of sorts and work was hard to come by. Being Chinese didn't help. There was a lot of prejudice and it was hard for even an educated Chinese to get a job. Many of his acquaintances worked in canneries. Donald recalls that he had a friend with a PhD in Engineering who was not even given a chance at a job.

Donald was drafted in January 1941 and sent to Fort Lewis, Washington for several days. Half the group was sent to Fort Stevens. Consequently, Donald was one of the first draftees from Portland to take basic training at Fort Stevens. The drill instructor was even from the Oregon National Guard. He was assigned to a barracks off the parade ground in the upper fort area. As a Chinese, Donald knew he was being watched, and he had reason to believe that the FBI was checking up on him. He was not the only one of Asian descent at Fort Stevens for basic training. There were two Japanese draftees from California there as well. After Pearl Harbor, they were immediately shipped off to parts unknown.

Once basic training was over, and because Donald had earlier learned Morse code, he was assigned to Fort Canby, Washington at the G-2 station located above the Cape Disappointment lighthouse as an observer and radio operator. However, there wasn't a radio up there. Donald believed that the coastal forts were given a low priority when it came to equipment. This issue surfaced again just seven months later.

His duty, even though he was Army and not Navy, was to identify incoming ships by taking their call letters. It was not required to log in this information, and often Donald was the only one performing this task. Since it was still peacetime, things were pretty lax. So, decent equipment for the job was lacking. In fact, Donald had to use a three-cell flashlight to signal the incoming ships asking for their call letters and they replied with their blinker or signal lights.

On December 7, 1941 Donald was on duty at the G-2 Station. Suddenly the telephone rang and the individual on the other end of the line said he was from the Army message center. His message was chilling, "Unknown element attacking Oahu." It turned out that this message was routed from an unidentified ship under way in the area. Since the Columbia Defenses were quiet that Sunday due to many a large number of troops on leave, and because he was the only one on duty at G-2, he believes he may have been the first one to receive word of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Immediately thereafter, everyone had to dig trenches and lay barbed wire. Donald felt very fortunate for not being assigned to that duty.

After Pearl Harbor, Donald had a lot of company at his station. Officers of Major and above were always present. While the Harbor Defense Command Post at Fort Steven's Battery Mishler was being completed across the river, the G-2 Station served that role. After several weeks the permanent post was ready and many of the officers migrated over there.

Two days after Pearl Harbor, on December 9, the Navy sent Chief John Garner and a group of four or so men to Fort Canby from the Navy yard in Bremerton, Washington. Their job was to take over the ship identification assignment from the Army. They settled down in Coast Guard quarters at the base of Cape Disappointment that shared territory with Fort Canby, and they used a lookout below the Army's G-2 station. (The G-2 Station sat at 296 feet above sea level with a visibility of twenty miles out at sea.) They also shared mess with the Army personnel. As it turned out, they didn't take over the job fast enough.

At approximately 6:30 PM on Wednesday, December 10, 1941 Donald and several others were at their posts in the G-2 station. It was dark with a light fog in the air. Due to wartime conditions, all navigational aid lights were out, including the Columbia River Lightship, plus the radio beacon was off. Donald spotted a freighter trying to make its way to the mouth of the Columbia River; except it was off course by at least three miles. What could he do? All he had was that three-cell flashlight. So,

he did all that he could do. He flashed “S-T-O-P” over and over again to the ship. There was no response. The ship kept coming in, and the inevitable happened. It ran aground on the shoals. It came ashore at forty-five degrees just a little south of the Peter Iredale and close to the southern boundary of Fort Stevens.

Donald has always thought that he was indirectly responsible for the ship running aground which turned out to be the Matson’s USS Mauna Ala. He felt this way because after the incident, Chief Garner told Donald he sent the wrong message, that he should have included several introductory letters in front of “S-T-O-P.” However, none of the Army personnel had been instructed in such things, and besides, international codebooks had not been given to them. Then of all things, a day after the incident, someone within the Army’s harbor defense command came up with just such a document for the G-2 station. {The ship was a freighter headed from Seattle to Honolulu. After Pearl Harbor, it was ordered to turn around and make way for the nearest port that was Portland, Oregon located about one hundred miles up the Columbia River.}

The testimony by the ship’s crew before the Marine Investigation Board revealed that before the grounding they had seen but one light. The radio operator, Kenneth Fulton, acknowledged that he had seen a flashing light signaling “H-A-L-T,” which was thought to have come from the lightship. This was reported to the master, C. W. Saunders, who ordered “dead slow” for several minutes. However, the master thought he knew where he was and he seemed willing; in the dark, in unfamiliar waters, to take the Mauna Ala over the bar without a pilot. After a brief time he ordered “full ahead.” Soon the seamen and officers on watch first heard and then saw the breakers. It was too late. The vessel was hard and fast on the shoals. By late the next day, it’s 60,000 Christmas trees, lumber, logs, shingles, frozen turkeys, and according to one Fort Stevens veteran, cases and cases of beer were washing ashore. The locals and those “lucky” ones at Fort Stevens had a merry Christmas indeed. The ship’s master had a window in which to make the right decision, but he was determined to beat the odds. Then the findings of the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation were that the blackout of navigation-aid lights and the silencing of the radio beacons under wartime conditions caused the wreck of the Mauna Ala. In the end, Donald was in the clear and he did not even have to write a report.

Several weeks after the Mauna Ala incident, Donald and six or so others were transported about eighty miles north to Westport, Washington located on the southern end of Grays Harbor. This area was to be fortified and Harbor Defenses of the Columbia personnel were to prepare the way for those to be stationed there. Donald was sent there as a communications or radioman. One of the first things he was asked to do by the Colonel was to send a message to Fort Monroe on the Teletype machine. Since he had never operated one before he did a quick study of the manual. Donald wasn’t through. In short order he, along with Master Sergeant Vard Nelson, figured out the code used by the Coast Artillery for messages. They were unauthorized. Even so, the officers frequently gave Donald coded messages to decrypt because they had not been trained. In other words, the Coast Artillery was still trying to get on a war footing.

The good news was that during this general time period Donald was promoted to Staff Sergeant, which, in his typical way, he dismisses as a necessity rather than anything special on his part.

By early February 1942 Donald was back at his G-2 post at Fort Canby. He got the feeling that the command didn’t know what to do with him because he was Chinese, and they couldn’t ship him out without reason. Donald never roamed alone. He always had someone with him. He was afraid of getting shot. Everyone was jittery. Radios were scarce. Scouts had to drive out to points, observe, drive back, and report. Most of the equipment was old; left over from World War I. The right ammunition wasn’t even available. It was that low priority issue again.

Donald slept either at the station or at the old CCC camp, but took his meals at the main fort area, which was a considerable walk from the station. On the night of the June 21, 1942, when the Japanese submarine shelled Fort Stevens, he was getting ready for duty while the shells screamed ashore. The next day, Donald overheard Colonel Roundtree talking about the failure to return fire. The Colonel complained that the commander had not given the duty officer the authority to authorize the batteries to return fire. Roundtree said that in peacetime he had asked for flares that would assist shore installations with sighting a nighttime target at sea. His request was declined. If permission to return fire had been granted, they could have made a difference. It was observed that the reason given for not allowing returning fire, -to not reveal the position of the defenses' guns-, was just an excuse, or a cover up. The forts had been there for fifty years and everyone knew where the coastal guns were.

In Donald's view, he was shipped out of the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia as soon as possible. He was in one of the first groups of men sent to California; somewhere near Los Angeles. He left just before the WACS arrived. After spending a few months in California, he was shipped to Oahu, Hawaii. In Hawaii, Donald came into his own. While stationed at Fort Shafter, he took training in jungle combat and air defense control.

After a year of training he was ordered aboard a ship whose destination was unknown. Soon, however, he found out. He was headed to Iwo Jima. Donald arrived on the 20th day of the invasion as part of a thirty eight-man outfit to operate an early warning system as an operational detachment. It was all part of the island's air defense control project. Donald remained there until the war's end. He was discharged in his hometown, Portland, Oregon.

While at Fort Canby, Donald was part of the 249th Coast Artillery, and he is still proud of it. I salute you Donald for a job well done.

