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During a Silent Attack, the Press Kept Quiet, Too

By ANDY MASLOWSKI

President Reagan and CIA Director William Casey complain of a bad couple of years trying to plug national security leaks to the press; now, with the Iran contra tug, multi newsmen are fairly splashing around in the stuff. The White House's woes in this regard are not unprecedented. However, there have been times when the press proved it can cooperate in preventing dangerous information from getting out.

One good example is a little remembered episode of World War II, involving the Japanese balloon bombing of this continent from November 1944 to April 1945.

Following Gen. Doolittle's raid on Tokyo in April 1942, the Japanese began planning retaliation against the American mainland. After two years of testing, they decided balloons could be used to carry bombs or incendiaries across the Pacific Ocean using the prevailing west wind. The bombs were designed to cause random destruction in cities, forests and farms.

Two types of balloons were made: bomb carriers, about 33 feet in diameter when filled with hydrogen and made of very thin paper glued together, with a lift capacity of up to 300 pounds; and radio balloons, which accompanied the bomb carriers and provided tracking signals. Radio balloons were made of rubberized silk, in the belief they were stronger. But only three silk balloons reached North America. The paper balloons worked better.

Each balloon had 30 six-pound sandbags designed to release when a barometer indicated the balloon fell below 30,000 feet in altitude. Another barometric device opened a valve and released hydrogen when the balloon rose above 35,000 feet. Each balloon usually carried four explosives, including incendiaries and 32-pound

fragmentation, anti-personnel bombs. These were supposed to release after all the sandbag ballast had been dropped, which the Japanese had hoped would be over a mainland target. Another device would destroy the balloon after its payload had been delivered. But this device often failed, allowing many balloons to be salvaged. The balloons could reach speeds of 200 miles per hour, and depending on wind conditions, normally crossed the Pacific in three to five days.

The first to reach American territory were launched Nov. 1, 1944. On Nov. 4, a Navy vessel salvaged one balloon envelope off the coast of Southern California. On Dec. 11, the first discovery on land was made near Kalispell, Mont.

By January 1945 enough balloon fragments had been collected to convince the War Department the Japanese had developed a new threat. But what was the purpose of these balloons? Were they only for incendiary and anti-personnel bombing? Could they be used as chemical or bacteriological weapons? Were they a means of diversion or some other purpose?

Balloon parts were sent to the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington, D.C., and to the California Institute of Technology. The FBI, state and federal forest rangers and other groups were alerted and told to report balloon sightings or finds. Geologists who examined sand from the ballast bags listed five Japanese areas that could be the source of the sand. Air Force surveillance produced photographs that discovered the manufacturing plant in one of these areas with several of the pearl-gray bags on the ground.

Fourth Air Force pilots also tracked two balloons from the air. A P-38 pilot from Santa Rosa Army Air Field brought

one down, while a P-63 pilot from Walla Walla trailed his target from Redmond, Ore., to Reno, Nev., before forcing it to land by repeated sweeps of air from his plane's propeller.

One of the most interesting aspects of this attack was the voluntary censorship exhibited by the U.S. and Canadian press and radio corps. Although it was a time of war, press cooperation prevented the Japanese high command of learning of all but one landing, that at Kalispell. After this announcement the news blackout on balloons was complete. The Japanese launched 9,000 balloons and estimated at least 10% would reach the U.S. But with only one reported landing, the Japanese General Staff ordered a halt.

Brig. Gen. W.H. Wilbur was chief of staff of the Western Defense Command and followed the entire Japanese balloon invasion. After the war he visited Japan and met the commander of the balloon campaign, Gen. Kusaba, who said he was told by his superiors that his balloon campaign was wasting the fast-dwindling resources of Japan. The Japanese General Staff believed that if the balloons were reaching America they would have been reported in its newspapers.

Unfortunately, the news blackout was perhaps responsible for the only fatalities of the balloon attack. On May 5, 1945, after the Japanese had stopped balloon launchings, five children and a woman were killed when they discovered a bomb on a picnic near Bly, Ore. Elsewhere, balloon bomb fragments had been found from the Aleutians to Mexico and from California to Michigan. Military authorities confirmed that about 150 balloons were recovered.

Besides the media, many other groups including health officials, county agricultural agents, farmers, ranchers, school authorities, teachers and law-enforcement representatives were notified of the balloons. Their cooperation also allowed silence when silence was necessary, and panic never had a chance to develop.

Most of the balloon bombs didn't explode or exploded over forests and mountains, far from populated areas. Had there been more damage, especially in urban areas, would newsmen still have remained silent? That will never be known. But the press did come through when it was deemed vital to clam up. As a result, the Japanese balloon bombing was a historic fact, experienced without the hysteria that might have been expected.

Mr. Maslowski is a free-lance writer based in Columbus, Ohio.