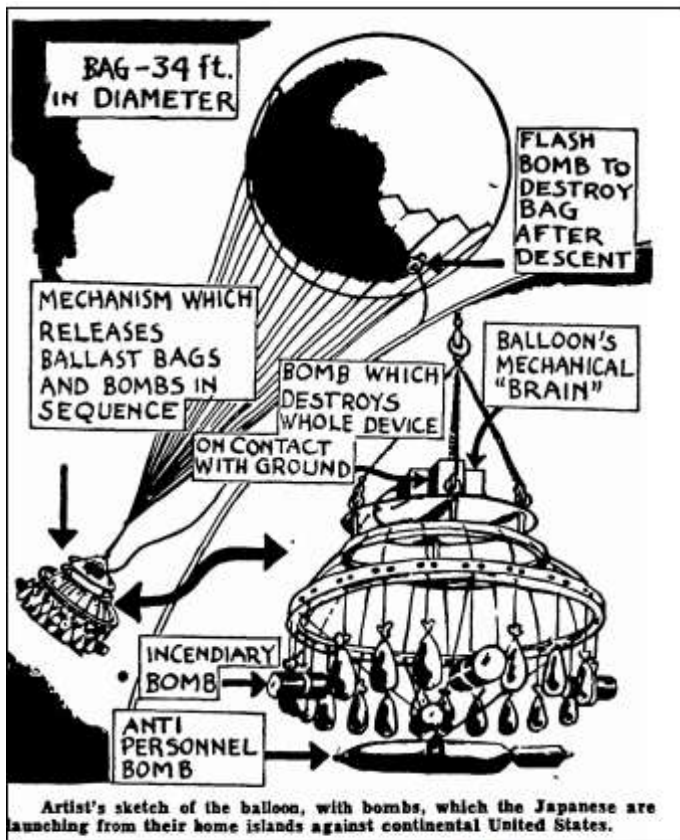


## When the Japanese Bombed Kalispell in World War II

By Rick Hull

The February 1945 propaganda broadcast from Tokyo was enthusiastic, if greatly exaggerated. "Ten thousand people have been killed," it declared. "One of our weapons caused great fires and damage at Kalispell, Montana. For months residents of the western United States have seen huge objects floating eastward in the sky at night. Each of our secret-type balloons can carry several persons, and the day is not far distant when we will land several million Japanese troops on American soil."



This drawing was released to area newspapers, such as the Choteau Acantha in June of 1945.

The story had some validity. After all, bomb-laden balloon had made it to America, and the Kalispell incident appeared in Time and Newsweek. And the local discovery would be the first real evidence of more than 9,000 bomb-laden balloons launched against western U.S. and Canada. The attack would be a failure, though five innocent children and a mother would die in Oregon.

However the Kalispell incident did not occur anywhere in town, but rather in the woods near Kila. It was December 11, 1944. World War II was heating up in the Pacific, though few would realize it would end in eight months.

Two loggers, O.B. Hill and his son Owen, had noticed what looked like a parachute near their cutting operation. When they finished for the day, they drove back to town and reported their finding to Sheriff Duncan McCarthy. The next day the trio found that the parachute was instead a large balloon made of thick paper. Of interest was a long fuse, 70-foot long, had

sputtered out before it could reach a black-powder charge that would have destroyed the balloon.

The sheriff rolled up the balloon and turned it over to the FBI. Based on weather reports and snow under and on top of the balloon, officials concluded it had probably landed between Nov. 11 and 25.

It was not the first mysterious appearance. On December 6, miners in Thermopolis, Wyoming reported a bomb exploding on a distant hill and a parachute object drifting away in the sky. And in early November, a large, rubber weather balloon with Japanese markings had been pulled from the sea off California.

The Kalispell balloon had Japanese writing on a label near the top. FBI agent William Bannister and Sheriff McCarthy asked Jiro Masuoka of Kalispell and Yoshi Sakahara of Whitefish to look at it. The Japanese-American men said it appeared to be an inspection sticker dating from October.

The Western News in Libby was the first to break the news. "Jap Balloon Found in Timber," it said. From there the story spread, eventually turning up in the January 1, 1945, issues of Time

and Newsweek. A garbled report reached a Chinese newspaper, which alerted the Japanese to the success of the cross-Pacific journey and triggered the propaganda broadcast.

American officials were initially puzzled. The balloon could lift a thousand pounds. Was it being used to infiltrate saboteurs. And where was it launched – from ships or submarines?

But within a few days authorities recovered an intact balloon in Oregon. It was missing only the bombs and ballast. Similar discoveries followed.

The paper balloons were about 33 feet in diameter. Ropes were attached to a reinforced belt around their middle, and dangling below was 24-inch aluminum wheel. In its rim were 72 electrically triggered detonators attached to a spaghetti web of fuses and wires. Hanging from this were 32 sandbags, thermite incendiary bombs, and a 33-pound high-explosive bomb. The rigging was not strong enough to support a person, and the balloon was filled with flammable hydrogen, which essentially ruled out submarines.

Officials realized the balloons were hitching a ride on the jet stream. Japanese meteorologists had discovered a band of winds between 30,000 and 35,000 feet that sped east as fast as 200 mph. The balloons could reach North America in 30 to 100 hours. The conclusion explained the Japanese weather balloon recovered off the West Coast and mysterious radio transmissions from similar high altitude sources.

The balloon bombs were low-tech, yet ingenious. The balloons themselves were made of paper sheets from a local species of mulberry tree glued with a paste from a Japanese type of potato. School girls laminated the paper into panels, which were then assembled over forms into spheres.

The Japanese had to overcome basic obstacles. As the balloon rose towards the stratosphere and was heated by the sun, it would be ruptured by the expanding hydrogen. So the neck of the craft was fitted with a relief valve. Shaped like a pie plate, the valve would release the excess pressure. It also kept the balloon from rising higher than the jet stream.

Yet at night the balloon would cool and drop out of the jet stream. The fix involved 32 sandbags hanging from the wheel. When the balloon dipped too low, an altimeter would fire off time-delayed fuses. Pairs of bags would be dropped until the balloon rose back to the proper height. A small electronic brain, with its battery submerged in anti-freeze to combat minus 60 degree temperatures and a transparent top to catch solar heat, controlled everything.

The Japanese premise had a major flaw. The idea was the incendiaries would set off forest fires that would divert American manpower from the war effort. But the jet stream was only strong enough to reach North America between November and March.

Another problem arose when the U.S. military slapped on a news embargo on balloon discoveries. From then on, the Japanese were operating in the dark.

The sandbags provided an important clue about the balloons' origin. A microscopic analyst showed it was beach sand, but contained no coral. That placed it in north half of Japan. Even more telling was a diatom species found only around Sendai, and minerals that matched volcanic rocks in the area. B-29 bombers were sent to destroy two hydrogen production plants in the vicinity.

American officials did worry that the balloons carried biological or poison weapons. Mentioned were anthrax, typhus, smallpox and foot-and-mouth disease. There was brief panic after rabies broke out after a balloon sighting in California. According to Wikipedia, there was a plan to use biological weapons, but the Japanese emperor vetoed it.

The new embargo proved fatal when a group of teenage Sunday school students stumbled on a balloon while on an outing near Bly, Oregon. A curious youngsters triggered the anti-personnel bomb and five teenagers and the minister's wife died. After discussions about how to publicize the danger without alerting the Japanese, the censorship was lifted.

Balloon launches ended in April of 1945. Everything was in short supply in Japan, including paper and hydrogen, and the rail network was crippled. The news blackout had also succeeded,

and the Japanese were unsure if the balloons were even reaching North American.

A 1945 count put the number of balloons found in the U.S., Canada, Alaska and even Mexico at 285. A 1970 review counted 342 incidents and sightings, with some as far east as Michigan. Thirty-three reports were from Montana, including a piece of balloon found in Flathead Lake.

The balloons continued to show up after the war. A live bomb was detonated by a Canadian ordnance disposal team in 2104, and another balloon was found in British Columbia in 2019.

In his memoir, Martin City developer Charles Green said he found one on his property in Glacier National Park a few years after the war. "It was in the spring just after the snow had melted, and having laid there for several winters, it was just a mass of gooey paper. I solved the riddance problem by stacking cedar post scraps on it for a couple of days, then set them on fire just before our lunch hour."

"We sat down about a hundred feet away and had about given up hope of a loud bang or some fireworks when the thing flared like a railroad warning fuse for a few minutes and then subsided. I wasn't about to become a war casualty at that late date, so I dozed the ashes into a roadfill," he wrote.

Pony Tracks September 2020