

Balloon Bombs: What are they?

Balloon bombs were hot air balloons with one 15 kilogram antipersonnel bomb and two incendiary devices attached. They were launched by Japan during World War II to wreak havoc on American cities, forests and farmlands. They were called the Fu-Go Weapon, supposedly a revenge bomb for the 1942 Doolittle raids on Tokyo. Only partially filled with air to compensate for different altitudes across the Pacific, they looked like giant jellyfish. The incendiary bomb was the biggest concern. During the dry season it could turn forest areas into an uncontrolled holocaust.

... and the army's Camp Evans Signal Laboratory



Figure 24. This inflated balloon shows the geometry of the many paper gores which make up the gas-proof envelope. Nineteen shroud lines attached to the cloth skirt carry the gondola. (U.S. Navy photograph, 80-G-326353, in the National Archives)

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Where did they hit?

Nov. 3, 1944, Japan released the first of more than 9,000 bomb-bearing balloons. It's estimated that nearly 1,000 reached North America. They were found in Alaska, Washington, Oregon, California, Arizona, Idaho, Montana, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Texas, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Michigan and Iowa, as well as Mexico and Canada. The last one was launched in April 1945. The last one found in North America was in Alaska in 1955 - its payload still lethal after 10 years of erosion. Picked up by a 74th Air Rescue Squadron H-5 helicopter crew from Ladd Air Force Base near Fairbanks, Alaska, it was sent to Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, for closer

inspection.

Who did they kill?

On May 5, 1945, a balloon bomb killed five children and a woman near Lakeview, Ore., when it exploded as they dragged it from the woods. Taking some local kids on an outing, Reverend Archi Mitchell watched in horror as his wife, Elsie, and the five children, ages 11 to 13, were killed. Those six were the only known victims of the balloon bombs. However, dangers of the balloon bomb still may exist. Hundreds were never found and may still be detonated with the slightest contact.

Mission accomplished?

The bombs actually caused little damage, but their potential for destruction and fires was awesome, not to mention their psychological effect on the American people. U.S. strategy was to not let Japan know of the balloon bombs' effectiveness. Cooperating for national security reasons, the press showed great restraint in not publishing balloon bomb incidents. As a result, the Japanese only learned of one bomb reaching Wyoming, landing and failing to explode, so they stopped the launches after less than six months.

Source: "Japan's World War II Balloon Bomb Attacks on North America" by Robert C. Mikesh, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973.

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