

Estevan Point Lighthouse

Vancouver, British Columbia

The sub that couldn't shoot straight

On the evening of June 20, 1942, Mrs. Thomas Dick was walking on the beach near Hesquiat Harbour, a fishing village on the west coast of Vancouver Island, when she saw something rise out of the water in the gathering darkness.

"It came up like a whale only it didn't make splashes," Mrs. Dick said. "It came up near a buoy and slowly went down again. It stayed up for nearly five minutes. I was very excited. It had a long top on it something like a ship. I ran to get my son but when we looked again it was gone."

Later that evening, a crewman aboard an American fishing boat, the Sea Breeze, spotted what he thought was a submarine on the surface four miles west of Estevan Point. After moving to within 500 feet, it submerged, only to appear astern thirty minutes later. Inexplicably, he didn't raise an alarm.

Shortly after ten o'clock, Commander Yokata of the Imperial Japanese Navy brought his Junsen Type B fleet submarine I-26 to the surface about two miles off the Estevan Point lighthouse and opened fire with his 5.5-inch deck gun. This was the first direct attack on Canadian territory since the Fenian raids of the 1860s.

After the war, Yokata recalled that "it was evening when I shelled the area with about 17 shots. Because of the dark, our gun-crew had difficulty in making our shots effective. At first the shells were way too short, not reaching the shore."

As the Official History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War dryly notes: "In his attempt to bring the war to North America, Yokata thus found himself in the embarrassing position of being unable to hit the broadside of a continent."



Canada

Estevan Point Lightstation



Yokata struggled to put things right. "I remember very vividly yelling at the crew, 'Raise the gun! Raise the gun!' to shoot at a higher angle," he said. "Then the shells went too far over the little community toward the hilly area. Even out at sea we could hear the pigs in a farmyard near the lighthouse squealing as the shells exploded."

R.M. Lally, the light-keeper at Estevan Point, had just finished lighting the powerful lamp atop the 125-foot lighthouse when he spotted a mysterious vessel zigzagging toward the point from the south-west. Any doubts he had about the stranger's identity were dispelled when it opened fire and a salvo crashed into the surf below him. Lally hurried down the spiral staircase to warn his wife to take cover before making the long climb back to douse the light. A veteran of the Great War, he stayed to observe the fall of shot as Yokata tried to get the range. Fortunately, Yokata never did and the shells fell harmlessly offshore or exploded in the bush behind the lighthouse.

Yokata not only startled Lally and the local livestock, he also broke up a card game. Ed Redford, the Estevan wireless operator, and his wife were playing bridge with another couple when the first shell exploded on the beach about a hundred yards from their house. Redford rushed his wife and guests into the basement, then sat down to broadcast "the general call of CQ along with the information that we were being shelled by an enemy submarine and that we were shutting down and going off the air temporarily."

Redford's message was received by the commanding officer of Pacific Command at Esquimalt at 10:14 p.m. local time. He, in turn, immediately broadcast a warning. Within half an hour, the corvette HMCS Timmins and the converted yacht Sans Peur, which had been on antisubmarine patrol in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and the Bangor minesweeper HMCS Lockeport, off Cape Beale, were on their way to Estevan. On their own initiatives, the Fishermen's Reserve (FR) vessels Moolock at Ucuelet and San Tomas in the Tofino area also steamed toward Estevan.

Another FR vessel, the newly commissioned Merry Chase, was in Refuge Cove approximately ten miles away from Estevan Point when the watch reported explosions to the west. The skipper, Coxswain D.W. Peck, then contacted the lighthouse station to inquire if they had heard anything. When no answer was forthcoming, Peck mustered his hands to action stations and steamed for the village, ordering his wireless operator "to keep a continuous watch throughout the night in anticipation of a signal." That signal never came--it is doubtful that COPC would have expected this tiny 58-foot fishing vessel to engage an enemy submarine--and Peck anchored for the night. An RCAF Supermarine Stanraer flew over the area but, as it was not equipped with radar, detected no sign of a submarine.

In the meantime, most of the frightened residents of Estevan Point had retreated deep into the woods to escape the bombardment. At Hesquiat, a predominantly Indian fishing community further up the coast, the locals took to their boats when informed by telephone of the attack. They were later picked up by Moolock and ferried to Point Alberni along with some shell fragments gathered at Estevan, fuelling rumours, which were already running rife, of Japanese subversion.