

The History Corner

Orcas Island Historical Museum in
Eastsound, Washington

Defending Orcas Island

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Orcas Islanders are naturally patriotic people, and this was never more true than during the dark days of World War II. Dozens of island men and women fought in the services and served in the merchant marine far from home, and more than one island family was visited by the tragedy of warfare. Those remaining on the island during the war helped the war effort as well, often in uniquely 'island' ways.

The Orcas Home Guard was formed in 1942, with active squads of island men, including some high school boys, in each community, keeping a watchful eye out for the enemy. Their commander was George Keys, and Beryl Hall, W.G. Miller, Glen Porter, Roy Cox, Henry Lehman, and Felix Norton were district captains.

The Orcas Island Air Observers were among the first active volunteers on island defense duty, manning posts in Deer Harbor, Eastsound, and Doe Bay around the clock. Kirk McLachlan was in charge at Deer Harbor, Wes Langell at Eastsound, and William Boyer commanded the Doe Bay post. On alert watching for enemy aircraft, the Air Observers learned airplane recognition skills and stood watch on a regular schedule, with each on duty four hours daily. The proud island traditions of volunteerism and 'making do' with local resources found apt expression in the person of George Gray, who ably served on the midnight-to-four a.m. shift despite being completely blind.

The Inter-Island Telephone Company advertised the Orcas Air Raid Warning weekly in the local paper, instructing everyone that three long and three short rings would be rung on all rural lines to signal the call for BLACKOUT. On the first warning, those with telephones were to run over and warn the neighbors without phones that a BLACKOUT had been called. No second signal within twenty minutes meant 'all was clear', although this may have been lost on the poor souls still wandering in the dark as they struggled home from warning the neighbors.

A windy night in June 1942 saw the only direct attack of the war on Orcas Island. Three barrage balloons broke loose from their mooring lines near Bremerton, sailed on a high wind across the Strait, and began wreaking havoc on the island with their trailing lines. Power lines were torn loose near the Culver Willis place east of Olga, phone and power lines were entangled on the George Loomis property, and the primary line took another hit near the Harding Gow residence. Rampaging in the dark about the island, the balloons tore up George Rodenberger's stawberry patch in a final fit of evil before flying off the island over Cole Point, on their way to even more severe destruction in British Columbia.