Lights Over Los Angeles

by Caitlin Hammer

A milky glow appeared in the second-story window of the white stucco house at 2500 Strand, in Hermosa Beach. Inside, Scotty Littleton lay beneath his sheets reading by dim flashlight. His parents had recently bought an entire set of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and Scotty would often choose a volume at random, uncovering the mysteries of nature and history. The big guns of the antiaircraft batteries along the coast had quieted, leaving the rhythmic creeping of the tide to soothe strained nerves.

The war was still fresh in February 1942, a dubious Christmas package delivered to the American people by President Roosevelt via radio the day after Japanese air fleets attacked Pearl Harbor. Angelenos had caught war fever on a grand scale. Since January, their challenge to the Japanese replayed nearly every night in mock attacks, when Navy batteries would hurl shells at targets towed by Army planes. To eight year-old Scotty and his neighborhood buddies it was entertainment, like nocturnal clay pigeon shooting or a fireworks show. But it always stopped around Scotty's bedtime –before 10 o'clock– a little gesture of gratitude for all of the Angelenos who would face another long day at one of the factories, galvanizing the tools of victory.

Scotty turned off the flashlight and hid it under his pillow. It was a school day tomorrow, Wednesday, February 25, but he would wake to a sound more ominous than the rattle of his alarm clock.

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Further north, eighty-thousand watts of white light branded "Hollywoodland" into the nightscape above Los Angeles. The 25-foot letters projected the symbol of silver screen glamour and easy riches as far as Terminal Island, in East San Pedro. Most of the Terminal Islanders were *Issei* fishermen, first-generation Japanese immigrants, whose trawlers moved easily in the familiar Pacific.

Thirty-one year-old Dr. Fred Fujikawa was not one of them. By 1942, he'd lived on Terminal Island for six years, and walked to his office each morning from his house on Seaside Avenue. It was a good practice; the islanders lived simply and had simple problems. Dr. Fujikawa also made house calls to several non-Japanese patients who lived along the coast. If he felt comfortable ministering to people of both cultures, it was because he was *Nisei*, or second generation Japanese-–born in San Francisco, educated in Berkeley and Los Angeles, interned at L.A. General Hospital. All of his patients were doing well, but the comfort level had plunged since that infamous Sunday two months ago.

On December 7, Dr. Fujikawa was loafing around his office, tossing a comment now and again to a friend who sat behind an open newspaper. The radio was on, likely tuned to *The World Today*, a CBS news show, because at about 10:30 A.M., the announcer thanked Golden

Eagle Oil and then an Oahu correspondent relayed news of the attack. Fred's friend called him closer to the radio and they stood still in disbelief for five or ten minutes until the connection abruptly went dead. As the news sunk in, Dr. Fujikawa grew anxious. His parents, like most Terminal Islanders, were *Issei*. He may have been all-American in spirit, but he looked Japanese. His confidence as a respected community doctor suddenly meant little; he feared for his family's safety.

That same Sunday night at 7:00 P.M., the entire West Coast had been blacked out as the Army prepared for another secret attack. On Terminal Island, FBI agents emerged from the darkness, rapping on doors and secreting away all of the *Issei* fishermen they had marked as dangerous. Community leaders were taken first, their boats confiscated and moved to a government-owned dock. Streetlights went out on Terminal Island every night thereafter and people awaited a knock at their door.

This particular February evening, Dr. Fujikawa groped his way home from the office. Scant moonlight reflected off storefront windows and puddles. He and his wife had dinner and drifted upstairs. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, and yet within seventy-two hours not one Japanese Terminal Islander in a community of three thousand would remain.

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Thirty miles east of the island, Goldie Wagner was just waking up. Arcadia was a growing suburb of Los Angeles and to Goldie and her milk delivery mates, growth was measured by the gallon. The area around Arcadia had been pastureland for the fifty years Goldie had lived in Southern California; the smell of earth and animals clung to clothes and hair like cigarette smoke.

The Hillcrest Dairy Company was likely one of the small-town dairy outfits that saw big opportunity in the new war. Blue collar workers from all over the country hopped off trains at Union Station every day by the thousands, settling into the suburbs that hugged airplane and rubber plants. And if the average Rosie spent her daylight hours popping on rivets, who was going to do the family's grocery shopping?

Goldie provided the essentials. People would mark the milk they wanted: whole, buttermilk, chocolate; and then there were the extras like cream, cottage cheese, pudding-–even eggs. Breakfast just wasn't the same without her. So when the streetlights suddenly flickered and went out around 2:45 A.M., Goldie must have sensed the morning stretching out before her. But she had plodded through one war before and must have discovered that consistency was the key. What was more consistent than cold milk at your doorstep? She got on with her route.

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It helped to be awake when you were trying to save the city. Maybe Tom Herbert had put in a couple hours of overtime at his day job, or he and his wife had gone to see a late showing of "The Pride of the Yankees." Whatever the reason, the air raid warden responsible for his Hollywood block had to be roused by his landlord at about five minutes to 3:00 A.M.

While Tom dressed, nearly thirty-three thousand other volunteer wardens swarmed in the streets of Los Angeles. From the rooftops they looked like newly hatched insects still carrying a bit of protective shell on their heads-–white fiberglass helmets with a red-and-white striped triangle at front. Armbands cinched their sleeves. They had all been through enough drills to break in their boots and develop a confident gait, but some of the assurance waned under the cold moonlight. There was something different about this morning. Darkness crowded the city, and their job would entail making it darker still. Some wardens had to smash shop windows to douse lights that might invite enemy aircraft.

In the darkness they were vulnerable. Just like new hatchlings, a few would never make it to the local Civil Defense Headquarters. A car killed one warden downtown, and many blacked-out intersections made crossing painful for other volunteers. Swarming into the defense offices around the county, they conferred. *It's the real thing, brother*, they said to each other. *Somethin's goin' on for real this time.*

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The threat had materialized over the ocean an hour before. Since January, all of San Diego's best hilltop makeout spots had been reclaimed by Boy Scouts and volunteers with night glasses. Little escaped them. A volunteer in one of these eyries had probably buzzed a filter center between San Diego and Los Angeles with the coordinates of the unidentified aircraft. Shortly thereafter the thimble-shaped lights on the air raid sirens up and down the coast blinked blue. Something moved in the sky towards the city. It was only minutes away.

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The wail of the sirens gave Warden Raymond Angier the damnedest surprise ever. He couldn't sleep through it if he'd wanted to. He dashed outside and scanned the area for lamplight. The block was a black corridor when the fireworks started up.

Up on the roof, Raymond had a panoramic view of the city. Orange smoke belched from gun batteries positioned along the coast as bright white-and red-shells shattered the black morning sky. The moon had vanished, and in its place were the thick white beams of eight huge Sperry searchlights, clawing at the haze over the city, trying to grab the target of their search. Raymond's eyes flicked between the strobes' bright fingers, and saw about seven luminous dots organized in a recognizable V-shape. The constellation of objects moved as though locked together, levitating at an altitude he estimated at 20,000 feet. With his training as an aircraft engineer at nearby Douglas Aircraft, Raymond could calculate with some accuracy the trajectory of the strange targets. When he first spotted them they were 60 degrees above the horizon, give or take five degrees, rising from the northwest shore area.

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Municipal police had no suave official response prepared when the phones began ringing. They hardly had men enough to take down the reports. Officers dimmed their headlights and navigated the shadowy streets in response to alleged "Fifth Column" sightings-–espionage in

action. Prostitutes and gangsters could have the key to the city tonight; most of the regular patrol cops already knew where to find their suspects: Venice Beach, Terminal Island, Little Tokyo.

Three Ohis were at home on Ocean Front Walk in Venice Beach when the police arrived. A helpful neighbor had noticed that their apartment was much brighter than the shuttered café below. Mrs. Ohi and her two grown sons would have exchanged the look worn by many Issei and Nisei these days when the police goaded them towards the patrol car. An expression that said, *shikata ga nai*—"can't help it"—*we've got an Oriental face.* And when the Venice police were through with them, the F.B.I. would take up their case. Smiling, the white men might ask, *So, you had your lights on during a blackout. That usually means one thing...you probably got some buddies in the planes overhead. Am I right?*

Of course, neither the police nor the F.B.I. yet knew what it was the Army outposts along the coast were trying to bring down from the sky. Reports from Angelenos conflicted. Some people heard the drone of plane engines but could see nothing but exploding shells and searchlights. One police clerk at a West Los Angeles station ran outside and saw something resembling a butterfly flitting high above the range of the ack-ack guns. And then at about 3:15 A.M. the 77th Street police station received a call from a civilian who'd seen an aircraft crash near the intersection of 180th and Vermont.

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Shells burst all around the glowing triangle without ever seeming to hit it. The spectacle filled Warden Tom and his awakening Hollywood neighbors with patriotism all the same. Hollywood hadn't been so lit up since Sid Grauman's Chinese Theatre opened in '27. Tom joined the sleepwalkers as they sang snippets of "The Star-Spangled Banner"—it helped to keep him alert. As he made his rounds, Tom noticed that the faces in the gathering crowd were calm and cheerful. The only sour faces he met were the motorists he'd ordered to pull over and cut the headlights. Drivers had pushed various ID cards under Tom's flashlight. *Look, Mister Warden, I'm an -----, I've really got to be going. I'm due in five minutes...Don't you know who I am?* But only Tom's ID card gave him authority under these circumstances, cheery as they felt.
Some folks remained ornery; the postman switched off his lights and kept going.

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Back on the roof, Raymond continued to follow the movements of the strange lights. The formation hovered over the opposite horizon now at about 15 degrees. Momentarily deafened by the whistle and crack of the incendiary shells, he concentrated on the dots that had at first looked to him as separate and circular lights, as clear as the planets closest to earth. Now, they appeared to him as one diminishing light. Raymond lost sight of it as it moved towards the coast southwest of the city.

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Some people would have to do without dairy this morning. Just before the guns opened fire on the gleaming objects spotted by the two air wardens, the radio stations signed off and the

Civil Defense Alert System changed from blue to yellow to crimson. If Goldie had sought advice from the local AM news channel, she may have felt abandoned. Air wardens paced their blocks in Arcadia, and yet no one was briefed on how long the blackout would last, or what had invaded the city sky.

Perhaps it was one of the many shells falling with the warble of a firecracker that spooked her. Errant shells –having missed or been repelled by their intended target– rained down on the sleeping neighborhoods. Police began receiving reports of the three-inch incendiaries landing on beds whose pyjama-clad occupants had just risen to take in the light show outside. At least two motorists suffered heart attacks after a shell struck the road in front of them.

At about the halfway point of her delivery route, Goldie's truck collided with something. It was a car. Milk bottles crashed and spilt. Blood and glass glittered in the street. The car's driver stirred but the passenger had died on impact. With the ambulances in short supply in the dark city, Goldie's truck probably served as a makeshift hearse, carrying the body to one of the hospitals still operating under dim safety bulbs. Pregnant women had been pouring into the hospitals since the war began, many with "Kilroy was here" scrawled in lipstick on their bulging bellies. But tonight there was an added urgency-–the excitement of an apparent blitz on Los Angeles would induce a dozen births before the sirens ceased.

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Dr. Fujikawa and his wife stood rigidly on their porch. They looked towards the greater metropolitan area, past Fort MacArthur's cannon-like guns that were still blazing-–still so very near now–-at fifteen after 3 A.M. As the explosive shells streamed red and orange around a target they couldn't make out, worry hardened in the doctor's stomach.

Just hours after the news report last December screamed of Japanese treachery, the Army commanders at the fort had barricaded the only exit from Terminal Island. No one was allowed to leave; it was now part of the arbitrary military zone that sprawled east and west, and north as far as the Presidio in San Francisco. Dr. Fujikawa's wife had been entertaining two ladies from Sacramento the Monday Roosevelt declared war on Japan, and they wanted to get home. They asked him politely if he might find out how.

Walking quicker than he'd intended, Dr. Fujikawa headed toward the ferryboat on Fourth Avenue. There were about five hundred families on the island, but only five or six family names. He probably knew someone related to the ferryman; he might secure a passage for his friends if he could barter a discount on a birth or a free treatment for arthritis. The ferryman was not in his boat though, so Dr. Fujikawa walked on.

That evening, he took the ladies and their things to the immigration station. Maybe they'd find some answers there-–how to get off the island, or how long they'd be trapped there. The agents at the station recognized Fujikawa from the frequent visits he made to sick people aboard Japanese ships that docked temporarily at Fish Harbor to trade and sell goods. One of the agents pulled him away from his company, as though they were going to discuss a special passage for the ladies. But the agent-–a Nisei too–-pushed Fujikawa against the wall with a long pole. A number dangled from the end of the pole, and he was photographed with it. Two flashes: a profile and a frontal.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Fujikawa protested. “All I’m trying to do is a favor for my friends, trying to get ‘em off the island, get permission.”

“Oh, we know that, Doc,” said the agent. “You’ve got to come with me anyway.”

In the holding room down the hall, a bell chimed and the elevator doors opened. A group of Japanese fishermen stumbled out. They looked at Fujikawa and said, “Oh, the doctor is here too.” He can’t remember where they went from there or how the ladies got home. He never saw the fishermen again.

Dr. Fujikawa and his wife, like other Terminal Islanders, probably went back to bed around 3:30 A.M. and slept uneasily, the silence after cease-fire as heavy as the pulse at their temples.

Outside in the smoky darkness, the Navy jeeps started rolling in. With the unconditional support of President Roosevelt, “the Japanese Question” was about to be solved. At Japanese churches across Southern California, people had started preparing for the evacuation they knew was coming. Nobody would have believed it would arrive so quickly though, at the end of a bayonet. Sometime that night, sailors and police officers pasted bulletins on shop windows around the island.

Each notice bore the same announcement: “Pursuant to such authority upon direction of the Secretary of Navy; You, all members of your family and all other occupants of the premises hereinafter identified, being located within such areas, are officially notified that you must vacate them not later than midnight February 27. You are further notified that if you are not gone from such areas within the time state you will be forcibly removed and will likewise face such penalties as the civil laws provide...”

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Scotty Littleton awoke to his parents’ whispers in the hall. He peeked out and saw his father’s pale face. As an air raid warden for his beachfront neighborhood, Scotty’s dad had to leave his family and enforce the blackout outside. The shells weren’t exploding over the ocean this time, so it couldn’t be a drill. But neither could he confirm his fears of a real enemy attack—-nobody answered the phone at the Civil Defense Headquarters. Only after he walked into the street for a better view did the air raid siren start up.

Mrs. Littleton’s father was staying with the family, and he was slow to get out of bed. Slow to do everything actually. But when Scotty’s dad shouted from the doorway, “Mr. Hotchkiss, I think this may be the real thing,” the old widower bolted down the basement steps.

Scotty and his mom were too curious to remain underground. *Besides, the old man’s morning breath is deadlier than falling shells*, they thought, and ran back up the stairs to the beach at their back door. The two of them stood side by side, clinging together for warmth, their eyes on the sky. Searchlights focused on what appeared to Scotty’s mother as a silvery, lozenge-shaped bug, seemingly paralyzed by the lights, hanging directly over Hermosa Beach.

Glowing shrapnel fell on the beach in front of them, sending the pair back under the eaves for protection. Scotty was so close he could smell the acrid smoke as the shells exploded. His eyes refused to blink and his lower lip dangled. *Were the neighbor kids seeing this?*

Not far from Strand Street, another air raid warden left his family in the backyard staring skyward. The thing they watched so raptly reminded him of the Graf Zeppelin he’d seen land at

Los Angeles' Mines Field in '29, only wider and flatter. He and some neighbors jumped into their cars, tossing a couple of shotguns into the backseat. The object picked up speed and vaulted into the night sky as they followed it, racing down Sepulveda. As it moved away, the warden got one last look at the rectangular silhouette. Three narrow slits, like the gills of a shark, stood out, glowing an angry orange-red. And then it was out of range.

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Warden Tom Herbert heard the all-clear signal—one minute blast followed by two minutes silence—at 7:30 A.M. and hobbled back to Hollywood, sore but giddy. He lingered over breakfast with his wife, chattering about the night's excitement. Tom savored his bit part in what he pictured was a small triumph of American morale; his wife undoubtedly liked the look of him in the Civil Defense gear. Then he napped long into the afternoon.

Waking up, Tom walked directly to the newsstand on the corner and plucked the day's *Los Angeles Times* from the stack. His knees nearly buckled under him. "RAID FALSE ALARM SAYS SEC KNOX," read the headline. He cursed aloud and slammed fifty cents on the counter. The article quoted Secretary of Navy Frank Knox dismissing the Army's antiaircraft response as a case of wartime jitters. Back at home Tom's wife tried to comfort him, but he wouldn't be quieted. He wondered who would take him seriously next time when he told them to pull over and douse their lights. Later on, Tom tuned in to the War Department's radio address. The Secretary of War claimed it wasn't a false alarm, but explained little more.

As the sun set, Tom sat down at his typewriter. He thought back to the darkness of the early morning, the shells raining down and the national anthem. Confusion descended on him.

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A few hours later and half a world away, a Dutch sailor aboard the *HDMS Tromp* spotted something moving along the horizon. Glowing like a comet, it hurtled towards the battleship, skimming the thick air above the Java Sea. And then it slowed. Crew members must have gathered on deck to watch the strange bright disk as it circled and circled overhead.

Wat is dat in vrednesnaam?

Having nearly been sunk by a Japanese Navy fleet a week before, the sailors knew the enemy. But this aircraft had no wings and dropped no bombs. And then suddenly, after orbiting the ship for three hours, it sped away —a streak of heat and light and sky.

Notes

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16. white fiberglass helmets: As seen in a photograph on a website [http://wanderling.tripod.com/la_ufo.html] and verified in Los Angeles: An Illustrated History (see bibliography).
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