THE ARIZONA PIECE OF WW2 HISTORY YOU NEVER KNEW EXISTED HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

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FOR A YEAR AFTER THE U.S. ENTERED WW2, ARMY SOLDIERS HOLED UP JUST ABOVE HOOVER DAM. THE REASONS WERE FIGHTING THEN, TODAY THEY'RE INCREDIBLE

An abandoned military pillbox/bunker sets on top of a bluff overlooking Hoover Dam from the Arizona side of Lake Mead

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The Army soldier crouched on the ledge, trying to avoid the concrete ceiling just inches above his head. His boots scraped the dirt as he maneuvered himself into position for the watch. He adjusted his binoculars.

A 2-foot-high window in the concrete wall opened a 270-degree view. At midpoint, on a rotating mount attached to the ledge, a machine gun aimed outward. The orders were simple: Watch for the enemy and respond if attacked.

Just a few months had passed since the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor, drawing the United States into World War II. The war in Europe had already stoked fears of German spies and sneak attacks; now the nation was on alert for a Japanese invasion.

Behind the ledge, stacked against one wall, was ammunition for the machine gun and for rifles that would fit through the 4-gun slots on either side of the window. Packs and rations leaned against another wall.

Some days, as many as three soldiers pulled duty in the concrete structure. On those days, the air grew close as the day warmed. The men would ease around a concrete pillar, jockeying for space on the hard floor and along the walls, which wrapped around in wide angles to form a crooked octagon.

The structure was known as a pillbox — defensive like a bunker, but smaller, commonly used during wartime to camouflage remote guard posts. The military manned hundreds of pillboxes along the western coast of the United States during World War II, waiting for a Japanese invasion.

This one was erected in December 1941 the weeks after Pearl Harbor. Its purpose was similar to the others': Watch for enemy activity, German or Japanese American intelligence suspected both.

But its location was less obvious. This one was near water, but not an ocean. It sat on a bluff along the Arizona border, perched high above Lake Mead and — more strategically — Hoover Dam, the engineering landmark completed just six years earlier.

The Americans believed the Germans and, later, the Japanese wanted to destroy the 726-foot-high dam, or at least cripple its power plants, which supplied electricity for aviation and munitions manufacturers in Southern California*. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which operated the dam — dedicated 80 years ago in September — agreed the threat was real.*

What authorities didn't agree about was how the attack might proceed. Would it come from above, an aerial attack by bomber planes? Would it come on the ground, a sneak ambush among the sharp ridges and canyon walls?

Or would saboteurs deliver a water assault, aboard boats launched on Lake Mead upstream from the dam or, more improbably, steered upstream from the Pacific Ocean?

Whatever the answer, the Army would keep watch. *For a year, soldiers holed up in the concrete pillbox, hidden by heavy chunks of rhyolite rock to hide it on the hillside, and they watched and waited. Until nothing happened. Then they left.*

Seven decades later, the greatest dangers on this hillside are falling rocks and rattlesnakes. The pillbox is one of the few reminders of an unlikely chapter in World War II history, one filled with fantastic stories about Nazi submarines trying to navigate the Colorado River and with more plausible evidence of the strategic value of Hoover Dam. It is an artifact of America's fears and its vigilance.

And it's still there, on a bluff in Arizona, hiding in plain sight.

WHAT'S HERE TODAY?

A visitor to Hoover Dam could walk across the top from the Arizona side to the Nevada side and back again, take the tour deep inside, stare at it in awe from the Mike O'Callaghan-Pat Tillman Memorial Bridge 840 feet above the Colorado River, and *never see the tiny WWII pillbox on the ridge.*

But it's there, and once you know it's there — once you know where to look — you can't see it.

Compared with the timeless architectural wonder of Hoover Dam, the pillbox looks frumpy, and rustic, squatting near the edge of a cliff, its slumping rock veneer baking in the desert sun.

Pat Hicks, the archaeologist for the bureau's Lower Colorado Region, crouches a little as she walks through the narrow doorway. She points to the concrete walls, floors, and ceilings, each about 13 inches thick. (see picture next page)

"They took on the character of the wooden forms so fully that the ceiling almost looks like wood," she says. The grain and the knots look as real as if the wood had petrified. The lines where the lumber planks met reflect imperfections in the cutting.

Inside, the box seems almost like a basement because of the low ceiling and the high windows.

Inside the "BOX"

The pillar and the oddly angled walls squeeze floor space and magnify the sense of confinement. The ledge where the machine gun was installed would offer little range of movement for the man on duty.

The military-built pillboxes when time or materials were short. The structures were generally small and often built on hills or outcroppings. At its longest and widest points, *the one at Hoover Dam is 21 feet, 6 inches by 13 feet, 6 inches. It has eight walls of varying widths.*

Work crews poured the concrete box and then added the rocky camouflage of volcanic rhyolite mined from the same ridge. Construction took just two or three weeks in December 1941. The Army dispatched troops for the pillbox and other guard posts around the dam.

"It was sort of a mystery who built it for a long time," Hicks said. "The answer to that mystery was in front of everybody's noses."

Blueprints, files, crew, and equipment lists: None of it was preserved for historians. Then one photograph turned up amid hundreds of others. It showed the construction of the pillbox on the ridge, the site barely visible on the edge of the image*, captured as an accident*, an afterthought, or a purposeful attempt to cast attention toward the dam and Lake Mead, which was full at the time, and away from the post.

What historians were most interested in: The men in the photo were wearing civilian overalls, which meant, Hicks says, that the bureau built the pillbox for the Army.

Otherwise, with no records, and no accounts of the year the pillbox was manned, historians have had to deduce much of what occurred in the structure based on information from other such sites and clues from the box itself. *A stash of documents unearthed in 2001 revealed a deep level of fear among high-level government officials and evidence of a threat more real than anyone let on.*

The" box" under construction in 1941 (Top right-hand corner)

This picture was taken and released in error. This was a classified project designed not to scare the public.

WHY THEY BUILT "THE BOX"

The last bucket of concrete was poured at Hoover Dam — then known more commonly as Boulder Dam — in May 1935, and on Sept. 30, 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke at a dedication ceremony, calling the dam "the greatest dam in the world" and "an engineering victory of the first order."

This is a view of Hoover Dam from the machine gun slot in the pillbox built on the bluff after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The gun window offered a 270-degree view around the dam.

The dam began to draw sightseers from the start, and the number of visitors grew when the first tours were offered in 1937.

But it also drew another kind of attention. As fighting escalated across Europe, American intelligence operatives began to hear chatter about threats on U.S. soil. *Hoover Dam, with its power turbines, emerged as a potential target for sabotage.*

In August 1939, the acting commissioner for the bureau wrote a letter to an Interior Department official. The letter was uncovered in 2001 by Christine Pfaff, a bureau historian who wrote a detailed account of efforts to safeguard Hoover Dam during World War II.

"It might be necessary to close Boulder Power Plant to the public, and to arrange for special policing of other structures and plants to protect from possible saboteurs," wrote Henry Bashore.

Barely two months later, according to the reports Pfaff reviewed, a ranger at the dam saw a German tourist taking a series of photographs near the dam. At one point, the tourist was heard reprimanding a woman who had accompanied him for appearing too prominently in some of the pictures, spoiling them.

Then on Nov. 30, 1939, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico warned the State Department of a Nazi plot to bomb the dam's intake towers, the concrete structures used to pull water from Lake Mead into the power plant. In a dispatch to Washington*, the embassy said German agents were found in Mexico City with the plans for the sabotage plot. Nazi spies living in Las Vegas had already visited the dam a dozen times to lay the groundwork.*

The Germans, according to the embassy, would rent boats in the guise of a fishing trip and then steer the boats toward the intake towers. Once there, they would attach bombs to the towers and then escape in the boats.

At the direction of the State Department, the Bureau of Reclamation immediately banned private boats from the vicinity of the dam. Over the next month, floodlights were installed at the dam and wire netting was stretched across the lake to block watercraft from within 300 feet of the towers.

The security measures occurred quietly, and the government denied some of them at first, insisting any precautions were related to “uncertain times,” according to the documents reviewed by Pfaff.

In February 1940, the War Department sent top-secret intelligence to the bureau warning that the sabotage threat was dire.

"Life and death orders have been given by Berlin to put LA in the black,” according to the records. “Unless quick action is taken, some terminal transformer station somewhere near Boulder Dam and another station in Los Angeles is doomed also to be sabotaged.”

HOW FEAR RAN WILD

Wild rumors about new Nazi plots ratcheted paranoia among officials at the bureau and in Congress. J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, *submitted 38 security recommendations to protect the dam and its assets,* including new security patrols, inspection stations on the approach to the dam in Nevada and Arizona, and closer scrutiny of tour groups and other visitors.

The bureau desperately sought resources, but the agency was told the military needed all available arms and ammunition to prepare for war. Sen. Pat McCarran of Nevada introduced a bill in Congress to establish a military post near the dam to fortify its defenses.

So often repeated was the threat that it took on an almost inevitable air. Director Alfred Hitchcock introduced it in his 1942 spy thriller "Saboteur." The unlikely heroes stumble into — and then thwart — a plot by a band of American fifth columnists to blow up Hoover Dam. The saboteurs later plant explosives at the Brooklyn Navy Yard to stop the launch of a new battleship, still cursing the failure of their attempt to disable the dam.

Outside of Hollywood, rising fears fed more fantastical ideas about how to stop real-life bad guys, according to the documents discovered by Pfaff.

J.P. Durbin, noted as “a concerned resident of California,” suggested building a steel and concrete canopy over the canyon to hide the dam. Rock and gravel scattered atop the structure could prevent damage from aerial bombs.

Oskar J.W. Hansen, the artist who sculpted the bronze winged figures that sit on the Nevada side of the dam, also believed the dam was a possible aerial target. He proposed installing steel cables in the canyon walls to form a protective grid over the dam and the power plant. The upper-level cables would be fitted with armor-plated shields to deflect bombs.

Later still, another artist and bureau consultant, Allen T. True, proposed building a “dummy dam” downstream from Hoover as a decoy. The dam, three-quarters the size of the real thing, would be built of wire and its surface painted to simulate the actual dam.

True’s real contribution, Pfaff wrote, may have been articulating the threat to Hoover and Parker dams on the Colorado River and, later, Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River in Washington state. The dams supplied half the electricity used by manufacturers in the West, he would write in 1943 and were easy targets inadequately protected.

Some of the threats were all too real, the documents suggest. Others sounded like a plot from a madcap spy picture, like the one about a Nazi submarine, which surfaced several times in the 1940s (the story, not the sub).

Nazi agents, the story went, planned to navigate the Colorado River from the Sea of Cortez up to Hoover Dam, where they would mount their assault.

According to various accounts, the German agents would pilot the sub to Yuma, disassemble it, load it on a truck, and haul it on the highway to a spot north of Parker Dam, where it would be reassembled and submerged again for the final leg of the trip to Hoover.

The sub was never sighted. But that didn't mean the dam didn't need to be protected.

THUS CAME THE PROTECTION

As security tightened at the dam, government officials began to argue about the nature of the threat, according to Hicks, the archaeologist for the bureau at Hoover Dam. The bureau and the Interior Department feared an aerial attack. The War Department believed saboteurs would approach by land.

"There was always that tension between the War Department and what they thought was going on and the bureau and what they thought would happen," Hicks said.

The bickering ended on Dec. 7, 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and drew the United States into war. Within days, the bureau and the War Department laid out plans for heightened security. *The bureau closed the dam to all non-official visitors. Security checkpoints were set up on the roads leading to the dams from Arizona and Nevada.*

On Dec. 8, Interior Secretary Harold Ickes wrote to the Army seeking help. Within days, work had begun on guard posts, including the pillbox on the Arizona ridge.

Hicks said it's never been clear where the bureau or the Army found the design for the pillbox. It could have been an Army-issue blueprint, or it could have been laid out by the bureau, which supplied the manpower and the materials. A schematic of the box prepared by the National Park Service for a restoration project shows uneven wall sizes and angles, a design perhaps dictated by the location on top of the ridge.

Incomplete records suggest there was another guard post on the Nevada side of the dam, but Hicks said she's never found evidence of a similar structure. A map used the letters "MGN," for machine gun nest.

"We've never found the sister to this one," she said. "I'm thinking there was another location on the west side, near a switching yard, but it was probably more of a nest, maybe just something made with boulders."

The Army established a command post in the newly completed public exhibit building and stationed troops there, in the steep hills on either side of the dam and at the two security checkpoints.

For a year, Army soldiers manned the pillbox daily, watching for incursions along the canyon walls, from the rocky slopes, from Lake Mead, on the dam itself, and even from the Colorado River on the downstream side.

Nothing happened, even as the government grew more convinced the dam was a target. Sometime in late 1942 or early 1943, the Army left the pillbox. The bureau couldn't afford to hire more guards or buy enough ammunition and *so, after a year of operation, the post was abandoned.*

HIDING THE PAST

A few feet from the doorway into the pillbox, a boulder rests on a patch of the ridge, almost poised to block the structure's opening. And, for a while, it did.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Bureau of Reclamation and the National Park Service — which manages Lake Mead National Recreation Area — *decided to open the pillbox to the public as a historic site.*

The public behaved badly. Visitors defaced the walls inside with graffiti and left garbage on the floor. In 1982, someone hiked up the ridge and tore down a section of the rhyolite veneer. The concrete box, with its 13-inch-thick walls, was undamaged. “But the wall was lying in a big heap of rubble,” Hicks says.

The park service brought in a stonemason and restored the rock camouflage, employing the same masonry techniques and the same rock used to build the box in 1941.

The bureau decided enough was enough and closed public access. Someone rolled the big boulder into the doorway, cementing it in place, and there it sat for a while.

After a few years, the bureau considered reopening the box to visitors. The boulder was carefully moved out of the way. Hicks said a suggestion to blow it apart was rejected and the bureau decided it could be an interesting interpretive feature.

But visitor rules meant the bureau couldn’t just point the way up the ridge and post a sign at the top. The box was too close to the ridge and would need guardrails. The trail would not be accessible to disabled visitors and would require rebuilding.

And there were the snakes.

“What we would be doing was altering the setting too much,” Hicks says. “It wasn’t worth it. This is a neat, neat, neat thing that’s out here.”

What’s left are a lot of good stories. The German tourists. The Nazi fisherman. The canopy and the dummy dam. The Nazi sub.

The government scoffs at the wildest of the stories, although true believers still insist parts of the secret submarine were discovered near Yuma, that wreckage was hauled out farther upriver, that the bureau confiscated the remnants and has covered up the plot, possibly storing what was left somewhere deep in Lake Mead.

Hicks chuckles at the stories. There were secrets during the war, and some remain today. But the reality is, that neither the Germans nor the Japanese succeeded in attacking Hoover Dam or disabling its power plants. How close they got is not evident in the records. Whether the pillbox accomplished its mission is also a mystery.

There are hints at the security measures installed during the war. A fence below the dam. The nets above the dam.

In 2001, in the weeks following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the government established a security checkpoint on the Nevada side of the dam in the exact location where visitors were stopped after Pearl Harbor.

And the pillbox remains, solid as the concrete and the rocks it’s made of. It’s not open to the public. The door is always padlocked, the windows covered with wire that keeps out any interlopers except those of the small critter variety. It's not often noticed by the one million people who visit the dam each year.

If you see it, you’ll know. It’s hidden in plain sight.

Just in case you want to find it.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/PHOTOS

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, *no private vehicles were allowed on the road on top of the dam without a military escort during the rest of the war*. This escort was a jeep with a machine gun mounted on it.

All tours were canceled for the duration of the war.

Other sources have indicated that originally 4 pillboxes were protecting the dam and that three of those 4 were dismantled after the war. The remaining structure was stabilized and reinforced by The Bureau of Reclamation and the National Park Service in 2012. One site indicated that there were only 3, to begin with, and two were destroyed.

Panoramic view of the Dam from atop the pillbox shown in the lower left-hand corner of the PIC

Close-up of the pillbox

View with the pillbox/bunker on the right.

The Pillbox from the side

If you are interested in watching a video concerning this article, *please copy and paste the below link into your browser.*

https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/best-reads/2015/10/01/arizona-wwii-history-hoover-dam/32564733/

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