Fort Stevens may be a peaceful park today, but it was once an active military base and the target of a surprise World War II naval attack.

**Battery Russell**

Battery Russell was a later addition to a large military installation built in the 19th century to defend the mouth of the Columbia River. Fort Stevens, which dates back to the Civil War, protected the Oregon side of the river, while Fort Columbia and Fort Canby stood guard on the Washington side. Together, these three forts comprised the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia.

Battery Russell was constructed between 1903 and 1904 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the U.S. Army Coast Artillery Corps. It was one of nine concrete gun batteries (emplacements for cannon or heavy artillery) built at Fort Stevens to conceal and protect mounted guns from enemy ships. Battery Russell was named for Brigadier General David A. Russell, who served with the U.S. 4th Infantry Regiment in the Oregon Territory and commanded Fort Yamhill before he was killed in action during the Civil War.

Battery Russell was built separate from the other gun batteries at Fort Stevens clustered along the banks of the Columbia River. It faced the ocean to the south, expanding the network of artillery and the "triangle of fire." It was armed with two 10-inch "disappearing guns" whose barrels could retract from view into the gun pits to provide cover for soldiers while they reloaded. Each gun was manned by a team of 35 men. A well-trained gun crew could fire a 600-pound shell once every minute with an effective range of eight miles.

**Fire Control Hill and Squirrelsville**

Firing the guns at Battery Russell required gathering data from the stations located at either end of each base line. The two stations reported the target’s angle from their position to the plotting room, enabling the soldiers to use triangulation to aim. A number of base lines for guns on both sides of the Columbia River ended at Fire Control Hill, directly above Battery Russell.

Throughout the 1930s, Battery Russell was the practice battery for a coast artillery regiment with the Oregon National Guard. In September 1940, the unit was federalized; after receiving new training at nearby Camp Clatsop (now Camp Rilea), the regiment was moved back to Fort Stevens in February 1941. But it was only after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7th that Battery Russell was manned on a regular basis. Because it was some two miles from the main fort, primitive housing was hastily constructed for the gun crews in the wooded area behind the dune. This area was known as "Squirrelsville" to the soldiers who were rotated in and out every few days.

**Attack!**

At about 11:30 p.m. on the night of June 21, 1942, an imperial Japanese Navy submarine bypassed the entrance of the Columbia River. It was the I-25, a member of the I-class of long-range submarines dispatched to go after military targets and naval vessels along the western coast of the U.S. The sub surfaced just south of Fort Stevens about 10 miles offshore and began firing shells from its 5.5-inch deck gun in the direction of the fort.

Soldiers scrambled out of bed and raced to their posts. They located the submarine by its gun flashes, but were told to hold their fire. It’s unclear why the order was given—perhaps those on Fire Control Hill thought the sub was beyond the reach of the guns, or the harbor defense commander may have wanted to avoid revealing the precise location of the fort and the extent of its arsenal. It’s also possible that a conflict between the newly federalized artillery regiment and the officer in charge may have played a factor.

Fortunately, most of the I-25's shells landed harmlessly in isolated swamp and beach areas, although several did touch down near Battery Russell. A regional newspaper at the time said that the sub "perpered the Fort Stevens area... for approximately sixteen minutes" before it ceased firing, submerged, and retreated beneath the waves.

Soldiers reloading a 10" disappearing rifle from behind the parapet, or wall, of the battery.

*Photo of the 2nd Coast Artillery unit from Coos Bay that became part of the 249th Coast Artillery Corps of the Oregon National Guard.*

*A photograph of the I-15, a submarine from the same class as the I-25.*
Aftermath

The attack by the I-25 may have been in retaliation for “the Doolittle Raid,” a surprise attack on the Japanese home islands by American B-25 bombers两个月 earlier. All told, approximately seventeen shells were fired at Fort Stevens. A monument now marks the site where one of the shells landed along the road from DeLaura Beach to the fort, creating a five-foot crater. Although there were no casualties, and the shelling caused minimal damage to property, it alarmed local residents about the possibility of further attacks or even an invasion. Barbed wire was strung along the beach, including throughout the wreck of the _Potr Inland_, and civilian guards were assigned to patrol the coast.

With the attack, Fort Stevens saw its only wartime action. It also took on heightened historical significance; it became the first U.S. mainland military base to be fired upon by a foreign power since the War of 1812—at the time of the attack, a period of 130 years. It still holds that distinction. The I-25 went on to sink two U.S. freighters and launch aerial bombings of forested land in southern Oregon near Brookings. It was destroyed in 1943 in the South Pacific by an American warship.

Battery Russell Today

After 40 years of protecting the harbor, Battery Russell fired its last shells on December 29, 1944 in a closing ceremony as it was replaced by the more modern Battery 245 to the northeast. Shortly after World War II, all the guns at Fort Stevens were removed, and the property was turned over to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Battery Russell became part of Oregon State Parks in 1975.

Today, Battery Russell is visited by more than 170,000 people each year. It serves as both an artifact of early 20th-century U.S. military history and a reminder of past conflict. It is home to the Pacific Rim Peace Memorial, which is dedicated to the American and Japanese soldiers who were involved in the shelling of Fort Stevens and which calls for an everlasting peace between their two countries. The memorial was dedicated on June 21, 1992, the 50th anniversary of the attack. More than 150 veterans of the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia attended. In 2012, a ceremony was held to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the event.

A crater resulting from the shelling. Courtesy National Archives.

The guns at Battery Russell fired 10"-diameter shells that weighed approximately 628 pounds.