

Air Spotters of WWII

During the Second World War, the government established a network of civilian airplane spotters whose duty it was to thwart any Axis sneak attack such as had befallen us at Pearl Harbor. From lonely observation posts throughout the coastal defense areas, the Army Air Forces Ground Observer Corps, numbering about 1,500,000 volunteers, maintained a vigilant and continuous watch on the skies over America to see that no hostile plains approached unnoticed. This volunteer air defense system was set up by the Fighter Command with the assistance of the American Legion, the OCD and other agencies, and established a new pattern of scouting. It remained in place until advancing technology in radar made them no longer necessary.

The town of Kent, Connecticut is credited with being the first such post in America, established on December 8, 1941, and it became the model upon which the entire program was based. The observation posts were erected on a prominent hill or any rise that offered a degree of unobstructed view. Colebrook had two such posts, one atop Panorama Hill, manned by the U. S. Army, the other at the crest of Stillman Hill, just past present day house number 33. This structure still exists in town; it is the tool shed located in Eno Hill Cemetery.



Everyone from high school students to senior citizens made up the cadre that manned these observation posts around the clock. Spotters usually worked in pairs, 2 to 4 hours a week, and relayed observations by special telephone to the Army Information Center; in our case, it was Brainerd Field in Hartford. On fair weather days, the spotters relied upon their eyes, and on cloudy days or at night, their ears interpreted the situation. When the observers had to rely upon their ears, the ladies might turn to knitting, and

both men and women quite often played cards. There were decks of cards that featured all sorts of aircraft, both Allied and Axis that were studied until they were committed to memory.

I recall one session when I accompanied my father to the Stillman Hill observation post that I will never forget: It was a clear day, and not much was happening. Suddenly a growl of multiple engines was heard coming from the east (directly toward Colebrook Center). Next a low flying, large aircraft seemed to emerge from the tops of the forest, which turned out to be a B-17 Flying Fortress flying at treetop level. When we first realized what it was, the aircraft was actually lower than the summit of Stillman Hill, but about the time it passed over the Center, the pilot raised the nose just enough to clear the tops of the maple trees that bracketed the observation building. The tops of these trees were lashing back and forth by the prop wash from those powerful four engines, and the noise was deafening. My father was on the phone unsuccessfully trying to make himself heard above the din. In seconds the plane vanished in the general direction of Norfolk, and he was able to complete his transmission. I doubt that he had to report that the

elevation was “very low!” I will never forget the belly gunner looking down and laughing as he waved to me from just a few feet above those maples.

Forms were supplied on 3 by 5 cards having the following categories: Number of aircraft, (one, few, many); Type of airplanes, (single motor, multi motor); altitude of airplanes (very low, low, high, very high); were planes seen or heard? (check one); your observation post code name (Colebrook’s was Bertram 5-7); direction of aircraft from post (N, NE, E etc.); distance of aircraft from observation post, (estimate in miles); aircraft headed toward (give point of compass).

Before the card was made out however, the observer picked up the phone, which automatically connected with Hartford and reported such as this: “Flash, one, single, high, seen, Bertram 5-7, north, one half mile, east.”

Of course this plane would be reported by one station after another, and the Army was able to track any and all airborne planes anywhere within the covered area.

If you were lucky, while your tour of duty was underway, someone would drop by to bring cookies or something edible.

Only one time during the course of the war did a German aircraft fly into American airspace, and that was near the end of the war when an Army Air Force crew flew a captured German plane to Florida. Of course the military knew about this, but the civilian observers were kept in the dark, just to test their proficiency. Before the plane crossed from water to land, a spotter sent in an emergency message not only identifying it as a German aircraft, but also the correct make and model.

- Bob Grigg