Jim Ulmer, a former chief aircraft warning observer, revisits the small Elloree outpost from which he once scoured the skies for German planes.

Sentinels Of the Sky

In wartime, hundreds of trained volunteers scoured the heavens for enemy aircraft over South Carolina.

Article & Photos by W. Thomas Smith Jr.

It's difficult to imagine the town of Elloree, South Carolina, concerned about a possible enemy air attack during World War II. Elloree was then and remains to this day a sleepy little farming community west of Lake Marion in Orangeburg County. Even harder to imagine is that more than 100 men, women and teen-age boys and girls from this self-proclaimed "Charmingly Southern" township volunteered their time to scan the skies for incoming bombers and fighters emblazoned with swastikas. But that they did, from an isolated little wooden telephone shack in the middle of a broad field.

The Elloree volunteers weren't alone. The phone shack, dubbed "Uncle 282," was one of hundreds of aircraft observation sites—huts, towers, rooftops, upper floors of hotels, and at least one chair on top of a children's playhouse—where aircraft observers scanned the Carolina horizons for enemy planes through two wars and beyond. It was serious service, involving training in aircraft identification and reporting.

The task was fairly simple, but vital. Whenever an aircraft was heard, the observer scanned the skies in all directions. When the plane was spotted, the observer began penciling eight primary pieces of information about the sighting onto an Army "Flash Message" form. The information included:

Number of airplanes. This included a blank space for actual numbers. If the observer wasn't sure how many planes were above, he or she could circle the words "few" or "many."

Types of airplanes. Were they single-, dual- or multi-engine (specified as "motor" on the old Army form) aircraft?

Altitude of airplanes. Were they very low, low, high or very high?

Were the airplanes seen or heard?

Code name for the observation post. The code name for the "Uncle 282" post was "Mack 10."

Direction (approach) of airplanes from the observation post. If directly above the post, the observer was to simply report "overhead."

Distance of airplanes from the observation post. The "overhead" report would suffice, if necessary.

Direction airplanes were headed. The observer could omit this piece of information if he or she thought it might delay the report.

Once the form was filled out, the observer picked up the telephone and said, "Army Flash," then uttered the specific post phone number. When the operator connected the caller to the Army Information Center, the voice on the other end responded, "Army, go ahead, please."

At night it was not quite so easy, and observers often fell victim to the same vigilant jitters that have plagued sentries since the beginning of history—often with humorous results. Jim Ulmer, a former chief aircraft warning observer, recalls, "Milt Felder told me that he and another observer were watching one night and they kept hearing these motors and they of course couldn't see anything and they couldn't figure out what direction they were coming from. They were pretty sure that they were hearing airplanes, and they said, 'Gosh, somebody must be raidin' us.' "

The two observers reported what they were hearing, but were later embarrassed to discover the noise was nothing more than the sound of trucks barreling down old Highway 15. Other deceptive night noises included passenger buses and sounds from a nearby cotton gin.

"If the wind was right, the sounds would fool you," says Ulmer, an observer during the Korean War and through the mid-1950s. Ulmer's parents, who observed during World War II, often phoned sightings from the Elloree post to other civilian volunteers and military personnel in Charleston.

Had an actual enemy plane been sighted, the information dictated over the phone might well have been received by a teen-age plotter like Johnie Rivers. "We spotted and marked the sightings on a map," Rivers recalls. "They would call in the information. Then we'd stick a pin in a point on a large map spread out on a table exactly where those planes had been seen and reported. What the military people did with that information, I do not know."

Rivers, who then lived on Peachtree Street in Charleston, would catch the bus, alone, after working at the map post, and sometimes would not get home until 2 a.m. "A high school girl certainly

couldn't be expected to do that today," she says laughing.

Rivers' father was a civil defense volunteer. "He was a block captain, and I remember he always had a fire extinguisher," she remembers. "[In the event of an air attack] he was the one in charge of organizing and directing the people in the neighborhood."

Aircraft observation posts, no matter their location, were almost always manned 24 hours a day. Volunteer observers, alone or in twos, stood watch during two-hour shifts. It was boring, some say. All agree the occasional emergency report of a night-flying aircraft without onboard lights was "exciting."

In a collection of observer reminiscences, "Memories of Volunteer Observers," for the town of Elloree in 2003, former observer J.Y. Antley said, "Boys liked to serve with girls." Indeed, that dynamic would never change. Nor would the innocent dismissal, by playing children, of a man with binoculars looking for airplanes.

Retired Inman Mills employee J.L. Morrow remembers "the man" perched in a special observation box on top of the Morrow children's playhouse. "My dad built for us a 10-by-12 playhouse that was pretty sturdy," recalls Morrow, who grew up near Spartanburg. "On top of that little house, the civil defense people constructed a box where a man was always stationed with binoculars, a telephone and a chart displaying various aircraft silhouettes."

According to Morrow, the aircraft observer became a permanent fixture. "He was just a part of life. We would be playing in the playhouse and we'd see the man climbing up above us to look for airplanes."

Records are scarce, but it's known that thousands of observers manned posts throughout the Palmetto State, tens of thousands nationwide. Volunteers were organized under the Ground Observer Corps of the Aircraft Warning Service, U.S. Army Air Forces. They earned service certificates, in some cases "wings," and their mission was vital to the nation's defense.

In fact, the threat of an air attack on the continental United States was quite real. Most vulnerable were coastal states like South Carolina, where a handful of cities built along large rivers were separated by long stretches of sparsely populated back country—easily flown into and out of from the sea. Not to mention the fact that the Palmetto State has long served as home to a variety of key military bases and depots, excellent targets for enemy air-raid planners.

Nevertheless, on May 16, 1944, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson issued his death warrant to the Observer Corps. A portion of that notice reads: "The aircraft warning centers, at which so many of you have served and to which many others have reported as ground observers, are to be closed. The Aircraft Warning Service, on a reduced scale, will be absorbed into installations used for the training of fighter pilots."

Stimson added, "This does not mean that the War Department is of the opinion that all danger of enemy bombing has passed. On the contrary, a small-scale sneak raid is still within the capabilities of our enemies."

By Fall 1945, all observer units had been disbanded.

In 1950, when hostilities erupted in Korea, the observers returned briefly to their posts. The threat was not from the North Korean air force, but from nuclear-armed Soviet bombers in America's new Cold War. As late as 1956, observers participated in Exercise Sky Train X, an aircraft-warning training exercise conducted throughout North and South Carolina. The service was permanently disbanded soon thereafter.

Was there a legitimate fear of the U.S. mainland being attacked during World War II or the Korean War?

"Well, somebody must have thought so, especially during World War II when German submarines were operating off the South Carolina coast," Ulmer says. "An air attack then was certainly a real consideration. The military didn't know for sure, but just *watching* for enemy planes then was very much like what the military is doing today with satellites and high-flying reconnaissance aircraft."

A watchful eye is always the smart play, he adds, "particularly in our world after 9/11." ❖

W. Thomas Smith Jr. is a Columbia author-journalist whose work has appeared in various publications, including USA Today*,* George*,* U.S. News & World Report *and* BusinessWeek*. He is a columnist for* MilitaryWeek *and a frequent contributor to* National Review Online*.*

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