

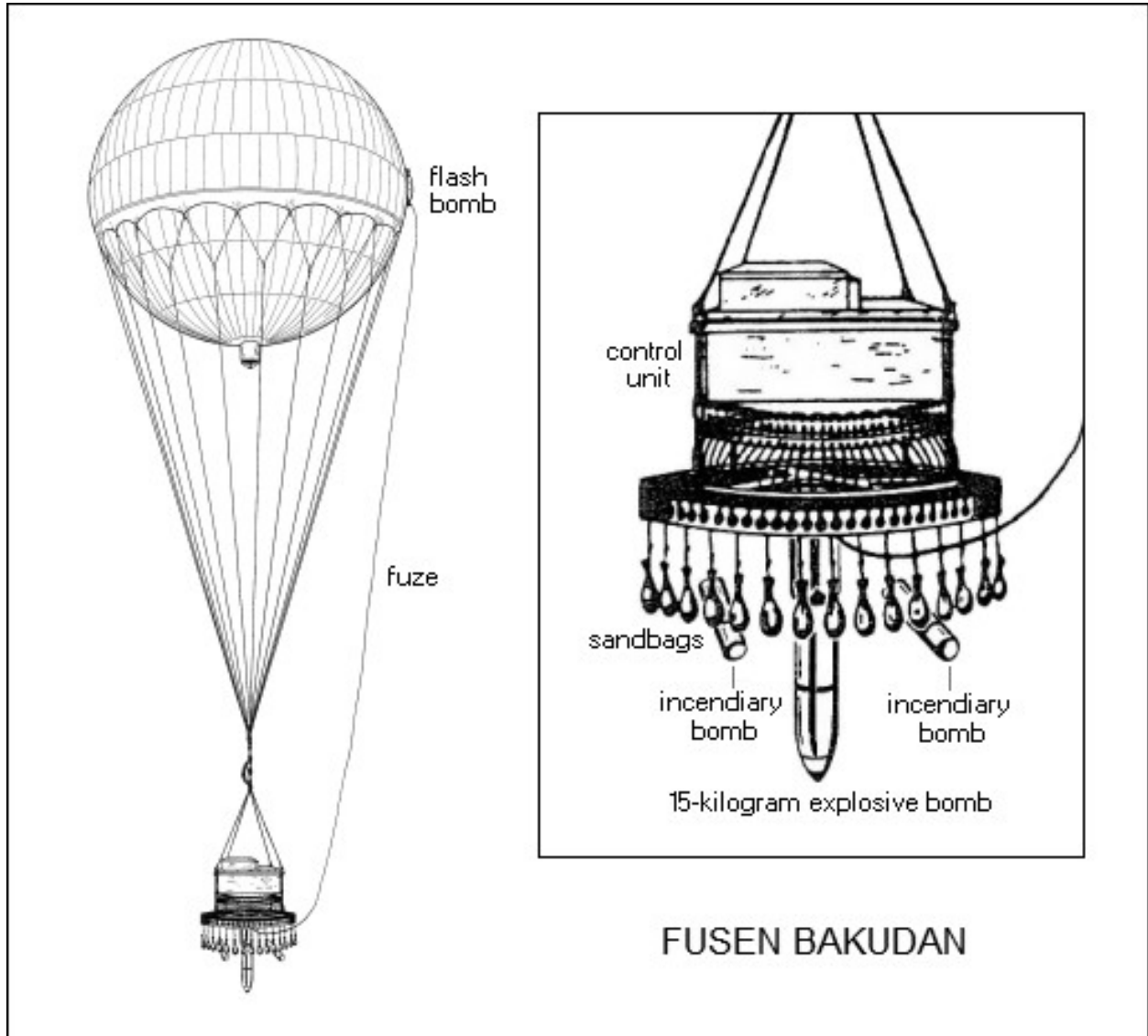
One in Nine Thousand

by Graham Brazier

When one thinks of this place, it's not often that the next thought is of the world's first intercontinental weapons system. But the two do have a fascinating connection. Though not one anywhere nearly as dramatic as "*The Comox Valley Record*" reported on February 8, 1995, in an item titled: "Denman Island bombed during Japanese air attack". It then went on to allege that "peaceful Denman Island was the target for an aerial attack by the Japanese armed forces in late 1944 and early 1945." Fake news, it seems, is not confined to south of the border, but also in vogue quite close to home; for simply put: Denman Island was not "the target" for Japan's innovative foray into the skies of North America in 1944 & '45!

To set the record straight; it was following Japan's defeat in the Pacific at the Battle of Midway in June of 1942, that Japanese military tacticians turned their imaginations to developing strategies that would threaten the west coast of North America without risking Japanese lives. They designed and built thousands, yes that's right, thousands, of, what were known as, balloon bombs (a.k.a. Fusen Bakudan, Fire Bombs, or Fu-go Bombs) which became the world's first intercontinental weapons system. They were designed with precision and hope that, upon release in Japan, they would follow the jet stream and arrive on the west coast in three to five days with their cargo of either high explosive bombs intended to kill or maim individual citizens, or incendiary bombs intended to ignite the forests wherever they landed.

Their dimensions were quite astonishing. The hydrogen-filled balloons were constructed of 4 ply washi paper which, according to some sources was fabricated by unknowing school children before being stretched over a sphere 33 feet in diameter with a chandelier housing the bomb, or, in some cases, bombs, suspended 70 feet below. If all went according to plan, the explosive or incendiary device would be triggered and ignited upon contact with the ground.



Of nine thousand balloons released from the shores of Japan in 1944, 285 were recorded as having landed on the soil of North America. Six deaths in Bly, Oregon and roughly two hundred forest fires were attributed to them and, though most were recovered unexploded in coastal locations between Mexico and Alaska, a few drifted as far east as Manitoba and Michigan. And one fell on Denman Island.

As it became entangled in a tree at the Komas Ranch near the north end of the island, neither of the pair of incendiary bombs it carried ignited and a forest fire was averted. This allowed several Denman residents to

photograph it, then to disentangle it and spread it out on the ground where they estimated it covered roughly a quarter of an acre. (For two photographs of the balloon bomb see Winnie Isbister's, *"My Ain Folk"*: pages 95 & 96.)

Many years later, events leading up to the entanglement were recalled by an unnamed veteran who "saw a balloon bomb floating by while having lunch in Royston, BC. He called the Royal Canadian Air Force at Comox and a P-40 [single engine, single seat fighter plane] forced it down on Denman Island. He later asked for a souvenir piece and was told there was no bomb. After he told them that HE was the one who had reported it, they told him it was already crated to go to Ottawa." (1)

As the veteran implied, there was a concerted effort by the governments of both Canada and the United States to deny or, at least, downplay the existence of the balloon bombs in order to discourage the Japanese government from continuing to manufacture and release them. Also, as implied by the unnamed veteran, the chandelier that housed the Denman Island bomb was crated up and sent to Ottawa where it eventually became part of a collection housed by the Canadian War Museum. Years later it was returned to the west coast in the custody of the Comox Air Force Museum where it was restored and is currently on display at CFB Comox.

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(1) <https://forums.gunboards.com/showthread.php?374751-Balloon-Bomb-Found>