



Chapter 10

Life? on Amchitka

We all pitched in, no matter what the task was, and soon everything was taking shape — sort of. More personnel were arriving on the island each flight and contractor personnel were beginning the construction. We had a good contractor, a joint-venture of Holmes and Narver Construction Co. and Morrison-Knudsen Construction Co. As you would expect, not everything went just right, but I'll have to say their overall performance under the circumstances the island presented, and the crash time for completion, was quite acceptable. Liquidated damages were quite high on each bid item of our contract — this is a great tool to improve time and performance.

Before I jump ahead too far, let me get back to our base camp. There were no women on the island, only men — for obvious reasons.

One of the most "interesting" huts we had was the latrine hut. It's hard to find the proper words to explain this hut — so bear with me as I endeavor to give you a picture of remote living in Alaska, without getting too graphic (which I detest as much as you do).

When this temporary camp was constructed, no septic tank nor laterals were built. Building on tundra and peat moss requires considerable changes in construction practices. Obviously, certain wastes required disposal. Perhaps if we think back to our childhood, or stories we might have heard of early American living where the little house with the quarter

moon in the door was the accepted design, we can better understand the latrine hut we had — but not quite. Our hut was a three seater, but this doesn't picture it too well either. At one end of the latrine hut there was about a two-foot step up, to an elevated "shelf" where the three seats were situated. This put our heads rather close to the ceiling — sort of a balcony, or maybe a stage from the other direction. Now this is an unusual arrangement, but let me continue. (We did have "store-bought" toilet seats).

Outside at the back of the building hopefully located directly under each toilet seat was a 55 gallon metal drum used in lieu of a septic tank. These were hauled off (no, this was not part of the duties assigned to the Administrative Section), to a disposal area being developed for a new camp we were to build. They were then cleaned, and returned for the next day's production. They would always miss hauling off a very important part of it — the odor. It stayed with us — throughout the hut. This was good training ground for lowering the lid on the toilet seat — though not everyone learned.

Now picture yourself elevated some four feet in the air, perhaps having conversation with a couple of your fellow workers, taking care of the necessities of life in this position. Sound awful? It's not over yet. (Thank the good Lord, there were never any reports of homosexuals on the island, — please sympathize with the military today if you will.) As bad as that may sound — you ain't heard nuttin yet.

This same open hut also had a string of five or six lavatories in a row down the middle of the hut as you came in the door. If you shaved, or washed your hands and face, this was the place. These lavatories were backed up to their opposite side by an open shower sufficient to accommodate three or four at a time — no doors anywhere.

I'll bet you thought it couldn't get worse — but it does. We residents of Amchitka now had a place to shave, shower, and (I'll let you supply your own word). But, in order for us to present a well groomed front, there was still another requirement — a haircut.

You guessed it, in the little spot left in the middle of the hut, just outside the opening where the showers were, and directly "below" the three-seater, was a barber's chair. A barber was there certain hours on certain days, to take care of this remaining necessity. One barber,

who cut your hair the way he wanted to, not necessarily the way you wanted him to.

There were times when you might require one of these facilities, and be faced with two or three of the toilet seats occupied, someone getting a haircut, maybe three or four shaving, and a shower full of naked men — all in one hut at one time. No matter how modest you might be, there were no alternatives — and, these were all requirements. So we just did what we had to do — everyone else did too.

Before I leave the latrine hut, I need to mention that hot water was almost non-existent. After a few days of trying to shave and shower in ice water (it felt like), I learned that I could take care of these chores in the middle of the morning or afternoon, and just maybe have enough "warm" water to survive in. Sometimes the latrine hut was even empty then. Necessity mandates adaption.

Next I need to mention our "mess hall" — another plywood hut. Before I go any further, let me comment on the food we had. I expect you could eat in any restaurant claiming the most well-known chefs in the world, and I doubt that you would get better prepared food than we had. Every week we would have steak, roast, chicken, pork chops, ham, and on holidays special dishes. On Thanksgiving we had the works — turkey, ham, and even the whole pig roasted with an apple in his mouth. Every meal was tops, and the quality of the food was the very best. The idea behind this was if anyone would go to a location such as Amchitka to work, the least they could do was to provide good food and plenty of it.

I failed to mention the goodies which were kept constantly before us. Sweet rolls, doughnuts, pies, cakes, brownies, and yes, creme puffs were within a few steps of all workers at any time of the day or night. Tables were piled high with juices, milk, soft drinks, but no alcoholic beverages this trip, though some made their way to the island in suitcases. There was much pride in all the cooks, and they loved to see us eat.

We ate on "re-claimed" picnic tables and as the camp grew, these became very close together. We were served by the catering contractor (who also did our laundry, and cleaned our rooms and offices). There was no limit to how much or what we ate — the quantity was

always more than we could possibly eat. It was noticed that *some* waistlines were growing on residents of Amchitka. Certainly, you don't suspect me, do you? I have remained *almost* the same weight I was when discharged from the Navy in 1946.

One incident began in our mess hall early in this tour. I expect we had about 20 or 25 personnel on the island by this time. For the duration of this test, Amchitka was considered to be a military base. There will be more about this later, but at this time we had an Army Captain who was the acting military commander of the camp. He was later replaced by a Naval Captain — a sad mistake. This Captain didn't appear to be too bad a sort, but something must have happened between him and the one employee I had in the Administrative Section, an Industrial Property Assistant. I really don't know who did what, or if anything was actually done at all. My employee was a retired Master Sargent — maybe just military jealousy, or left overs from past experience — I don't know.

On this particular morning we were all at breakfast — all talking at once — and from all appearances everything was well with everyone. All of a sudden my employee began cursing the Captain at the top of his voice, for an extended period, then picked up a knife and started swinging it around. He then jumped on top of the table, walked to the aisle still yelling as loud as he could, jumped to the floor, then out the door. I was never able to distinguish any of the words he was saying, and still don't know what the problem was. He had a small trail bike to pursue his duties on the island, — jumped on this and rode off. As you might expect, a hush fell over all of us, but we recovered soon, finished our breakfast and started to work. There was no place my employee or anyone else could go — this was an island — a few miles of roads, then only tundra.

Two or three hours later he came into the office, sat down at a typewriter (this was now a two typewriter office), wrote out his resignation and threw it on Col. Barwick's desk. His appearance didn't indicate that he was in much better shape now than he was at breakfast. There was no one else around the office at this time but the Colonel and me — I wished there had been a whole army there about then or, that I was back in Oklahoma. The Colonel

wasn't much bigger than me — the ex-sergent outweighed either of us by 60 or 70 pounds. I am totally dedicated to peace myself, and wished that everyone was — particularly ex-master sergeants.

Col. Barwick asked him to sit down. He wanted to talk with him, but he responded that he just wanted to resign, go back to Anchorage, and be through with the government completely. By speaking calmly to him, Col. Barwick finally convinced him to sit down and talk.

Now that was alright with me, but as soon as he sat down, my good friend the Colonel, called me to his office also. This was about the same time I was wishing I was back in Oklahoma, but by mustering up my courage I entered and sat down as calmly as I could. Col. Barwick handed me his resignation request he had just typed. It was almost incoherent — hardly anything spelled correctly, and in most instances not even in sentences. I couldn't determine from his writing the reason he wished to resign. It took a while before anything nearing coherency took place, and not too much then.

After several minutes of calmly talking with him, we all agreed that we would tear up the resignation, put him on the plane to Anchorage *that day*, and allow him to decide what he wanted to do when back in the familiar surroundings of Anchorage. Colonel Barwick assured him that he would never keep anyone on the island that didn't want to be there. I think we were all relieved by this decision. Later I learned he had left the government — I don't know what ever happened to him. This was not the last incident we had on Amchitka with someone going beserk.

This Industrial Property Assistant was replaced by a man from Chicago, who served out the duration of this project in good shape. We became good friends by the time we closed down camp at the end of the project.