

## Chapter 13

### A Little More Leisure

It was just an old rusted canister, maybe three and one-half feet long by some fifteen - sixteen inches in diameter, half buried in silt. I had walked over it several times, stepping on it as I did. This was at the top of a seventy-five foot bluff facing a small cove on the Pacific Ocean side of the island, near its eastern point. It was almost accessible by vehicle — no tundra to cross — so I made several trips to view the "scenery" from there.

This time I was with my good friend John Reynolds. When he came to the island he brought a 22 caliber target pistol with him (this was later taken away from him and sent back to Anchorage). This time, as we approached the canister while maybe sixty or seventy feet away, he decided to do some target practice — shooting several times with the bullets just glancing off its side.

Later we learned this was a "live" 500 pound bomb that had failed to explode when dropped on Amchitka during World War II. When we got some demolition experts on the island they gathered up "lots" of live ammunition including this bomb, transported it to a remote area and detonated them all at once. Quite a bang! What if . . . ?

Another incident with "live" ammunition took place one day as I was working at my desk. Just outside the building adjacent to where I was sitting, a motor grader was working on the road. I heard a lot of shouting all of a sudden — the work stopped, and people were hollering

back and forth — a lot of excitement going on.

My curiosity got the best of me so I stepped outside my office door and within ten feet of where I was sitting at my desk, the motor grader had graded up *three live mortar projectiles*.

These were crated away and the demolition crews did their thing — again, quite a bang.

What if . . . ?

On our next trip to Amchitka for the "big ones" described in Part III, whole buildings full of live ammunition were found on the northwest end of the island.

Before we wander too far from the cove where the bomb was, let me relate another occasion when John Reynolds and I were there — another storm. This time the winds were coming from the Pacific Ocean side of the island — again extremely strong. I was bundled up in my parka the best I could and still freezing. You can't believe the "chill factors" we experienced on this island.

We walked near the seventy-five foot cliff I mentioned before, and watched the surf climb over the top. The cove was facing the wind, and was shaped in the form of a funnel. No matter, anytime a surf climbs a seventy-five foot cliff, you have some heavy weather.

One day the story passed through camp that a Japanese whaler had harpooned a whale off the north shore of Amchitka. We assumed that at the time they harpooned it, there wasn't enough time for them to "process" their kill, so they placed a homing radio inside its mouth, tied it up to the rocks on the shore of the island, with intentions of returning for it the next night. One of the employees on Amchitka found it while "beach combing", and took the homing radio as his prize for the day. This left a seventy foot long whale to rot on the beach.

In Oklahoma there were very few occasions to walk up to a whale — though some of our catfish were quite noteworthy. But since I was in Alaska instead of Oklahoma, I decided I would go see this giant mammal. There was just one problem — to get there you had to walk across a good mile and a half of tundra, then climb down a sixty or seventy foot bluff, then walk back across the tundra to return to camp. I was in my prime, and hadn't I walked the

thirty mile round-trip in Anchorage to see the earthquake damage?

The next morning several of us, John Reynolds, my friend who worked in my branch, and several others started to cross the tundra. I am smaller than some of my co-workers were, so I had to lift my feet higher to clear the tundra for the next step. That statement was just to get your sympathy for what I went through to make this trip.

On the way there, we starting noting that our group was getting smaller and smaller. My employee fell out after about half a mile and was left — at his request — to make his way back to solid ground on his own. On we went, and when we finally got there, there was only six or seven of us left. I made it!

We took our pictures, and several were able to extract a tooth for a souvenir. I didn't try for one — I wouldn't have known what to do with it anyway.

I must tell you that if you ever have an occasion to go look at a dead whale — don't. The odor was so intense I can still imagine it even today. Only two other occasions have I been so totally consumed with odors — first, while in Kotzebue where sea lions and walruses were killed, dragged up on the beach and left to rot (I'll talk of this in Part III). The other time was at our church when skunks intruded the heating and air conditioning ducts one winter to make their home — they won, and we had to dismiss church until they exited. No volunteers were found to go after them.

We made it back to camp, very tired, but with something to talk about for the rest of our lives — and pictures too.