

Chapter 16

Pack-up Time

As soon as the shot was over many of the personnel on the island left. We were now on a program to secure everything and close down the island. Most of the analysis of the shot would take place in the lower 48.

The hole was permanently capped and several individuals autographed the concrete while wet. We later took our turn standing on the concrete cap to have our pictures made — if for no other reason, just to prove we were there.

There were a few insignificant "cracks" in the ground for a mile or so around ground zero. Air monitoring equipment was set up strategically everywhere there was any possibility of a "leak", but none were found.

The new camp we built had been sold to a contractor who would move it to Adak after our departure, to house his own workers. The PX, mess hall, and "hospital" buildings were to be left in place, but secured to survive the intense storms of the winter. I would later live in the hospital building.

Curiosity of finding any cracks or damage to the landscape of the island caused many of us to walk around the area to different places. One of the best indicators a place should be visited, was if there was some sort of a road or a walkable trail instead of having to walk across the tundra to it. Just above the shot area on the Bering Sea side of the island was a favorite place to go — an area of easy access to forty foot bluffs with a small beach area at

their base.

Dick Caselle was our architect — a very friendly young man from Boston. He and I would hike around the island a good bit together and we became good friends. He was determined that while working in Alaska he would make his fortune — return to Boston a wealthy man, then marry and settle down, starting his own business. He *saved* almost everything he earned, and I expect he probably made his goal. I lost contact with him after the project.

He and I were at the point of these bluffs one day when we spotted a ptarmigan in the grass very close to us. The ptarmigan is of the grouse family — a fair size bird, and I understand very tasty, although I never got to try one. One of their characteristics is the ability to camouflage themselves. They become white in snow, and in the case where we saw this one, it was colored exactly the same as the tundra. I had my movie camera and decided I would get a good picture of this one in the wild. Although I walked to within five or six feet of it with my movie camera running, when I look at the film, it is almost impossible to find it — its camouflage was so great.

You remember I mentioned the contractor electrician? He vowed not to shave until he left the island — a vow he honored to the end. He produced a beard down almost to his waist — salt and pepper grey, clean but l-o-n-g. We got to know him as "Harry" — a natural name because of his beard. Then the time came — a ticket to go home, time to shave, get a haircut, and all the other things forgotten while on the island. He shaved, and it looked as if he had become entangled with a wildcat and lost the fight — and then no one recognized him. Perhaps at home they did.

Our own crew of the Corps of Engineers was also getting smaller after each flight out. I stayed until the last — you know, the paper must go on. Then we were all packing up getting ready to leave soon.

One of our employees — a young engineer just getting started — was a very conservative sort. A lot of "spare" materials were to be left on the island as not worth the value of their

salvage when shipped by air freight to Anchorage. One of items that was determined to not be economically salvagable, was some storage batteries — uh-oh!

Think what you would do if you saw twenty or thirty brand new storage batteries (already filled with battery acid) being deserted on an island. All you would have to do is to crate them up with plywood which was also to be left behind, label them as personal property, and ship them back to Anchorage with your own luggage. Seems logical, doesn't it? This he did, including labelling the box with "This Side Up". All should have worked well, except . . .

The weight of the box was pretty heavy. The airline was not a freightline — all shipments had to be handled by the pilot, co-pilot, and the flight engineer. So, the easiest way to load and unload anything was (they thought) the best way. It's easy to see that a carton this size and weight should be "rolled" to its place where it would be secured in the airplane for its journey to Anchorage. So roll it they did — even with the label "This Side Up" showing plainly.

One problem. All the battery acid spilled out of the batteries onto the floor of the airplane. Bubbling, hissing, liquid caught their attention quite soon. The pilot immediately had someone find the shipper to identify what was smelling like rotten eggs and discoloring the metal and disintegrating their carpet. What would happen to the wiring and controls just under the floor of the airplane if . . . ?

Our poor boy arrived and properly identified the battery acid creeping throughout the DC-6. How much would they bill him for one twenty year old DC-6? Needless to say, the pilot and crew all lost their good natures — but there wasn't time to stop and lynch our employee just then. They really wanted to fly the airplane back to Anchorage — not abandon it there on Amchitka.

Solution? With the *assistance* of our employee, and others who pitched in, they got out their tool kit, dismantled the floor of the airplane in this area (but first removed the batteries from the plane), then began cleaning it up. Each piece was taken off the plane, washed intensively, rinsed, then dried. The plane was then rebuilt, and flew off some four or five hours later for Anchorage — without the storage batteries.

In the final analysis — after many discussions between the airline and our employee, they finally let him off the hook *because* he had labeled the box "This Side Up", and they had failed to follow the label. They also pointed out the shipment of corrosive materials was required to be in an approved container — the storage battery was not one. I would have to say the airline was very lenient in this case.

No further incidents occurred while closing down the camp.

When we finally cleared out, there were only two contractor employees left on the island to keep the remaining buildings from disintegrating during the winter — a carpenter whose home was in Norway, and an eskimo. A State of Alaska Game And Fish Department employee who was on a prolonged study of sea otters and other wild life on the island also stayed to continue his studies.

Back to Anchorage.