Chapter 28

Amchitka...Continued

Back on Amchitka was the beginning of the end of my stay in Alaska. A few more incidents occurred which were significant – to me at least – which I'll recite for you as best I can. Some things are extremely hard to find the proper words to relay the feelings associated with them. One such incident very nearly cost me my life. After all these years I still have a queasy feeling every time I think of it. Sometimes at night I wake up thinking about it.

I believe I have already mentioned the helicopters we had on the island. Their body style gave them the name of banana – you know, the ones with two big rotars, one on each end, with a bent body – used for transporting troops or freight in the military. Their purpose on the island was for emergencies, as well as at shot time, they were to evacuate to the air those last few who were necessary to be on the island at the time of detonation. Their pilots and crews were required to log so many hours of flying time and maintenance – making several flights a week available to any employee of the government who could get his name on the flight manifest – I, being one who did, along with John Reynolds and several others on this particular flight.

So, I grabbed my camera just like any other tourist on Amchitka, climbed aboard, and off we went. A six foot door along the side of the body was left open with only a two inch webbed strap hooked across it from side to side. Benches ran up and down either side of the body of the helicopter, so I sat just opposite the open door, thinking I could snap more prize photos

from there than anyone else. (I did get some pretty good ones.)

One other thing about the helicopter was the noise level. If you've ever flown in one you can appreciate the fact that in order to be heard you had to yell at the top of your voice, and sometimes even then you couldn't be heard.

As I became more accustomed to our flight – about 2500 feet – I more readily would jump up from my seat and go to the open door to snap a picture. I was able to get one shot which I believe would be a prize winner if ever entered in competition – the Pacific Ocean meeting the Bering Sea at East Point – from about fifty feet high, looking almost straight down at the churning water.

Further on into the flight, someone had noticed the shadow of our helicopters moving across a barren stretch of land almost below us, and suggested I might like a shot of that. I agreed it would be nice, so to the open door I went – shot the picture – then; before I could move back from the door, the pilot of the helicopter banked hard to the left, forcing me into the webbed belting. The G-force was sufficient to where I couldn't pull away. I was scared! The belt just hooked in place and I didn't know how much pressure it would take to snap the hook. If the belting went, I went!

I hollered at the pilot but he couldn't hear me – he was wearing radio earphones. I hollered at John Reynolds, a 200 pounder, who I thought might grab my belt and at least hold me from falling out, but he couldn't hear me either. No one heard me. A 2500 foot fall was not in my planned schedule.

Well, the webbed strap did hold, obviously; and as soon as the pilot changed course I sat down, buckeled up, and forgot about pictures for the rest of that day at least. Never again will I stand in an open doorway of a helicopter – unrestrained.

One other incident on this same flight kinda shook me up also.

It seems the helicopter pilots were required to practice quick descent landings – and chose this same day to perform a "doozie". We were cruising along at about 2500 feet just over the end of the runway, when all of a sudden we began to fall almost straight down. (I was

sure glad I wasn't standing in the door at that time.) Down we went – until it seemed a crash was inevitable, when suddenly we leveled off just before touching the runway on all wheels, just the way he was supposed to do it. The best way I could describe the fall and landing would be what I think a free fall in a parachute might be – it opening just before you touched ground. (I have never jumped in a parachute, so I am guessing.)

The moral of this incident is – when riding in a helicopter, sit down in your seat, buckle up, and take your pictures through a window.

Our mail service to Amchitka was limited to the ability of airplanes to fly in the Aleutian Island weather – and then no more than two to four flights a week would show up – many times less. Most of our mail could have been delayed a couple of weeks with no harm done – but, some might be important and require immediate action.

We also had direct radio contact with both Anchorage and Las Vegas – so generally, we were pretty comfortable with our communications. However, no communication is better than the one initiating it. On this particular incident, much was left to be desired.

One more disaster was averted – *only because it did not happen.* People heard from us about this "goof-up". A significant earthquake occurred near Japan 1500 miles to our southwest, one Friday evening. A tsanami warning was issued for the Aleutian Islands – to be alert for a possible extensive title wave some time Friday night. (They travel across open water at approximately 500 miles per hour.) Our camp was only about 50 feet elevation, and there was evidence that tsanamis in the past had left driftwood up to two to three hundred feet elevation. The AEC office in Las Vegas was notified, but I guess their reaction was that since they were safe in Las Vegas – no further action was required. We had twenty-four hour radio contact with them, but no one thought to call us.

Anyway, the next Tuesday we received a copy of the warning in our regular mail – many hours after we would have all been washed out to sea, if the tsanami had developed.

I think I must tell you about the great sea otter harvest on Amchitka.

Having transported several hundred sea otters by plane both to the southern coast of Alaska, and the northern coast of California – it was still determined by those who were supposed to know, that the waters of Amchitka were still very heavily overpopulated.

In the early part of the 20th century, sea otter pelts were considered the prime fur in the world, and they were trapped almost to the point of extinction. I believe they became protected by treaty world wide; at least the Alaska Game and Fish Department protected them while we had our shots on Amchitka.

Permission was granted by whoever grants permission to harvest sea otters, to kill up to 1,000 otters for their hides. This was rather a gruesome sight – their meat is very red, resembling cat meat. The hides were harvested and processed. In what the state of Alaska hoped to be a big sale, wasn't quite as successful as they had expected. I believe the price was not nearly as high per pelt as they had anticipated. I heard later that the fur was so thick, it made the coats heavy – the quality they wanted during the days of the flapper, but not nearly as acceptable in the sixties.

While we are on sea creatures, let me mention that our friends on the University of Washington boat who took us to Semisopochnoi, also provided us – from time to time – with enough Alaska King Crabs to feed our camp. I was able to see them as they took them from their traps, and boy, that's some crab. Their legs reach, I'm sure, up to four feet across. I learned to enjoy the crab salad a great deal – in fact, I wish I had some right now.

Two hundred and twenty-five miles to our east, on Adak Island, was a King Crab processing plant. Several of the employees on our island when traveling to Anchorage or Seattle would call ahead before their plane left and order crab. The airplane would be met in Adak with a ten pound box of frozen crab – at a much reduced price than they would have had to pay in Anchorage or Seattle. They were well packaged, and would remain frozen for the trip o.k.

One other fish incident, then we will move onto something else.

One of the employees on Amchitka was fishing off the dock at the staging area on Amchitka, and caught a 300 lb. halibut – not the usual place to catch them, I understand. He's probably still telling his grandchildren about this. They are very delicious to eat, but I was surprised to see how they look. Black on top with two eyes sticking out of their head, and white on bottom. They are better to eat than to look at.

John Reynolds was always looking for some way to aggravate someone – anyone. He added that spark which kept us on our toes all the time.

We had a carpenter on the island – a Norwegian, but he was given the name of "Swedelander". He was a very nice, friendly boy who would do anything for you. He made extra shelves for my room, also made boxes to ship my stereo equipment in, when I left the island, among other things.

But, he couldn't stand "hippies". The mere mention of "hippies" or "flower child", would set him off. I must say, I fit into the same mold, but we are not talking about me, are we?

John Reynolds returned to the island after his monthly turn around tour to Anchorage. With devilment in mind, he brought a package of very colorful flower blossom decals found on many questionable cars during that time in history – all with the intent in mind to compliment our carpenter's pickup. If this also changed his disposition a bit, John would laugh about it, then patch things up. Sure enough, catching the pickup parked one night, he plastered it all over with flowers.

At first our friend was ma.a.a.d..., but, then he caught the spirit of the joke and when Mr. Reynolds offered to remove them from the pickup, he refused and left it as it was.

In all of Amchitka, he had the only government pickup sporting a wide variety of eight to ten inch flowers in many florescent colors. When I left the island, you could spot Ott's pickup anywhere you could see it by the flowers on it.

Somewhere along about here, I completed my contract with the Alaska District, Corps of Engineers, and went home to Oklahoma on a turn around contract – signing up for another

year of duty in Alaska.

Coming back from a couple of weeks leave, I happened to notice on the bulletin board in the Personnel Office in Anchorage, that they were advertising for Contract Specialists in the Huntsville Division Office, of the Corps of Engineers in Huntsville, Alabama. I gave permission to the Alaska District Office to send my name to them, and after returning to Amchitka within just a few days, the Huntsville Office requested my transfer and off I went on a permanent change of station. Of course, this required me paying the government back for my turn around contract transportation.

I now had a replacement employee – up from the lower 48 – who had completed one 30-day tour on the island – a boy who seemed quite capable.

The radio call from the Anchorage District Office came about 10:00 a.m. on the day of one of our scheduled flights, and they requested that I be on that plane. It's arrival time was approximately 2:00 p.m. which gave me only four hours packing time before I was to leave.

Our carpenter friend made boxes to pack my stereo equipment in, and I started trying to get things ready to leave. It became obvious in a couple of hours that I needed much more time to get everything ready. My turn around replacement was on the plane and this would leave one of us without a bed if I didn't get off the island.

A little after noon, our Corps of Engineers rotating chief, Ellis Morgan, radioed from Anchorage and made me an offer for my stereo equipment, to just leave it in my room and that he would find it when he came back to the island in a couple of weeks.

I accepted his offer, caught the plane at the last minute, and left Amchitka – I assume – forever.