Chapter 8

The Aleutian Islands

We were off on an entirely new adventure. Flying out of Anchorage on a Reeves Aleutian Airline DC-6, across the Cook Inlet, we ventured out over the Chigmit Mountain Range paralleling the banks of Cook Inlet. These mountains were very rugged, and completely covered with snow and ice. Glaciers were noted several times as we proceeded south and west from Anchorage. Some 150 miles or so southwest of Anchorage we passed a volcano island in the middle of Cook Inlet, puffing smoke just the way they are supposed to. This was my first view of an active volcano, but then another 100 miles or so we flew over the Katmai National Monument – this is referred to as the "Valley of 10,000 Smokes". Further on out the Aleutian Island Chain – on another trip – we flew very close to the smoke stack of a venting volcano which I got some very close up pictures of.

Something I need to emphasize now, about our flights to Amchitka and return – is that on almost every flight, all or most of the way, we flew above the clouds. Of course there were breaks allowing us to glimpse areas occasionally. Only one time did I fly this trip with a clear unobstructed view. I will give a mile by mile description of this trip later. This time (my first trip) was almost entirely above the clouds, and when on the ground, it was very bleak. How much can you say about clouds and mountains.

My first real clue to "life" on the Aleutian Island Chain was when we landed at Cold Bay,

Alaska; and this was still connected to the mainland – not an island. I would guess this was 700 or more miles from Anchorage – we had been flying a long time.

The air terminal and a few scattered buildings seemed to be most all there was to the community. The terminal was a small building with ticket counter, coffee pot, rest rooms, and not much else. We parked on an apron and walked in a mist or drizzle, through puddles of water to the terminal.

Here, as on any of the remote locations, the landing of an airplane is a big event. It represents a connection to the outside world, which is a very valued and sought after occasion. Mail arrives, items in low supply are delivered, and the occasion to talk with someone different, represents a break in the day to day monotony. Most remote communities have a movie house, and a town house which are heavily used. Community functions fill a big part of their leisure time.

After about an hour on the ground at Cold Bay, we started the next leg of our journey down the chain. When we could see through the clouds, we would note that some of the islands, were mere rocks sticking up through the surface of the ocean – sometimes not appearing to be any larger than a small car, and perhaps just breaking the surface of the water. Others were large mountains – some close together, and others miles apart. We were told that navigation through these islands required a master seaman. The weather *and* the submerged islands restricted shipping (usually limited to ocean going barges) to just a few months during the summer. Heavy seas are evident all winter long, in fact about nine months of the year.

We also noted on another island, that a runway matt had been left since World War II. These matts were open faced steel mesh such as expanded metal only flexible which had been rolled out on a smooth place – wherever found – to enable pilots to set down their planes when overtaken by inclement weather. They could sit the weather out – as we explained about the small plane airstrips near Portage Glacier. When the weather cleared, they could make another attempt to get back to home base.

We heard several stories about fighter planes taking off on short missions during World

War II, the weather would "close in," ceilings would drop to zero, and whole squadrons would simply fly until they ran out of gas, crash into the sea and be lost. More than one of these stories centered around Amchitka which was home to 40,000 military personnel during that period. There were crashed planes, unexploded bombs, and other mementos of the war on Amchitka which we will mention later.

Next was Adak, now some 1100 to 1200 miles out of Anchorage. Adak was an active Naval Base, and also had some native population. Fisheries were operating in season and this was where most of the Alaskan King Crab was processed we understood. But, mainly it was Navy and communications. While on Amchitka, on quite a few occasions when Japanese and Russian trawlers would encroach into U.S. territorial waters near Amchitka, a plane from Adak would buzz them and we would see them moving back.

The Captains who were in command of the Adak Naval Facilities were not always as neighborly as they might have been. I'll refer to two occasions here, then pass on down the chain to Amchitka.

On one occasion a Reeves Airline plane returning to Anchorage was denied landing and refueling on Adak. This created a very hazardous situation. Alternate airports are hundreds of miles away. It was my understanding that the Navy had contracted with the airline to refuel flights out the Aleutian Island Chain. The geography and distances must be understood, to generate an accurate picture. From Anchorage to Attu is nearly 2000 miles. Most flights out the chain proceed all the way to Attu, and at times will make a side trip north to the Pribilof Islands some 500 miles round trip up into the Bering Sea. Refueling is mandatory.

This occasion drew lots of attention – as the Reeves airline pilot filed a report when landing in Anchorage stating he "landed with zero fuel". I believe the Adak Captain was required to spend several days with the Commandant in Seattle, explaining his actions this time. I never heard of any "punishment" occurring but I suggest his pants might have been threadbare when he came back. This left we, who were working on Amchitka, with a little apprehension about the Navy – and I hold an Honorable Discharge from the Navy dated

1946. What changed?

The other incident occurred a year or so later, and may have been another Naval Captain in command at that time. We will talk about the weather out the Aleutian Island Chain later, but let me say here so we may better understand this, that there were periods when we couldn't get a plane in to Amchitka for 10 days to 2 weeks at a time -- there were some very hazardous landings even then. If you have never spent time in areas such as this, imagine the most horrible weather you can, then think much worse.

On another trip out from Anchorage they arrived at Adak with the report that all airports further on out the Aleutian Islands were closed because of the weather. In this case, the Reeves Airlines had contracted with a local construction contractor to provide rooms to accomodate crew and passengers in just such an emergency as this. Once again the Commanding Officer allowed then to land, but would not allow anyone -- crew or passengers -- to de-plane. I believe they had to stay on the airplane sitting on a parking apron for some 12 - 14 hours before they received a favorable weather report to proceed their flight. I never heard of any explanation to this event. Perhaps there was, -- I hope so.

I was fortunately not on either of these flights, but it remained in my mind that these kinds of actions might well cause a crash some day, or some medical problem. I must admit I have not heard of any though.

Before I leave Adak, let me mention the approach to the runways. Adak is mountainous -- not real tall mountains, maybe 4 - 5,000 feet -- but significant barriers to the airport. The airport sits at the back of a small horseshoe shapped bay, surrounded by mountains. One end of the runway begins at the waters edge, and the other end almost butts into the base of a mountain. The approach from the mountainous end requires a rather sharp turn with rapid descent to the runway. Winds coming off the mountains seemed almost always to mandate landings and take-offs towards the mountainous end.

On this, my first flight out the chain, we were approaching toward the mountain for a landing headed toward the sea. I was seated on the side of the plane to get the best view of the terraine. The plane kept descending and the mountain kept getting closer until I was sure

we would meet with great impact. However, at the very last minute our pilot banked hard to the right and we missed – but, my best estimate was by perhaps 50 feet. This in a DC-6...? I heard that several years before, one of their planes came in too low and crashed at this pass. This time we made it though. Other landings I experienced both here and at Amchitka, were much worse.

Every so often one of their pilots would take a wave-top flight from Adak to Amchitka – not exactly wave-top, but about 200 feet above the water. This was probably necessary because there was no GCA equipment operational on Amchitka at that time, and the ceiling was barely above our flying altitude. The distance is about 250 miles, with spotted uninhabited islands between – in fact, from Adak on, I don't believe there was any native population since World War II, when the Aleut Indians were relocated because of the Japanese troop advances up the Aleutian Island Chain. At the time of this story, only Amchitka, Shemia and Attu had any resident population after you left Adak.

This trip was one of the low flights. It gives you a strange feeling flying over the ocean at this height in a large airplane. When we would pass an island, it would almost look like we were looking up to their shore line. Everything was bleak and seemed to be in two colors only – blue-purple and where there was tundra showing it appeared gray-green. You could see out the window of the plane that it was raining, and white-caps were evident to a greater extent as we neared Amchitka. The weather was deteriorating, but I would later learn that this was the normal for Amchitka. Not a good place for a vacation.

Then Amchitka was in sight – melding into the ocean on its eastern end – and increasing to a height of some 1200 feet toward its northwestern end. The currents of the Bering Sea sweep by its northern shore, and the currents of the Pacific Ocean on its southern shore. With a maximum width of some three miles and extending about forty miles from one end to the other, it looks like a broken pencil on the map.

The meeting of the Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea currents, having several degrees difference in temperatures was a constant weather maker. In fact much of the weather

entering the lower 48 around Washington and Oregon, was "made" on Amchitka. Just one positive note here is that there was less than one thunderstorm occurrence per year. Having lived on Amchitka about two years, I heard thunder one time. I should also note that the temperatures very seldom dropped below 20 degrees Fahrenheit – though the "chill factor" would drop to very dangerous levels. I learned much about "chill factor" during my stay on Amchitka.

Our plane came into the island very close to runway level, and just under the ceiling – landed successfully, and we were now residents of Amchitka Island, Alaska. I landed on Amchitka dressed in a suit, white shirt, and tie. Boy! did I have a lot to learn.