Chapter 9

Shock Personified

I understood the Alaska District Corps of Engineers had entered into a small contract the year before we arrived, to rehabilitate the East-West runway of the airport on Amchitka built during World War II. They also construct the plywood camp we would occupy, including what little plumbing we had. Not all the comforts of home, but enough to start from.

We heard a story that during this construction period, there were only two vehicles on the island, and, one day during one of Amchitka's famous fogs, these two vehicles had a head-on collision on the airport runway. After spending time there, I could understand how this could happen — in fact, other accidents happened while I was there, totally attributable to the weather conditions on the island.

As I have stated before, Amchitka was home to 40,000 military personnel during World War II, as the Japanese attempted to march up the Aleutian Islands to mainland Alaska. Amchitka is where they were stopped. I understand the Japanese had many troops on Little Sitkin Island — just a few miles from Amchitka. Three runways were built during World War II, the one we were landing on, a North-South runway which has its own story later, and a shorter fighter plane runway at near sea-level a short distance away from the bomber runway we were using. The North-South and the East-West runways both had their own large wooden hangars.

The troops were housed in quonset huts about 20 feet wide and 40 to 50 feet long. These

were sunk into the ground 4 or 5 feet which gave them some protection from enemy straffing, but this was also mandated because of the tundra covering most of the island. We had lots of trouble with tundra relating to construction. These quonset huts would *explode* with a loud bang during high winds and just splinter into kindling – then the winds would scatter the debris across the entire island. I have seen on many occasions, sheets of wood or metal being carried by the wind about head height, and never see them touch ground in my scope of vision. This was also the source of all the nails on the roads and the debris on the runways.

The rehabitation contract had cleared the East-West runway of all trash, but had not removed any from the other runways. The fighter runway had trenches dug across it to prohibit its use.

The hangar for the East-West runway was somewhat rehabitated – at least to the point of closing it in and making its 40 feet high doors operatable. This was used for vehicle repairs and dry storage for some items. The other hanger was also used for storage, but could not be closed up – nor was this runway cleared of debris. I have a story about this runway I will relate later is this book.

We had a near perfect landing and taxied to the hangar area where another plywood hut had been set with a stenciled sign over its door reading, "Amchitka International Airport." Ha! We de-planed and were greeted by Col. Barwick, the Resident Engineer for Amchitka, and his "Chief" of the Engineering Branch. All the personnel attached to the Corps of Engineers office were top notch, and aside from one incident, all performed their tasks well, and completed the project with much pride.

We climbed into his International Scout and headed for camp – hoping to avoid another flat tire which we did. Col. Barwick was commenting as to how soon we could run the magnet over the roads to pick up the nails, and it was determined that should be one of the first priorities, and that multiple times would probably be required.

If you are not familiar with this type of magnet, it is a big roller on wheels pulled behind a vehicle which "picks up" the nails and they are scrapped off into a pan for disposal. Several times there would be like 50 - 100 pounds of nails picked up in one trip between the camp

and airport. Each time the roads were graded, the magnet would be run again. Eventually we got the road pretty well cleared of nails.

So here I am, riding up the road to camp, wondering where my intelligence has escaped to. It was cold, but the temperature was probably in the 40's – though it felt like it did back in Oklahoma when it was perhaps in the low 20's. A drizzle was falling, and perodically a "storm" of short duration would pass over which would produce very high winds and heavy precipitation of some kind, depending on the temperature.

We stopped on our way to camp at our "water supply lake" – about 30 feet wide and maybe 60 or 70 feet long, with a wooden dam 10 or 12 feet high. The comments were that this would be an adequate supply for the new camp we were to build, that the water had been tested, and was almost totally pure.

Not too far away, it was decided to take some core samples to see if that location could be used to dispose of the "driller's mud" when removed from the hole we were to prepare for the underground nuclear shot.

Then, appearing down the road was this little cluster of faded green plywood huts we were to call home. Since there was no place to run – the plane left as soon as we got off it – I decided to try to make the best of things. I unloaded my suitcase at the closest hut to the office, mess hall, and latrine unit. This was good thinking, as precipitation and high winds were almost always with us. We could depend upon it most always being miserable outside.

My "home" consisted of one-fourth of a 10 x 20 foot plywood hut, almost flat roofed, and tied to concrete anchors below ground with 3/8" cable. At times I wondered if these would hold. In fact, we lost one hut because of wind at a later time.

I had a metal cot, a 2 x 4 foot closet, and three small shelves. Our heat consisted of an oil heater situated in the middle of the room. When the winds would blow – which was most of the time – the flue would not draw, and the hut would fill with fumes and smoke to the point we would have to evacuate and open the door for ventilation just to breathe. Sometimes we

might wake up in the middle of the night with our eyes watering so much we would have to go out into the cold, long enough to get a few breaths of fresh air and clear our eyes – then back to sleep for the rest of the night.

There were no chairs though we did find some old apple crates and ammunition boxes to sit on, but mostly we were on our feet or in bed.

Now let me explain a few facts of life to you. I don't believe I have ever slept the night out without having to make several trips to the bathroom. I'll keep this clean, but this was a very significant portion of my early stay on Amchitka.

With this fact established, let's explore the layout of our camp to understand the difficulties to be overcome in order to accommodate mother nature – a necessity. The road was dirt, or I should say mud. The latrine hut was across the road and down two huts from where I slept – a distance of perhaps sixty or seventy feet. The weather produced precipitation of some sort over 90% of the time. The fumes in the hut I slept in would wake you quite regularly so you could find some place to breathe – and, every time I moved mother nature would generate the urge. Now during the day I wore combat boots or rubber boots. This was not a normal attire for the night, furthermore, if you got dressed each time you made the run, you wouldn't last more than a few days before you collapsed from lack of sleep. House shoes would sometimes be filled with mud, and other clothing might be wet when you returned.

What would you have done? – I cleaned up my houseshoes each morning.

From the time we hit the island and for the duration of the project, we were on a work schedule of twelve hours a day, seven days a week. Actually the work schedule didn't mean much except that we were available and expected to work at any hour day or night. I was called out of bed one night at 2:30 a.m. to go to the office to work. I might also add, that should we have a break in our work – at any time – we were free to pursue whatever we wanted to with our time. This I also took advantage of – it pretty well balanced out.

Now that I was "settled" in my new home, I went across the street to my office. As I have

mentioned, it was a World War II building maybe 20 x 30 feet with holes in the walls big enough to drive a car through. Prior to our inhabiting it, sea gulls had called it home, without cleaning up before they left. There was one "private office" to one side of the building which Col. Barwick had already confiscated and had also moved his cot into it, so he was working and sleeping in the same small room. There were no luxuries for the elite here.

There were a couple of "restored" picnic tables which had been salvaged from the World War II quonset huts in the larger part of the building. These, our engineers, architects, and construction inspectors swapped about to use.

John Reynolds found a usable metal office desk in one of the deserted World War II building which he confiscated. It had a fairly smooth top to write on, and even the brown office paint was still pretty much intact. There was just one problem with it. When the military left after the war, whoever was using this desk must have been kinda sloppy – they left the lower right hand drawer partially open (about 12 or 14 inches), and this was inviting enough to entice a sea gull to call it home. You know what happens when a bunch of gulls are flying over you, and you hear or feel that splatter – this is what happened to the desk drawer. Full of it.

Mr. Reynolds thought this was a good conversation piece, so he kept this drawer as he found it – for the duration of the project – even when we moved into our new office complex later on.

This left me – I was "chief" of the administrative section with an organizational chart which said I was to have, as I remember it, eight employees, (there never was but one) to find a place to sit. When I looked around, I saw the "chief" of the engineering branch, the "chief" of the construction branch and an architect sitting around the delapidated picnic table, all of them with crude facilities, and so I figured my best rule was to join them. To the corner of the office adjacent to Col. Barwick's "private office" (with no door) was an apple crate sitting on its end with a typewriter on it. This was my office. There was no chair, so one of the engineers found a 2 x 4 and a piece of 1 x 6. With a saw and a few nails (these were plentiful on the island) he made me a chair by nailing the two pieces of 1 x 6 to either end of the 2 x 4. By

getting a good balance, I could sit on it and type. A cardboard box was emptied by someone and it was passed to me for a "filing cabinet".

We now had an operational office on Amchitka, ready to start a $30 million contract to be completed in impossible conditions within nine months. We did it!