

The crew of Loran Station Attu



Life on the edge of the Western World

By Steven C. Levi

It's easy to think about a remote assignment when you're not actually there. But when you are on remote assignment, that's a bit different.

Days don't turn into weeks and weeks into months the way they do when you're in the city. Days drag into days and the only sure sign of time passing is the arrival of the mail plane.

In August of 1989, as part of an assignment for "Alaska Magazine," I went to Attu for two weeks. As both a historian and writer I have always wanted to go to Attu. Not only is it the most remote corner of the United States, it is also the most intact battlefield of the second world war. It was the site of the second bloodiest battle in the Pacific Theater and one of the few places where American forces were subject to a suicide

charge by Japanese forces.

Being remote was not foreign to me. When I first came to Alaska in 1976, I was a traveling instructor for Chapman College. I would fly into a remote installation, stay 12 weeks teaching classes in history and government, and then move on to another base.

During my first year, I visited Port Clarence and Cape Sarichef (which no longer exists) on Unimak Island as well as two Air Force facilities: Tatalina and Fort Yukon.

Interestingly, I didn't find that much difference in morale or attitude between the time I was on a loran station 10 years ago and last year. In fact, it was almost as if I had stepped through a time warp.

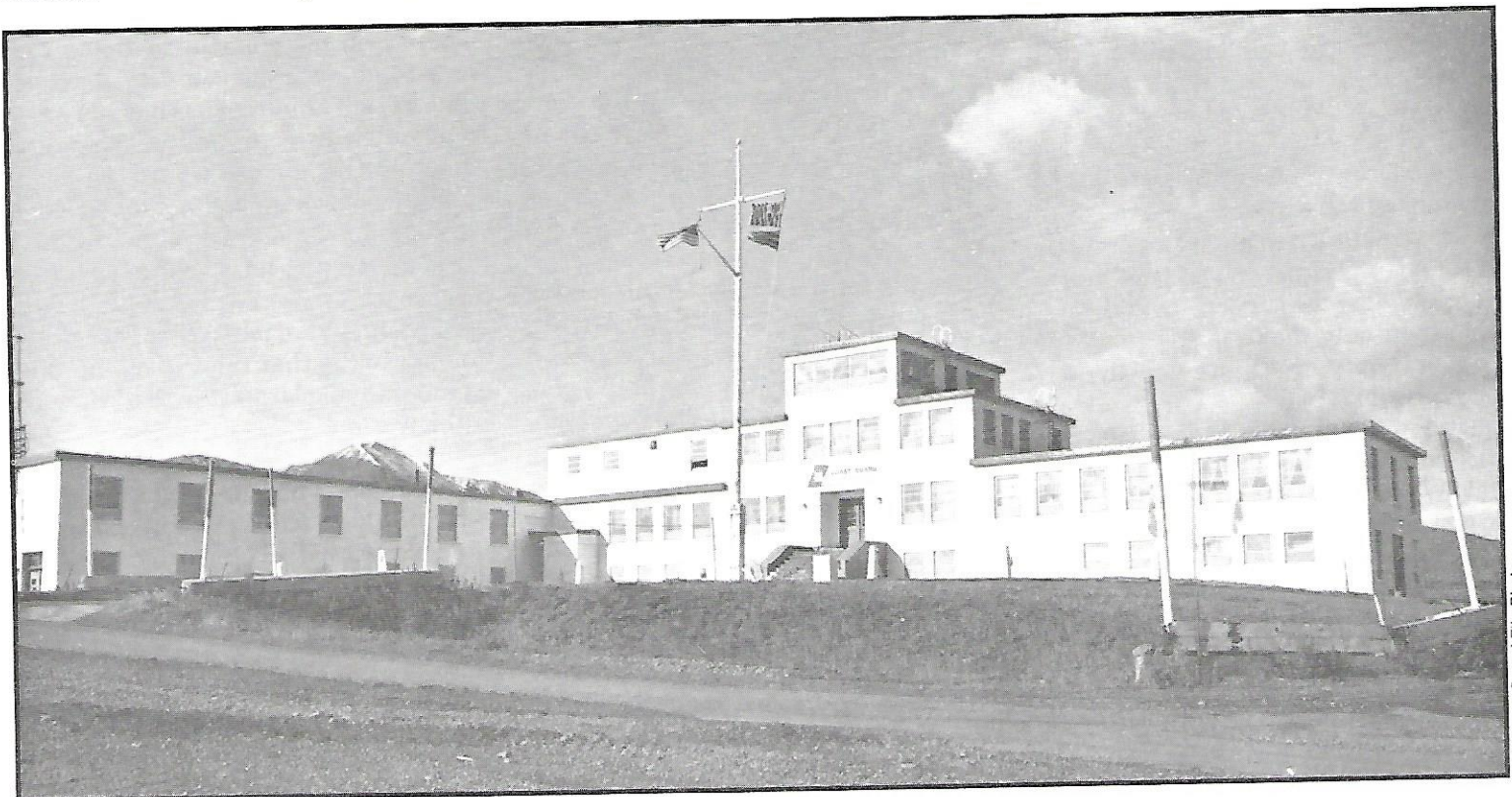
The only difference was that 10 years ago, there was a movie a night and today loran stations have a library of videos. However, both the movies

and videos were just about as popular. Ten years ago, barely a handful of men watched the movies; about the same number watch the videos today.

Another thing that had not changed over the years was the attitude of the men on station. For quite a few of the men, particularly the younger ones, a remote assignment is a s&%\$ assignment. They didn't have a firm grip on how important loran is and why loran stations are situated in such remote settings. For them, the remote year was a long one, and often one of waiting for time to pass.

The men — and now women — who will to make it through the year in the best mental shape, I discovered, are those who decide early that their remote year was one of great potential.

They can study for advancement, learn to play the banjo, write that novel they know is lurking in their soul, or



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learn to draw.

It was all a matter of attitude, of the individual making the decision that a remote assignment was one of possibilities.

Each remote station has its advantages. At Port Clarence, for instance, the men looked for fossilized ivory and traded with the Eskimos who lived across the bay.

On Cape Sarichef, the men searched the beaches for glass balls and Russian flotsam or hunted caribou and red fox.

On Attu, the men had the advantage of spending a year in a "living" museum. Almost all of the structures from the American occupation are still there, though most of them have collapsed. Roadbeds run from the station to Holtz Bay, where the Japanese forces were based, through Massacre Valley and up the ridge where the Japanese charged.

Marsden landing matting litters the island and, in some places, old airplanes lie where they were shot down 40 years ago. Along some ridges and into the valley below, .50 caliber slugs and shells carpet the area. In others, bunkers and caves, where the Japanese lived, still stand.

Most impressive, hidden in a crevice at the upper reaches of Massacre Valley is a mile-long tunnel filled with buildings and vehicles, remnants of the military occupation of the island. Once the Coast Guardsmen are off work, there is an entire island to explore.

But even with so many possibilities at their fingertips, some men never even got out of the station. In 365 days, some men only make it as far as the landing strip. Others go everywhere it is possible to go.

Kevin Shaw, for instance, who has since completed his year at Attu, noted that "When you are isolated, things get old fast. There is no hard liquor allowed here so all we have are beer and wine coolers. I mean, REAL excitement around here is the mail flight coming in on time!"

Shaw learned early in his tour that it was important to get out of station as often as possible. Living and working in the same building can get on your

nerves.

"Isolation is hard — particularly with no women. I miss a lot of things, but [you] can't spend a year here and sit in the station. I get out a lot.

"During winter, I cross country ski, and when the weather is nice, I take photographs. There are all kinds of wildlife here and we can fish for salmon and halibut. And I quit smoking here — which was not the easiest thing I have ever done."

Gary Hartzell, 19, noted that Attu

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was quite a change from Riverside, Calif., where he grew up. He has been on station for nine months and is looking forward to getting back to civilization. Like most of the other men, what he missed most was easy to state: "WOMEN."

"After I leave here, there are a lot of things I'm never going to take for granted again, like the mail coming every day or television stations." [Attu has a single station that can be picked up infrequently — from Bethel. I was told that other remote stations have cable.]

Being one of the younger men on station, Hartzell took a lot of kidding at first. One day last winter, for instance, his roommate woke him up and told him he had overslept. Since it was dark outside almost 24 hours a day, there was no way to tell what time it was. Believing his roommate, Hartzell dressed frantically and dashed down the hallways of the station looking for his chief. It took him 10 minutes to

realize that it was three in the morning.

Later, he was almost fooled into believing that a plane was coming in. He thought a C-GULL was something like a C-130.

Another time, after he had been at the base for only a few weeks, he was told the Liberty Barge was coming in to take some men over to Shemya, the closest island to Attu. It is an Air Force base with women and hard liquor.

Hartzell and three other men went out with suitcases to wait for the barge.

One at a time, the other three drifted back to the base on some excuse and left Hartzell waiting for a barge that would never come because it didn't exist.

Boatswain's mate David Weaver, 27, is an old hand when it comes to the Coast Guard. Coming from assignments in both search and rescue (SAR) and drug interdiction, Attu is, in many ways, a welcome break in his career. "The Coast Guard has a lot to offer; that's why I've decided to make it my career. But loran duty is quite a bit different than SAR or drug interdiction."

For someone who was used to boarding ships looking for illegal drugs, Attu has been

a bit of a change. It's not as dangerous. "There's an old Coastie saying, 'You have to go out, but you don't have to come back.' That means that you have to go out with your ship but, because some of the Coast Guard work is dangerous, you might not be coming back. It's hard to explain that to a lot of the younger guys here, who are at their first base. To them, the Coast Guard gave them a bum job. What they don't understand is that the Coast Guard is lot more than a loran station at the end of the world."

For the 26 men stationed at Attu, their 365 days of tour is hardly exotic and fun-filled. They are there because loran is a critical service to the traveling public. Even though the men may be seeing a part of the world very few others will ever see, a year without women is a hard year indeed. But it's a year in which you can improve yourself... or you can spend those 365 days counting sunsets.

