

H97-48
Ed Walker
PWSCC History Course
01/16/80
Side 1
[Audio is very faint]

[Speaker just begins talking no introduction]

Speaker (I assume it's Ed Walker) talks about the aftermath of natural disaster (in this case the Valdez Earthquake, 1964). Says it was very difficult for him to accept help [charity]. Finally agreed to take four tires from the Red Cross if they would let him pay it back.

Hadn't thought about WWII in a while because he only likes to think about pleasant things. Did a lot of planning so he would get someplace where he wasn't being shot at and the end result was that he wound up making nine trips to the Aleutians where he was shot at every time.

In 1942 Ed joined the newly formed civilian intelligence corps put together by Colonel Castner. Group was called many things: Combat Intelligence, the Scouts, Castner's Cutthroats. Corp members wore what they wanted to – no standard uniform. Everybody carried his own pack and cooked his own food. They were tramping through the Aleutians and Col. Castner was down by the stream mucking out his fry pan. A U.S. soldier came along (this was after the invasion) and asked what outfit this was. The Colonel said "Castner's Cubs" and the soldier responded "looks more like a bunch of cutthroats to me." The Colonel told the story around and "Castner's Cutthroats" stuck. The Japanese wanted to wipe out the U.S. Pacific Fleet so they attacked U.S. forces at Dutch harbor and landed troops at Attu and Kiska. At the time of the Dutch harbor attack, Castner Cutthroats were in Anchorage. So they decided to go down to Dutch Harbor and throw the Japanese out. There were about 36 guys in the whole outfit. Spent the night filling machine gun rounds with ammo then went down to the harbor and borrowed a yacht that had been lent to one of the generals for use as his personal brig. Castner's Cutthroats got all the way to Kodiak before the Navy caught up with them and made them turn around. The lads protested that they wanted to toss the Japanese out of Dutch Harbor and the Navy told them they [the Navy] were running this war so back off. Later on Castner's Cutthroats started working with the Navy and the Navy gave them two subs. Castner's Cutthroats had to learn how to drive everything they had, shoot everything they had to shoot, demolitions, map making, and how to live off the country. Had some fabulous men. Ed was selected because he knew a little bit about the Army and its etiquette.

Guy name Joe Mouth, a trapper was down at Dutch Harbor when Colonel Castner came in with a couple of generals. So Joe (who was a private) said "Hi, General" and went up and shook their hands. Colonel threw his arm around Joe and acted like he was an old buddy.

Plan was to take the subs and scout out where the Japanese forces were on the Aleutians because they really didn't know. So they stopped at Dutch and built two boats (Keel and ribs) in twenty-four hours. They then lashed the boat skeletons to the conning tower, but the turbulence tore the boats right off. Had rubber boats for them to go ashore with.

Pulled into Adak first. Absolutely pitch black at night. Ed and another fellow Wilbur Church, were to shove off first and secure the beach.

As the boat was being inflated, Ed and Wilbur could hear a hissing sound, but didn't have time to investigate it before it was time to shove off. They got about three hundred yards offshore and the blasted thing blew up. Ed and Wilbur wound up in the drink with their packs. The other boats had shoved off. A famous sub whose name he can't remember passed by, saw them floundering, threw them a line and towed them a bit until they could drag them aboard. The crew stripped both men down (because they had been in the freezing water) and rubbed them down with towels. The cook came up to Ed and asked him if he could use a snort. Ed said that he could so both he and the cook had a drink. Another landing that they made, the ship broke apart on the rocks and they all started swimming for shore. One of the fellows in his group was Jamie Nickerson, a trapper who could quote every line in the Bible. Ed once asked Jamie how he knew so much of the Bible and Jamie replied that he had once done some illegal trapping around McGrath, wound up in the Fairbanks jail for the winter, and the only book in the whole jail was the Bible. Jamie has a photographic memory and he memorized it.

After the wreck, Ed made it to a seaweed covered rock, but Jamie was still floundering in the seaweed. As he went under for the last time, Jamie said "all right, you old red blistered Cockner, you've got me." Ed grabbed him, hauled him up onto the rocks, and pounded the water out of him. Jamie survived and was alive and well as of 1980.

When the U.S force came to Alaska, Castner's Cutthroats went down to Dutch to meet the 165,000 troops on the troop transports. To fool the Japanese, the Army had trained the soldiers in the desert. None of the new troops had any shoepacs -footgear to keep the soldiers' feet warm even if they got wet. Colonel Castner went to the general in charge and told him that they [the Cutthroats] could scrounge up a lot of shoepacs. General turned him down. Said that the troops were only going to be there about a week. Would retake the islands and then return to the States. Forty percent of the casualties were the result of frozen feet, the most pathetic thing Ed had ever seen.

Troops landed first at Attu where there were 3,600 Japanese dug into the mountains. Castner's Cutthroats came in later from a different direction to Attu. Didn't come in with the main forces. An old skipper once told Ed that the weather in the Pacific is made in the Aleutians. It is one hellhole of weather.

Got rid of first general brought in General Andrew. General Andrew sent for Lt. Bob Thompson of the Cutthroats, promoted him to Captain and asked him to help locate the Japanese forces on Attu. Before their mission, the Cutthroats were given three days in Anchorage.

Bad Whiskey Red was qualified to be a skipper. He didn't have to go on that mission, but he wanted to. Red had come to Alaska to Seward and walked the railroad to Talkeetna. At Talkeetna he talked Belle the landlady into giving him some supplies on credit (pair of pliers, wire, an axe, and some salt). Red took those few supplies, spent the winter in the Bush and came back with a whole armful of furs.

Red didn't have to go on that Attu mission because there was a shortage of skippers and the military had asked him to be a skipper. Red, however, wanted to because he said that he had been down in the Aleutians nine times now (the Attu mission would be their ninth trip) and he wanted to get some of his own back. But, he said, "after this mission, I'm

never getting further than two miles off the beach. I'm getting back on the sea where I belong."

Red got shot right between the eyes on that ninth trip. His comrades buried him right on the ocean so he would never leave the sea again. Costner's Cutthroats were lucky in that they had very few casualties and/or injuries.

The Japanese on Attu were very hard to capture. American forces wound up with only fourteen prisoners out of 3,600 Japanese troops.

Kiska was the next Island that had to be retaken. Ed and another guy came up with a scheme to scout out the island which they broached to the Colonel. The scheme was to send in Ed and his comrade on a sub. They would then locate the Japanese forces and escape from Kiska by stealing a plane, not that either of them knew how to fly. The Colonel was in favor of it, but the Navy nixed the scheme.

Soon afterwards, Costner's Cutthroats got a new colonel, he had been a military attaché for six years in Tokyo. He spoke Japanese and played Japanese songs on his harmonica.

While they were in Adak, the colonel let them in on his plan to get scouts onto Kiska.

The Cutthroats were to stuff beach grass into military coveralls to create dummies. The dummies were then going to be parachuted onto Kiska. Once the Japanese had discovered that they were shooting at stuffed coveralls they [the Cutthroats] could parachute in and the Japanese wouldn't shoot at them. Ed up and told the colonel that there was no way he was jumping out of a plane unless he had to do so in order to save his life.

The U.S. invasion force on Kiska numbered about 165,000 troops. Ed went in with the first Special Regiment (demolition experts). They went in towing a rubber boat just heaped with high explosives. One bullet and that would have been a beautiful harbor.

The scheme was to blow some rocks out of the harbor so the landing barges could come in in the morning. Ed's job was to secure the area so the demolition experts could do their job. They had just finished rigging the rocks when the landing barges started to arrive. To this day Ed doesn't know what was done to the combat troops prior to launching them from the carrier because their eyes were glazed and they would absolutely not listen to anybody. Ed still had men out in the harbor and he finally got hold of a captain who got the troops to stop. Ed got his men in and said "let's get the heck away from this outfit."

Before dark, there were fourteen crosses in a little valley in Kiska. The Japanese forces had come in with barges under heavy weather and had loaded up 10,000 troops and sailed away without the U.S. Navy knowing anything about it.

After that the islands were cleared and the war in the Aleutinas was over. The Costner's Cutthroats were then shipped back to Anchorage where some of them got the idea to go to Barrow and map a trail from Barrow to Fairbanks. Ed had just gotten married then so he didn't go. (At the time, getting married was against Army rules because it meant that your wife would be shipped Outside even if she was from Alaska). Ed often wondered later if he should have gone to Barrow because one of the scouts was lost up there.

Apparently the scout got into a fight with the guy in charge, stalked off, lost his bearings and was not found/died.

When Ed and another guy were on Amchitka prior to the invasion of Kiska, they were close enough to Kiska that they could hear the roar of enemy planes as they were taking off and they could tell by sound how many planes there were. Ed and comrade would then radio this information to the U.S. forces on Adak. The U.S. forces would send out

their P-38s and the American and Japanese planes would have their dogfights over Amchitka.

The Japanese knew that the scouts were on Amchitka so they had to be very careful. They walked on fox trails and lived in barabaras (underground shelters). It got so that whenever they would hear the Japanese planes they would pull in their chimney and fill the chimney hole with a blob of grass so they were effectively camouflaged. The Japanese would often strafe the island in hopes of flushing them out, but didn't know where on Amchitka they were.

[Ed takes questions from the audience]

Student: Were the guys in your unit always individuals or did Alaska make them that way?

Ed: Alaska makes them that way. Strong individuals get stronger and weak ones get weaker.

Dan Yansky, one of the fellows in his unit was a strong hunter. When they [the scouts] were on Amchitka, they used to be able to hunt geese because it was so warm there even in winter. At that time rations were tight and their shoepacs were wearing out, but the military wouldn't resupply them because they didn't want the Japanese to know where the scouts were. The scouts could hunt the geese with their rifles, but if the birds fell into the ocean they couldn't retrieve them.

Dan, however, said that he could come back with a dozen geese by nightfall. Naturally Ed doubted this and both he and Lt. Heacock bet Dan \$20 bucks each that he couldn't bring back a dozen geese. So Dan went out and came back in an hour before dark with fourteen geese. What Dan did was this: he knew the geese had to come down to a freshwater stream to drink. He hid himself by the stream and when the goose came down to drink, he shot its head off. He then propped up the dead good, hid himself again, and when the geese landed again he killed some more. Dan only used six shots to get fourteen geese. He would line their heads up and get three geese with a single shot. Dan was still alive when this interview was done. (Ed mentions that sixty-four members of the Cutthroats were still living but doesn't say when that survey was done)

Side II

[Begins in the middle of Ed's conversation]

Rinehart a fellow Ed knew, trekked all over Alaska looking for copper. He finally found a vein, took Jack Book (?) (Bullock?) on as a partner. Jack sold it and both of them came off with two million dollars.

Thought about having a reunion of the Cutthroats for their 25th anniversary, but that didn't come off. All of the officers with the exception of Heacock were dead when this program was made in 1980.

Student: What was the Native role in Alaska during WWII?

Ed: In the Cutthroats, they had several Natives or part Natives. Nels Hudlund from Bristol Bay, part Swede, part Indian, fisherman and a super boatman. When the Cutthroats went in their boat Nels was the captain. The regular captain would say "What do you want me to do, Nels?" The Cutthroats always relied on the man with the expertise whoever that was.

Had an Aleut. Aleuts are funny people, don't think at all. [Doesn't follow up on this].

On a mission to Amchitka, a passing plane dropped a note that there was a sub on the other side of the island. The Cutthroats were to check it out. Ed was selected to do the job and discovered that it was an American sub. Ed also discovered many tins of cigarettes that had washed up on shore. He filled up a spare pair of pants with salvaged cigarettes. When he returned to camp, he found the Colonel (military attaché) with a handkerchief wrapped around his hand. When Ed asked what happened, the Colonel told him that he had been checking out a trapper's cabin on the other side of the island where he suspected Japanese soldiers to be held up. Putting his ear to the tundra, he could hear the radio signals they were putting out. When the Colonel rushed the place, it appeared deserted. However, when he attempted to search the attic, the enemy soldiers slammed the attic door hurting his hand.

Some months later Ed ran into their Japanese interpreter in Dutch. The interpreter was surprised to see him, thought he would be in jail. Col. Lebeck had accused Ed of cutting his [the Colonel's] prisoner's throats when Ed was supposed to be guarding them and the Colonel was going to have Ed court martialed. [Ed implies that Col. Lebeck killed the prisoners, but doesn't come straight out and say so]. Ed didn't dare to go back to Anchorage for a long time after that.

Another story: Ed was having a drink with Bad Whiskey Red and Ed had the hiccups. Suddenly, Red seized Ed by the throat. Ed thought Red had gone off his rocker so he commenced to fight for his life. Just before Red throttled him, Ed broke his hold. Red quieted down by then so they both had a drink. Then Red said "no more hiccups, eh?" Red had deliberately scared the hiccups out of him.

Had a couple of Eskimos from Wainwright in the outfit. Upicksoun was one. He got yellow jaundice when the outfit was in the far end of Mt. McKinley. The lads were living in a ranger's cabin eating out of season sheep. The lads told Upricksoun that if he were anywhere near the Japanese now, he'd be shot because he looked so much like one of them. As it happened they sent him down to the hospital in Anchorage and he recovered. One fellow was part Russian, name was Del Kenny. Del was a pretty good boatman, but not very smart.

One time on Adak Ed and Del went out to check a halibut set in their little dory, Huck One. A storm came up and on their return trip they found themselves bouncing through 8-10 foot waves. At one point they were getting so low they had to refuel on the run. They didn't dare shut down the motor. Finally they made to a lee and were able to get to shore. A Navy cruiser that had been watching them struggle and which had been preparing to go out and bring them in sent them a signal: "well done, sailor." Del, more inexperienced than Nels had been unable to predict that the storm was coming in.

Student: Were you aware of any military buildup or fortification in Prince William Sound area during WWII?

Ed: There weren't any.

Student: Were you involved in the building of the road that was built thru from Canada up to around Salinas and that area?

Ed: Only involvement was when he married his wife who was a dispatcher and worked on that project. His wife was one of thirteen women who came to Alaska from Washington, D.C. to work on the road. She was there at the beginning and end of the project. Salinas road was built without any knowledge.

Student: Why were the Aleutian Islands so strategic to the Japanese?

Ed: The taking of the Aleutians was an attempt to draw the U.S. fleet away from the Pacific. Later on the Aleutians would function as a stepping stone for them.

Ed's last job for the Army was as a balloon chaser. Eskimos had sent word that Japanese were dropping things into their lakes with balloons to poison them. Ed was sent along with an FBI agent down to Bethel. The FBI agent intimidated the natives by flashing his badge so Ed decided to ask the questions.

Ed and the agent went downstream to a little store. Struck up a conversation with the storekeeper, asked who he could talk to to find the balloons. So the storekeeper directed him to a lady. Ed hired a translator, they talked to her and sure enough they found the balloons. The balloons were forty foot in diameter and made of paper. Attached was a framework of light metal and attached to that was a series of incendiary bombs. The Japanese plan was to set the forests of the West Coast on fire with the balloon bombs. However, the balloons wound up in the Kuskokwim River Valley.

The balloon bombs were defused with a pair of pliers. They were using fuses like those used on dynamite. The balloon was considered so top secret that the pilot had to taxi right into the hanger before it could be unloaded. The balloon was then dispatched with the FBI agent to Washington, D.C.

Ed spent the rest of the winter chasing balloons for the Army. Even found two up on Saint Lawrence Island. A lot of the balloons were frozen in the ice of streams or creeks so Ed would thaw them out and defuse them.

One time Ed was balloon hunting during the spring muskrat season when all the Native trappers and their families were out on the lakes. The balloon was tangled up in a spruce tree and Ed was up the tree cutting the wires. The operation attracted quite a bit of attention and a crowd formed around the base of the tree. Marshall, the pilot, hollered up at Ed "do those bombs explode if you cut the wrong wire?" Ed replied, "they certainly do" and boy, did the crowd scatter.

Another time Ed wanted to buy a walrus tusk that he stumbled over on St. Lawrence Island. After three days of negotiations, it was decided that the tusk would be sold for fifty cents a pound. The tusk, however, was still attached to the skull so Ed said that he wasn't going to pay fifty cents a pound for the bone that the ivory was attached to. So they all went over to the store which had a scale. After they had jabbered a bit, the storekeeper told Ed to give him a \$20 spot and he could take the tusk home.

Ed was in Sitka for three months, and Haines for one year.