

# **The Sitka Naval Operating Base and Army Coastal Defenses National Historic Landmark**

History of the Military Installations, and Sitka Maritime Heritage Society

Plans for the Japonski Island Marine Ways Heritage Center

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## **Intro**

WWII in Sitka: 1937 Naval sea plane base, 1938 Fleet Air Base

1939 Construction begins on Naval Air Station on Japonski Island for patrol sea planes.

Army harbor defenses, to protect the air station, initial headquarters Fort Ray on Alice and Charcoal Islands, mainly three batteries of 6-inch guns, at Makhnati (Causeway), Biorka Island, and Shoals Point.

**Lingít Aaní**, going back thousands of years. Japonski and other islands X'us' Noowu, Crabapple Fort, was bread basket for herring eggs, salmon smoke houses, guests.

Now designated **The Sitka Naval Operating Base and Army Coastal Defenses National Historic Landmark**. The National Historic Landmark designation is for sites significant to the nation's history. This Landmark designated in 1986, and includes the Causeway on the other side of the airport, and the shoreline of Japonski Island from the O'Connell bridge to the old officers housing on the waterfront, including Mt. Edgecumbe School, UAS, and the SEARHC Community Health building.

Causeway now the Fort Rousseau Causeway State Historical Park.

World War II brought around 4,000 men to this small fishing town which at the time was around 1000 residents.

## **The Sitka Naval Operating Base**

### **Japonski Island Marine Ways Building**

This is a marine railway, for working on boats out of the water. The building was built in 1941, with wings added on for a workshop and parts storage. It was used to repair boats for both the Army and the Navy, though it was inadequate for the size and number of boats – about 50 in 1943 - and shipwrights, with 11 just with the Navy. There were plans for a larger one never built.

After WWII the facility was used for repairing the shore boats, ferries between Sitka and the federal government community of Mt. Edgecumbe. The boat repair was done by Robert Modrell for about 30 years. He was a highly skilled shipwright who first came to Sitka to teach boatbuilding at the Bureau of Indian Affairs Mt. Edgecumbe High School. The O'Connell Bridge was built in 1972, the beginning of the end of Mt. Edgecumbe as a separate community from Sitka.

### **The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society and plans for the Navy marine ways**

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society mission is to preserve and to share Sitka's maritime heritage, especially with youth, to encourage and build the skills, heritage and knowledge into the future. In 2005 we facilitated the transfer of the property to the City from Alaska

DNR, for the purpose of rehabilitation as a maritime heritage center. We have replaced foundation and roof, repaired all the doors and windows, now working to complete last walls and install accessible restroom, just finished a federal Historic Preservation Fund Grant, working with City and Borough of Sitka as a Certified Local Government. Great partner, getting these federal funds into the community.

Next phase, the haul out will be restored to function. The public will be able to watch actual boat repair.

Outside, panels will tell all about the Naval Air Base and the Army Coast Defenses. There will be a public float for kayak storage and launching.

We also do historical and maritime programs, have a walking tour, and have a book now being printed.

#### **View of Structures remaining:**

**We have a highly detailed map from 1945 on our website under History tab, WWII page.**

The **dock** now used by *Kekui* was twice as long. There was also **shore boat waiting room** and ramp and **small boat harbor**.

The **boathouse** is included in the industrial area of the Naval Air Station. This included a **bomb-proof power house**, recently demolished, where swimming pool is now, and the old **coaling sheds**, one still there, from turn of the century, and many workshops and an admin building, nearly all gone now. (On other side, on Airport Road: former fire station and paint and oil storage building and a barracks survive.)

Had power and water coming across channel from Sitka, in 1944 reversed direction, Navy generators supplied power to town of Sitka, to keep canneries etc. going.

Still surviving are the **torpedo and bomb site building** (with the tall center portion).

**The naval air station was primarily for long-range patrol seaplanes, the Consolidated PBY** (Patrol Bomber, with Y being the code for Consolidated aircraft company) or **Catalinas**, with large **ramps and tie-downs** on the apron in front of the hangars. The **hangars** now house UAS Sitka (south hangar) and the Mt. Edgecumbe school's gym. That building has the **air control tower** on it.

The apron in front of the hangars is big enough for wheeled planes capable of landing on an aircraft carrier deck, and it was outfitted with a catapult and arresting gear system. But have heard only one plane tried landing and it was not smooth. (Aircraft carriers can turn into the wind.)

On the hill above the hangars the buildings that are now Mt. Edgecumbe School were built as, an **administration building, with a communications center and crows nest in the partial third story. (Below it the windowless concrete structure with the mural, behind the old laundry building, was a bombproof communications center.)** Next, **facing town, with the eagle sculpture now, was the recreation center, with a gym and 800-seat theater and bowling alleys.** Next to it are two barracks and the mess hall, with brig. Then is the Navy dispensary, which still exists at the back end of the Mt. Edgecumbe Hospital.

**Then the stewards barracks, now gone, just past the current hospital, marked “Igarotte Village” on 1945 Navy map.** Filipino men could join the military and eventually get citizenship, but served in the Navy as stewards, doing cleaning, cooking and acting as servants for the officers and their families.

“Igarot Village” was a model Filipino Native village exhibit at the Alaska Yukon Pacific Exposition in 1909 in Seattle.

The base also included the **Bachelor Officers Quarters** (now SEARHC Community Health), the junior **officers housing**, and **then the senior officers housing on the waterfront**. Before the war families lived here.

(**Section bases**, to spread out the planes in case of disaster or attack, at: Annette Island, Port Armstrong, Port Althorp (near Pelican), Yakutat, Cordova, Ketchikan.)

## Timeline

**Before 1867** – this is **Lingít Aaní**, going back thousands of years. Russians in Sitka to claim territory, their profit center was Western Alaska. Surprising but true, Lingit owned and controlled all of SE AK all the way up to 1867. Russians weak, had to respect.

**1867**, transfer of Russian claims to US, much more powerful than Russians, brought negative stereotype, Alaska Natives not citizens, no rights to their land or resources. Lingit leaders protested, finally got Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971.

Sitka side of Japonski taken by military. Sealing Cove smoke houses other structures destroyed 1900s, added to military reserve. 1905 National Forest took just about everything else.

WWII a continuation of this, and more property requisitioned, not all given back. Biorka Island, much owned by Rudolph Walton (he had applied for it), government bought but never paid (from his grandson, Charles Daniels).

**1902** – Japonski Island had a coaling station for government ships, such as the U.S. Revenue Service Cutters. One of the original **1904** coal storage buildings is still standing, known as the old laundry building, now being used by MEHS.

**1903** Cable to Juneau, 1904 to Seattle,

**1907** Wireless Station, built tall radio towers **1921**

**1922** Naval Treaty with Japan promised no construction in Alaska, expired **1936**. The U.S. War Department recognized the strategic importance of the Pacific, as Japan takes over other countries. War Plan Orange (**1924**) strategic defense triangle Panama, Hawaii, Alaska. In late 1930s, built strategic defense bases at Sitka, Kodiak, Dutch Harbor.

**1930** Alaska had 400 combat troops.

**1937:** Navy designates Sitka Naval Seaplane Base for servicing seaplanes.

**1938:** designated Fleet Air Base, half squadrons of seaplanes rotating every 6 months.

**1939:** Construction begins on Naval Air Station by consortium Siems-Drake-Puget Sound, 1700 workers plus Army and Navy personnel. Used the steamship *City of Victoria* as worker housing in beginning.

**Navy Seabees (22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion) arrived November 1942**, ultimately work worth \$25 million, was 65% of original contract when halted in May 1943 and the SeaBees went to Attu. (Later one company (CBMU 512, of 45th) continued work September 1943 to August 1944.)

(Siems Spokane Company, Puget Sound Bridge and Dredging Company, Johnson Drake and Piper Company)

**(January 1941** became Section Base.)

**December 7, 1941:** Surprise attack by the Japanese on the American military base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii; the **United States declares war.**

Sitka's base is the only one operational in Alaska. The air stations at Kodiak and Dutch Harbor are completed soon after.

(Only a few days before, Sheldon Jackson School launched the Princeton-Hall, mission boat built by George Howard, Andrew Hope and SJ students, new boat taken by Navy, painted gray, gun mounted on deck)

**Summer of 1942: June 1942:** Japanese forces attack Dutch Harbor, and occupy Kiska and Attu Islands in the Aleutian Islands (Alaska), to divert the U.S. from their planned attack at Midway.

**June and July 1942:** Unangax and other residents of Attu and Kiska taken prisoner by Japanese, residents of other Aleutian islands and Pribilofs removed by US military to internment camps in SE Alaska.

**June 4-7, 1942:** The main Japanese fleet is defeated at the Battle of Midway, near the U.S. base in the mid Pacific. It is the end of Japan's naval superiority.

Sitka important as a waypoint for Aleutians Campaign, to drive Japanese forces from Aleutians.

**Following summer, July 1943** becomes Sitka Naval Operating Base.

**Summer 1943:** Japanese forces are driven from the Aleutian Islands. The Battle of Attu left nearly 2500 Japanese and 549 American dead. The Japanese had secretly evacuated Kiska, but friendly fire and booby traps took 313 American lives.

**1944:** August 15<sup>th</sup> The Sitka naval operating base is decommissioned.

**1946:** the Army and Navy bases turned over to the Department of the Interior, thanks in part to lobbying by Alaska Native Brotherhood. Converted into Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school (Mt. Edgecumbe) and tuberculosis hospital, Mt. Edgecumbe Hospital built 1950 in response to TB epidemic. Federal community called Mt. Edgecumbe, dissolved in early 1980s. MEHS is now operated by the State of Alaska, and the health care facilities by the nonprofit Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium.

**Impact on Sitka:** fishing town of a bit over 1000 in 1930, was nearly 2000 in 1940. People who were in Sitka at the time remember the contribution of servicemen to the local social scene, music, with celebrities entertaining the troops and visiting Sitka, sports, and to parades, especially the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. There was a dark side as well, with increase in alcohol and crime.

Huge explosion when ammunition storage caught fire in 1942 blew out windows on Katlian Street.

**In 1950**, 2000 in Sitka, and another 1300 on Mt. Edgecumbe (name of federal community on Japonski and other islands).

How many men here? Matt Hunter estimates around 4,000 max. In 1941 had 2000 Navy, a few Marines, and 1000 Army.

1946 to late 1970s: “The Island” a nearly self-sufficient federal community. Shore Boats (maintained at Boathouse) until bridge in 1972.

## **U. S. Army Coast Defenses**

*Note: please leave artifacts and ruins be, so others can experience and learn from them.*

The Army harbor defenses were to protect the air station. **Three batteries of large guns, on Biorka (Fort Peirce), the southern tip of Kruzof Island (Fort Babcock), and on Makhnati Island (Fort Rousseau) on the end of the causeway, with base end stations, with search lights, for aiming guns by triangulating observations to determine speed and location, could destroy enemy vessels entering the Sound.**

**This was not effective in an age of air war, and was among the very last coast defense installations built.**

### **Two anti-motor torpedo boat batteries at Whale and Watson Point.**

Japonski and neighboring islands were leveled and connected, including an 8,100 foot (mile and a half)-long causeway constructed to Makhnati Island.

The Army Coast Artillery began work on placing guns and base end stations in Sitka in late 1940, with two emergency batteries at Makhnati and at Shoals Point.

Work started on Army housing in **January 1941**, and the **initial garrison arrived in May 1941** from Fort Chilkoot. **Fort Ray** was built for 3000 men and about 200 officers on Alice and Charcoal Islands. It was the Army’s headquarters until **1943** when it was attached to **Fort Rousseau**, at Makhnati Island, at the end of the Causeway.

The late Walt Dangel arrived in **May of 1941 with the 250<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery**, to install the emergency emplacements of 155mm guns (replaced by modern 6” guns) and searchlights for aiming them at night. (War was not declared until December 1941)

Structures on the causeway were storehouses, a fuse house, motor sheds, officers’ quarters, a theater, eight barracks, two mess halls, and a dispensary, which are all gone except for concrete foundations. Most were removed for use by the government elsewhere in Alaska.

There were also magazines (ready storage for guns and ammunition), anti-aircraft guns on the Japonski shore and along the Sitka waterfront.

**Fort Babcock** was an unfinished gun battery at Shoals Point on Kruzof Island, and **Fort Peirce**, also unfinished, on Biorka. Three guns were at Olga Point (north Sitka Sound), and two-gun batteries were on Whale Island and at Watson Point (Sea Mart area), **Camp Aberdeen** on shore, **Camp Riley** on the hill above. Also camp in Sitka High School area, and a radar (installed summer 1943) on Harbor Mountain, and check points and lookouts throughout the Sound have left ruins behind in Sitka.

Initial construction was by the private consortium Siems Drake Puget Sound, then they were phased out by Navy Construction Battalions or SeaBees in 1942.

**Whale Island:** Temporary gun, then a 90mm battery, camp, an anti motor torpedo boat battery, along with Watson Point.

**Kayak Island** (as well as Neva): Coast Artillery built, initially manned searchlight, with 4-man crew on the searchlight, and remote station. Camp. **Seabees 1943-44** built the concrete bunker, to protect the men with the searchlight from enemy fire.

Kim Elliot (Signe Wilson and her first husband, Kent Adams) family homesteaded Kayak Island in the early 1960s, until they left after disastrous fire.

### **Aleut Internment:**

**June 1942:** Attu Island and Kiska taken by Japan. Attu residents, and weather crew on Kiska, taken prisoner. Aircraft carrier at Atka used to attack Japanese, and Atka was bombed by Japan. Atka residents evacuated, village burned by US to prevent use by Japan.

**June 1942:** residents of Pribilofs and residents of Atka, July 1942 residents of Unalaska and other villages, taken with what they could carry to SE Alaska. Until summer of 1945 had to live in severely substandard conditions at old canneries and a CCC camp.

Cold, inadequate cooking or sanitary facilities, not allowed to leave but people did and worked elsewhere, inadequate food and tools. Then when got home, found houses and churches looted and vandalized by occupying troops.

450 **Pribilof Island** Unangax people taken to Funter Bay, where 32 people died.

85 people from **Atka** taken to Killisnoo, where 17 people died, mostly elders and very young.

111 residents of **Unalaska** taken to Burnett Inlet Cannery, 40 miles from Wrangell, where 5 people died.

163 people from **other villages** taken to the Ward Lake CCC camp, near Ketchikan, where 20 individuals died.

Moment of silence, for the soldiers, sailors airmen and civilians who lost their lives, on both sides, and for the Unangax people who suffered so much.