

Sitka Names and Places

The Causeway, by Bob DeArmond with Matthew Hunter

Although the Sitka area was never a battlefield or subjected to enemy action during World War II, activities connected with the war considerably altered some of the local geography, and in no place more so than on Japonski Island and the smaller islands near it.

All of Japonski Island was reserved "for military and naval purposes" by executive order of President Harrison on June 21, 1890. In time the Navy built a coaling station on the eastern side of the island, facing the town, and in 1907 it added a wireless communications station. The two facilities, close together, occupied perhaps 5 percent of the total area of the island. The remainder was unoccupied and very little used.

To the west and south of Japonski Island were a number of smaller islands that were not part of the reserve. Eight islands to the west were unoccupied and are the subject of this series. To the south of Japonski were Harbor, Alice and Charcoal Islands and some smaller islands that enclosed, with the south end of Japonski, a shallow body of water known locally as The Lagoon. The geography of the area had remained unchanged for as long as records had been kept.

World War II brought about great geographic change to that island area and by the time it ended all of the islands had been joined to Japonski. The beginning of the change should perhaps be dated May 18, 1937, when Lt. Robert Sihler arrived to take charge of establishing a base on Japonski Island for Navy planes. The work started slowly but increased at a fast pace after a major construction contract was let on August 31, 1939, and construction continued until the summer of 1944.

One of the constructions of those years is locally known as The Causeway, a name that fits the dictionary definition of the term: "A raised roadway over water or marshland." In this case the causeway snakes westward from Japonski Island, connecting eight small islands and partly enclosing Whiting Harbor.

The first two Army units, some 200 men, reached Sitka on August 31, 1941. They were Company K of the 4th Infantry, from Chilkoot Barracks at Haines, and Battery F of the 250th Coast Artillery. By that time the Navy base had spread over a large part of Japonski Island, so the Army put its installations on Alice and Charcoal Islands and, after the causeway was built, on the islands it connected. High humps of country rock on Alice and Charcoal Islands were blasted away to level them and provide rock for the causeway. Shot rock also came from Japonski Island and from the causeway islands, two of which also originally had high profiles. All of the rock work, including the building of the causeway, and the construction of Army buildings, was done by the Navy contractor, Siems Drake Puget Sound, with some of the final construction by the SeaBees.

The islands connected by the causeway, starting from the Japonski end, are:

Nevski Island .1 mile across. Named in 1809 by the Russian navigator Ivan Vasiliev the first, published by Lt. Sarichev, IRN, in 1826 as 'O[strov] Nevshoy,' or 'Nevskoy Island.' This island was presumably named for the Russian warship NEVA which was at Sitka in 1804. Nevski is also a Russian family name." [Orth's "Dictionary of Alaska Place Names."]

During the construction of the causeway, Nevski and the next island, Reshimosti, were joined together to make one piece of land. The only thing built on it was a ration storehouse. There are no traces of the building today.

Reshimosti Island .100 feet across. Variant 'Ostrov Reshitosti,' a Russian name meaning 'determination,' given in 1809 by Ivan Vasiliev the first, published by Lt. Sarichev in 1826 as '[O]strov Reshitosti.' The U.S. Coast & Geodetic Survey, in transliterating the name, erroneously kept the Russian 't' which appears in English as 'm'. [Orth]

The island was joined, as above, with Nevski, during the construction.

Virublennoi Island .1 mile across. Russian name meaning 'cut out,' given in 1809 by Ivan Vasiliev the first; published by Lt. Sarichev, IRN, in 1826 as 'O[stov] Vyrublenney.'

Three ammunition magazines were built on this island, and they remain. Two of them were blasted out of solid rock. All are at ground level, are the shape of Quonset huts, and are buried under a man-made hill of rock. On the island are the remains of a Navy crane that was used to place large guns and in construction work. There is also a rocky clearing that was the site of a ration warehouse.

Gold Island .1 mile across. Named in 1880 by U.S. naval officers and published by the U.S. Coast & Geodetic Survey in the 1883 edition of the Coast Pilot. [Orth]

No clue has been found for the naming. The USS JAMESTOWN was at Sitka in 1880 and her crew was making surveys. Several local features were named for her officers, but none named Gold was on her roster at that time. No report has come to light of gold prospects on any of those islands.

The Orth dictionary lists both Gold and Virublennoi Islands as .1 mile across, although the maps show Virublennoi as much the larger of the two. It is quite possible that it was enlarged during the construction.

There is a two-story bunker on Gold Island, buried under rock and earth. It has three entrances at ground level and two at the top. There is a mount on top of the bunker, for a gun or an instrument. This concrete structure will undoubtedly survive for a long time.

On the island there is also a wooden fuse house. The floor has collapsed and vandals have broken all the windows and torn off the doors.

To be continued

^cf66 decauswa
The Causeway, Part 2
with Matthew Hunter

Part 1 of this series described the World War II construction of a roadway that connected Japonski Island, the site of a Navy air base, with eight small islands lying to the west. Those islands, with Alice Island and Charcoal Island, constituted an Army base whose mission was the protection of the air base from a possible enemy attack. Construction on the first five islands west of Japonski -- Nevski, Reshimosti, Virublennoi and Gold -- was described in the previous article.

Sasedni Island -- ``0.2 mile across. Variations: Ostrov Sasedney, Sasedni Group. Named in 1809 by Ivan Vasiliev the first, published in 1826 by Lt. Sarichev, IRN, as `O[strov] Sasedney,' meaning `neighbor island.'" [Orth's ``Dictionary of Alaska Place Names."]

This is the largest island in the causeway itself and about the same size as Makhnati Island at the causeway's end. In prewar days it had a small sand beach on its north side and a rock hill that was leveled as part of the construction.

Buildings on the island included two large officers' quarters, seven large two-story barracks, two mess halls, two day rooms, two storehouses, three huge motor sheds and a motor repair shed. Only the foundations of those buildings remain. The meteorological station (MET) still stands, a one-room bunker with a chimney for launching weather balloons. Meteorology was considered very important because of the effect humidity and wind can have on a shell traveling 15 miles.

Also remaining on Sasedni are four anti-aircraft gun bunkers which were built in 1942 for three-inch AA guns. They are of concrete and each consists of an octagonal gun position in the center. And each of the four had an underground crew shelter and a power room.

In addition to the four three-inch guns on Sasedni in July 1942, there were, according to a Navy inventory, four .50-caliber AA guns for use against low-flying aircraft, and two 20 mm. guns for the protection of two batteries. Even further construction was planned for the island, including a theater. This was deleted from the construction program in May 1943.

Kirushkin Island -- ``.02 mile across. Variation: Kiriushkin Island. Named in 1809 by Ivan Vasiliev the first and published in 1826 by Lt. Sarichev as `O(strov) Kiryushkin' meaning `smelt island.'" [Orth]

This island is one next west of Sasedni and today has only the concrete foundations where once stood eight barracks, three store houses, two buildings holding day rooms, two mess halls and a dispensary. Still standing is a concrete bunker with the date 1942 incised in the concrete above the door. This was the Navy's temporary HECP (Harbor Entrance Control Post) and was used for that purpose until the ``permanent" HECP was completed on Makhnati Island in 1944. The bunker had four rooms for the Navy radio station and its personnel. It is not known what use was made of this bunker after the HECP moved to Makhnati Island. Ships wishing to enter Sitka Sound were required to radio for permission and the purpose of the HECP was to identify the ships and make certain they were friendly.

Mogilnoi Island -- ``250 feet across. Variations: Mogilnoy Island, Shell Island. Russian name meaning `grave,' given in 1809 by Ivan Vasiliev the first and published by Lt. Sarichev in 1826 as `O(strov) Mogilnoy.'" [Orth]

The island has the concrete foundation of a rather large building, considering the size of the island, but the purpose of the building is unknown.

Next week, Makhnati Island and Fort Rousseau, at the outer end of The Causeway.
To be continued

The Causeway, Part 3
with Matthew Hunter

Much of the landscape around Sitka was altered by World War II construction, and one of the greatest alterations was the connecting of eight small islands together and with Japonski Island. This was done with a causeway built of country rock that was blasted from Japonski, Alice and Charcoal Islands and from some of the smaller islands themselves. Seven of the islands and remnants of their World War II installations were described in the first two parts of this series. At the outer or western end of The Causeway is:

Makhnati Island, described in Orth's ``Dictionary of Alaska Place Names" as ``0.1 mile across, 2 miles west of Sitka. Variations: Liesnoi Island, Wooded Island, Moknatoi Island, Ostrov Mokhnatoi, Osbrov Mokhnatyy. Russian name meaning `rough,' given in 1809 by Ivan Vasiliev the first and published by Lt. Sarichev in 1826 as 'O(strov) Mokhnatyy.'" [Orth]

This island, at the seaward end of the causeway, was the site of Fort Rousseau, one of three sub-forts to Fort Ray, the Army headquarters on Charcoal and Alice Islands. Some of the Alaska forts established during World War II were just a collection of buildings, but Fort Rousseau was a real fortress and portions of it will last as long as the island remains. It was named for General Lovell Harrison Rousseau whom President Andrew Johnson appointed to be the United States Commissioner to formally receive Alaska from Russia, a ceremony that took place at Sitka on October 18, 1867. More of General Rousseau later.

Fort Rousseau was ideally situated on Makhnati Island, a high lump of country rock, as a command post for the defense of the Japonski Island Naval air base, and Sitka, against attack from the sea. It commanded an unobstructed view of the

wide entrance to Sitka Sound, from Cape Edgecumbe to Biorka Island. And when completed it was reasonably secure against aerial bomb attack. Together with the installations at Shoals Point and Biorka Island it could subject any approaching enemy vessel to intensive crossfire.

Most of the fort was underground, much of it blasted out of solid rock. As a result, more of the original installation remains on Makhnati Island than on any of the other islands. There are two ammunition magazines on two levels, chambered into the solid rock and with a total of 22 rooms. The headquarters bunker is of concrete, buried underground on two levels, and has 15 rooms. It contained the HDCP, the Army's Harbor Defense Command Post, and the HECP, the Navy's Harbor Entrance Control Post. Above the bunker was a radar, operated by the Army Signal Corps which also had a radio communications system, and a signal tower. These collapsed long ago and are now a deteriorating pile of timber and concrete.

Of especial interest, although much overgrown, are two Panama-type gun mounts which allowed the guns to be rapidly rotated up to 270 degrees. The mounts were for a pair of French 155 millimeter artillery pieces from the first World War where they were designated GPF for Grande Puissance Fillou. After the war they were rebuilt in the United States and adapted for coast defense. According to Navy records at the National Archives facility in Anchorage, there were four of the 155 mm. guns on Makhnati Island but only two of the gun mounts remain.

Another main attraction is the gun mounts for battery 292. There were two six-inch (diameter of projectile) guns, 50 calibers, or 25 feet, long. The battery commander's station is on top of the battery in a two-level bunker with three rooms. It is shaped like a machine gun nest and from there the guns were aimed at the target.

In addition to the big guns, there were batteries of 50 mm. anti-aircraft guns on Makhnati and on some of the other islands in the causeway. Sasedni Island, for example, had eight anti-aircraft guns plus a couple of 20 mm guns.

Fort Rousseau was not just another collection of Army buildings but a real fortress and much of it will last as long as the island in which it is imbedded. Lovell Rousseau, for whom it was named, was born near Stanford, Lincoln County, Kentucky, on August 4, 1818. He attended the common schools of that state and studied law in both Kentucky and Indiana. He was admitted to the bar at Bloomington, Ind., in 1841. He was a member of the Indiana House of Representatives in 1844 and 1845.

When the Mexican War broke out, Rousseau became the captain of an Indiana volunteer regiment and served for the duration. After the war he was elected to the Indiana Senate and served from 1847 to 1849. He then moved to Louisville, Ky., where he practiced law and served in the Kentucky Senate.

After the Civil War started, Rousseau was active in keeping Kentucky in the Union. He raised the 5th regiment, Kentucky volunteers and was made its colonel. He participated in several of the major engagements of the war and became in turn a brigadier general and a major general of volunteers. While he was still in the Army he was elected as a Republican to the 39th Congress, effective March 5, 1865. On November 17 he resigned from the Army and took his seat in Congress when it convened on December 5, 1865. He served as a member of the Committee on Naval Affairs.

In Congress Rousseau was a staunch supporter of President Andrew Johnson and his policies, although the President was not popular with a majority of the Republicans in Congress and in fact came within one vote of being impeached. During the consideration of a bill to extend the Freedmen Bureau, which the President favored, Rousseau got into an acrimonious debate during which his opponent implied that he had been a coward in battle. Rousseau demanded an apology and when he did not get one, he struck his opponent with a light rattan cane. The House voted to expel him but did not get the necessary two-thirds majority. Rousseau was reprimanded and resigned, but a special election was called in Kentucky and he was sent back to Congress. He served until the end of the 39th Congress on March 3, 1867, just 27 days before Secretary of State William H. Seward signed the treaty purchasing Alaska from Russia.

On March 27, 1867, President Johnson appointed Rousseau a brigadier general in the regular Army with brevet rank of major general.

Next week, General Rousseau comes to Alaska.

(To be continued)