

## Chapter 16

### The Attack and the Evacuation



**N**ick Galaktionoff was asleep when gunfire awakened him about 5:30 on the morning of June 3, 1942. He had seen and heard military target practice before, most dramatically when a boat pulled a target out in the bay and the heavy guns from Amaknak Island fired at it. As he struggled awake, he made out the words, “Japanese come!” He ran to the window, expecting the streets to be flooded with invading troops. He joined Cecil Diakanoff on the street, and they watched the havoc as Japanese planes bore down on the village. People ran to bomb shelters and vehicles sped past. Nick noticed Blackie Floyd, owner of one of the bars, and about eight civilians in the back of a truck. A plane flew overhead, not much higher than the electric poles, and the ground was chipped away by gunfire. Nick dashed for a pile of cement sacks stored near the U.S. marshal’s house.

The planes in this attack—a combination of Kate bombers and Zeros—flew a path over Sedanka Island, delivered their bombs, and returned in much the same direction to carriers stationed in the North Pacific.

The next day, about six in the evening, Nick was walking up from the dock with John Bereskin of Akutan when the sirens went off and ten Japanese fighters and eleven dive-bombers struck again. Before he was able to reach his foxhole, the oil tanks on Dutch Harbor were hit and dark clouds billowed into the air.<sup>1</sup> The oil burned for days, filling the air with smoke and sending a dark rainbow into the water. These planes had approached Dutch Harbor by skirting the northern end of Unalaska Island; they returned by flying south, past Makushin and Kashega, between Unalaska and Umnak Islands.

Those killed in the first attack included twenty-five newly-arrived soldiers at Fort Mears. Casualties the next day raised the final death toll to 43. No local residents were killed or wounded. The details of the attack

on Dutch Harbor and its defense have been chronicled in several books by scholars and participants and do not need to be restated here except as recalled by former residents of the three villages. Mary Diakanoff remembered how, at night, she looked out of the bomb shelter her family used and saw Mt. Newhall—still dappled with winter snow—glowing red from the burning tanks across the water. Her father, Carl Moller, was the civilian fire marshal but the only equipment he had been given was a bucket of sand.<sup>2</sup>

Constantine and Helen Lekanoff were awaiting the birth of a child when the attack came. Constantine was a son of Simeon Lekanoff and a half-brother to Nick Lekanoff. His first wife had died in childbirth and now Helen was expecting their fourth child. Her mother had come from St. George to help. They lived in a small house near the church. On the second day of the attack, while residents took shelter in bomb shelters, Helen remained at home and went into premature labor. Her husband found her there after she had given birth to a baby girl, Alita. He brought her and the baby to the bomb shelter. The infant was “so small, they thought she was a doll. The noise was terrible,” Helen said. “Someone almost sat on her, she was so small. It was terrible in there.”<sup>3</sup>

Recollections from childhood are often reshaped in light of subsequent knowledge, and memories of the attack on Unalaska and Dutch Harbor became interwoven with subsequent events. Irene Makarin remembered standing outside at Biorka and waving at the Japanese planes. This would have been on the first day of the bombing when the planes flew over Beaver Inlet. “All the kids that are playing outside, they’re standing there, waving at them,” Irene said. “They don’t bother us, just past the Biorka. They go around that lake over there. They go around and they come back and they’re really low. All the kids are standing up, waving at them. They were waving at us, too.” She recalled that Peter Lukanin and Candy Ermeloff arrived from Unalaska and reported news of the bombing to Alex Ermeloff, the chief. They also brought word of an impending evacuation of the village. Eva Tcheripanoff’s memories also blur the bombing of Unalaska with the evacuation of Kashega Village. She, too, recalled being outside as Japanese planes flew overhead just as a vessel arrived to remove the villagers. Several vivid memories merged—airplanes passing overhead, the fear of invasion, and the eventual evacuation.

In fact, a month passed between the attack on Unalaska and the evacuation of Kashega, Makushin, and Biorka. The confused memories of childhood do, however, reflect the official bumbling that surrounded the removal of Unanga from the Aleutian and Pribilof islands. After the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association successfully fought for federal recognition and redress, between 1977 and 1988, Unanga’s experiences during World War II became subjects for college theses, dissertations, newspaper articles, books, and films. Hours and volumes of testimony confirm the ill-conceived removal of villagers, the burning of Atka,

the pervasive vandalism of homes, the deaths and privations in the relocation camps, and the overarching bureaucratic indifference that surrounded the return. The material collected during the reparations process focused on the largest communities: St. Paul, St. George, Atka, Akutan, Nikolski, and Unalaska. The story of what happened in the three villages was already slipping from memory.

Japanese forces took Kiska and captured its small contingent of U.S. naval weathermen on June 6. Attu was occupied the next day as the villagers prepared for church and the teacher and her husband looked forward to a quiet morning. Unlike the school teacher, Etta Jones, who within days of her husband's execution, was sent to Japan, the villagers were confined to the immediate vicinity of the village until September when they were shipped to Japan.

After being forced to find refuge at summer camps, the residents of Atka were swept from their village on June 12 as U.S. Navy personnel set fire to their homes and church. The vessel carrying the Atkans arrived at Nikolski, startling the military men stationed nearby. "They spent two or three days," recalled Dorofey Chercasen, "and told us what had happened to their village."<sup>4</sup> By the time the Atkans reached Unalaska on June 16, the 477 people from St. Paul and St. George had arrived on the USAT *Delarof* after a hasty departure from the Pribilof Islands. A few Atkans had been left behind on their island and they were flown to Dutch Harbor. All 83 Atkans went aboard the *Delarof* and a few days later the overcrowded ship departed Dutch Harbor for Southeastern Alaska. The Pribilof people were set ashore at Funter Bay on Admiralty Island on June 24 to make their way among the ruins of an abandoned cannery and an abandoned gold mining camp. The next day, the Atkans were barged fifty miles away to Killisnoo, a deserted and burned-out fish plant at the site of a former Tlingit village. Conditions at both places were not so much substandard as non-existent.

Five days later, June 29, orders were issued to evacuate the remaining villages in the Chain.<sup>5</sup>

Nick Borenin was nineteen when he left Makushin aboard a small Navy vessel. Elia and Eva Borenin, along with Nick's two sisters and brother, had packed a few belongings, mainly clothes. In addition to the six members of the Borenin family, the evacuees included Pete Olsen, his wife and son. The village was simply left to itself. Although Nick Lekanoff was at Unalaska, he heard from Makushin people that, unlike Unalaska, Makushin was evacuated with no warning. "You guys are leaving" is all that they knew. There was no information about where they were going or if they would return.<sup>6</sup> Elia Borenin was the starosta [church warden] and it seems likely that if he had anticipated a lengthy absence he would have taken steps to protect the chapel. "Everything in the church was left as it was," Nick Borenin recalled. "All we brought was just a suitcase."<sup>7</sup> They disembarked at Chernofski.



The Kudrins at Kashega. Back row, left to right: Sergie (21), Peter (30), Mike (27). Front row, left to right: George (17), Efemia (57), Olga (24) Photograph courtesy Jane Mensoff and Eva Kudrin.

The evacuation of Kashega was complicated by the fact that one or two residents were at Chernofski. Sophie Kudrin, a woman of legendary drive, was cooking at the sheep ranch while Eva, her fourteen-year-old daughter, was staying with Efemia Kudrin. Efemia's daughter, Olga, was in her early twenties, and she and Eva provided help to the older woman who suffered from severe arthritis. After dinner one day, Eva and Olga took garbage to throw over the bank and into the sea. They saw a boat of some kind out on the water. On their way back home, they passed Olga's brother, Mike J., and told him, "We think we saw a boat out there, but we're not sure."

“All of a sudden those five planes was coming,” Eva recalled. “Good thing they didn’t bomb us!” She and Olga just stood and watched as planes flew southwest toward the end of the island. Before long, the boat they had seen earlier had anchored near the village. Olga later identified it as a PBY support boat.<sup>8</sup> Men came ashore in a skiff and Mike J. told them about the planes that had just flown over. This news appears to have accelerated the evacuation of the village.

“We couldn’t take anything,” Eva recalled. She once remarked that people were in such a rush that they just grabbed any clothes at hand.<sup>9</sup> Efemia Kudrin’s arthritis made climbing into the skiff and onto the tug a slow laborious process. “And it took a long time to get that Olga’s mother on aboard, you know,” Eva recalled. “So I didn’t take anything, no clothes or nothing. Just the way I’m wearing, I got on the boat.”<sup>10</sup>

On another occasion she recalled that after seeing the boats she went back to Olga’s house where Mike J. was helping his mother—“She couldn’t walk or anything”—and Eva did the dishes. “Mike said he was going to go down by the beach again. He said that boat must be coming for something.” Eva, Olga, and Mike J. returned to the beach. “The boat was coming; it anchored out and a dory came ashore and they told us to go right away. They didn’t even give us a chance to take our clothes or anything, you know, because those planes were flying around Kashega. It was just terrible....It was in the evening, about 9:30.”<sup>11</sup>

George Gordaoff was older than Eva and his memories, while differing in some details, contain important additions.<sup>12</sup> He identified the boat that anchored off the village as a California herring boat, a “nice boat,” a “big boat.” The ensign was in charge and he gave the order for people to pack just a single suitcase. Villagers had time to board up the chapel, but there was not enough lumber to thoroughly protect all the windows in the homes. After the village pets were put down, the people took a dory out to the larger boat. When they arrived at Chernofski, they were housed in a tent. This soon proved unsatisfactory because water seeped through the canvas floor, actually forming puddles. After George reported the problem, the people were moved onto the *Columbia*, an Alaska Steamship Company vessel. Gordaoff recalled that the Kashega people were there for “about ten days” before the Nikolski residents arrived. This would date the evacuation of Kashega to approximately June 28, the day the general orders were issued.

The women, children, and a few men traveled from Nikolski on an FS or YP boat while the younger men traveled on a tug.<sup>13</sup> They reached Chernofski on the evening of July 5 and immediately went aboard the *Columbia*. This vessel could easily accommodate all the passengers, unlike the overcrowded *Delarof*. “It was a nice big boat,” George Gordaoff recalled, “and it had nice staterooms, dining room, a real passenger boat.”<sup>14</sup>

Twenty individuals are listed as having been evacuated from Kashega, but this included Sophie Kudrin and George Gordaoff who were picked up at Chernofski. The list identified George Borenin as chief of the village.

He was living with the elderly Nikifer Denisoff, while Sergie Borenin was staying with Cornelius Kudrin. There was Carl Borenin and his young daughter, Mary. Carl's wife, Eva, had left the village. Peter Yatchmenoff appears to have been away from the village, but his wife Nellie was there with their two young children, Laura and Paul. Laressa Yatchmenoff, the widow of the late chief John Yatchmenoff, had returned to Kashega from Unalaska in time to be evacuated. Efemia Kudrin's household included her daughter Olga along with visiting Eva, and also her sons Sergie, Mike J., and Peter. Peter's wife Tatiana had gone to Atka to visit her ailing father and been evacuated from there.<sup>15</sup> Six-year old Vassa Kudrin, daughter of Mike and Dora Kudrin was also at Kashega, but it is not known with whom she was living. Kashega not only had the largest population of the three villages, but three of its residents—Laresa Yatchmenoff, Efemia Kudrin, and Nikifer Denesoff—were older than any individuals at Biorka or Makushin. None would survive the evacuation.

The evacuation of Biorka occurred on a day when the men had caught a large number of salmon and the women had started preparing them for drying.<sup>16</sup> That evening, as it was growing dark, three men arrived in a small boat. Andrew Makarin and Candy Ermeloff went to meet them. The order for evacuation had arrived. Irene Makarin was inside when her father returned, spoke to his wife in *Unangam tunuu*, and told Irene to collect her clothes. She had no suitcase and so she used a flour sack. While the Biorka people gathered their belongings, the military men waited at the shore. By the time everyone arrived, it had grown dark. Irene recalled that they took a skiff out to a small vessel—"too small"—leaving their homes behind. "Holy Smoke," Irene said, "they left—all the Biorka people—they left a lot of stuff. My mom and dad used to have chickens, dogs and cats, everything. They left a lot of good stuff in their houses." The fish were left drying on racks. It was late and the children had fallen asleep when they arrived at a dock. Irene was awakened and led off the ship. "Me, I'm just crying," she recalled. "I want my daddy, you know. Couldn't see my daddy." They walked past soldiers who stood in a line watching them as they boarded the *Columbia*.

The route taken by the *Columbia* from Chernofski has not been determined. Kohlhoff suggests it first went to Akutan and then backtracked to Dutch Harbor to collect the Biorka people. If those from Biorka were taken to Dutch Harbor, it would have been more likely that they boarded the vessel first and that the *Columbia* then proceeded to Akutan. George Gordaoff recalled that the *Columbia*, after leaving Chernofski, stopped at Unalaska and Akutan. If the ship stopped at Dutch Harbor, did Andrew Dyakinoff—who is listed on the manifest—get off? The strongest evidence that the *Columbia* went from Chernofski to Unalaska is Eva Tcheripanoff's recollection.

We went from Kashega to Chernofski to pick my mom up. We stayed in Chernofski overnight.... We stopped over [at] Dutch

[Harbor]. John [Tcheripanoff] was working over there that time. I wasn't married to John. I was single. He used to work for Seims Drake or something over there. I saw him on the dock. I remember that. From there we went to Kodiak. From Kodiak to Ketchikan.... John left with them. John was traveling with those Unalaska people.

Nick Galaktionoff recalled both his sister, Molly Lukanin, and Andrew Makarin saying that “after the other villages had been picked up, a small boat came from Akutan and took the Biorka people to join the Akutan people on a larger ship.”<sup>17</sup> In any event, eighteen people from Biorka and forty-one from Akutan soon found themselves at sea with the Nikolski, Kashega, and Makushin residents. The Biorka women and children were given one room and the men and boys another. During the trip to southeastern Alaska, sailors stood guard at the door to keep the children from having the run of the ship. On one occasion, Irene slipped out and went looking for her father. She was caught by a husky sailor who carried her back to the quarters while she struggled and cried, “I want my dad. I want my daddy!” The man handed her to Eustina Makarin who delivered a good scolding.

Among the shipboard traumas that Irene laughed about years later was breakfast. The first morning she was seated between her parents at a table with the other Biorka people. Breakfast was served and her father said, “You better eat something.” But Irene just stared at the odd food in front of her. “I never see cereal before, you know,” she said. “I turned around and told my dad, ‘I want my fish, boiled fish!’” All the Biorka kids, she said, had a hard time adjusting to the food.

“We were traveling with those Nikolski people,” Eva recalled. “And Peter Dushkin’s mother, Augusta— I used to be chubby. I had long brown hair—and every time I saw her it seemed she didn’t want to look at me. Every time she saw me, she just hide away from me.... She thought I was white people! Oh, she made me laugh after we knew each other and she told me, you know!” Augusta told her that sometimes when she was tired of being inside the cabin, she wanted to go out onto the deck but she was afraid. “She’d look around first, because she didn’t want to meet me!”<sup>18</sup>

As the ship traveled past Unimak Island and along the Alaska Peninsula, there were frequent boat drills. Olga Mensoff recalled that they stopped at False Pass for water.<sup>19</sup> Nikifer Denisoff had hunted sea otters near here a half-century earlier, but now he was too old, his eyesight too poor, to join the younger men who took turns standing watch. The most he could do was to go to the railing, feel the familiar wind and smell the salt air as the ship made its slow way across a dark and heavy sea.



Ward Lake map dating to 1935 showing the Wacker homestead, the CCC shop and garage, and the residential area of the camp. The "Play Ground" is a recreational beach. Ketchikan Museum.