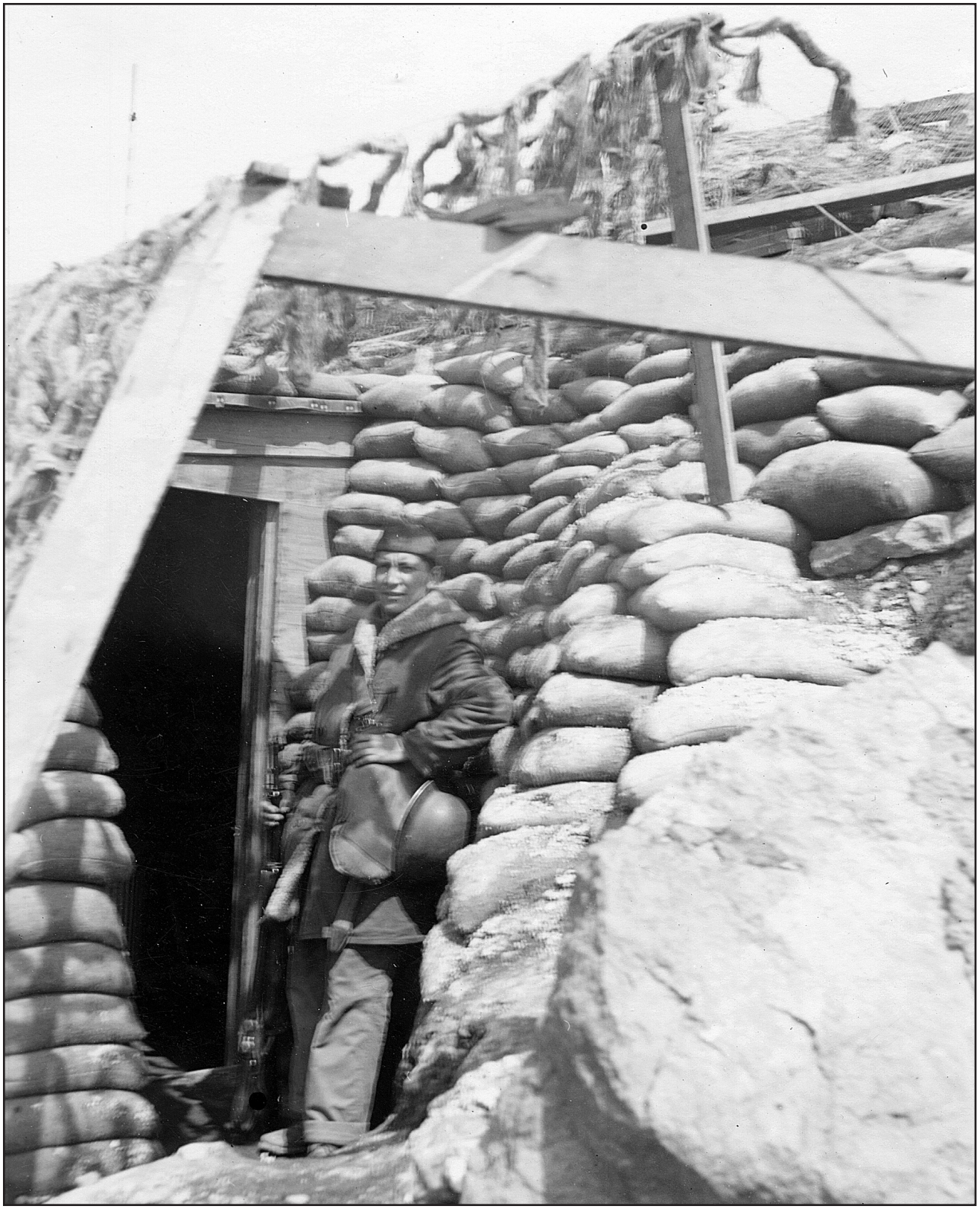
Aleutian World War II National Historic Area
Unalaska, Alaska

Fort Schwatka Self-Guided Tour



Ulakta Head, Mount Ballyhoo

View from one of the three base end stations at Ulakta Head. National Park Service Photo.

Welcome to the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area.

Time has taken its toll on the features of Fort Schwatka and visitors need to be aware of the hazards that exist. Use caution during your visit and please stay on the roads, trails, and pathways. The site preserves bunkers and observation posts still in excellent condition; however, tunnel entrances leading into them are not stable and most have caved in. For your safety you should avoid these entrances. Collapsed tunnels may also be the cause of any area that appears to have sunk below normal ground level. It is not safe to walk on these areas. Please stay off of the building ruins and no matter where you walk watch for nails, holes, and icy tundra. Cliff edges are steep and very often undercut; loose gravel, slippery slopes, and unexpected wind gusts could cause you to lose your balance. We recommend that you stay at least 20 feet from the cliff edge. Nearly all of the self-guided tour is accessible by vehicle. Using safety precautions you can also travel on foot to explore other features of Fort Schwatka that are not described in the self-guided tour.

If you are on your own, you must contact the Ounalashka Corporation office at 400 Salmon Way, Unalaska, near Margaret Bay or the Aleutian World War II Visitors Center for an access permit.

Left: A member of the gun crew poses next to the crew quarters

Fort Schwatka, July 1943

Self-Guided Tour Map

Orientation Sign

Fort Schwatka and the "Iron Ring"

Before you lies the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area and the historic footprint of the U.S. Army base Fort Schwatka and Battery 402. At 897 feet above sea level the fort is the highest coastal battery constructed along the coast of the United States. The fort was constructed in 1940 to protect the Dutch Harbor Naval Operating Base from a seaborne invasion fleet. The June 1942 attack on Dutch Harbor prompted an upgrade of the fort that was completed by early 1944. At full development Fort Schwatka had over 100 structures supporting the soldiers of the two coast artillery units that manned the cannons and antiaircraft guns. Barracks, storehouses, a recreation center, officers club, quonset huts, latrines, administration, and support buildings all served the needs of an estimated 250 soldiers stationed on this lonely mountain.

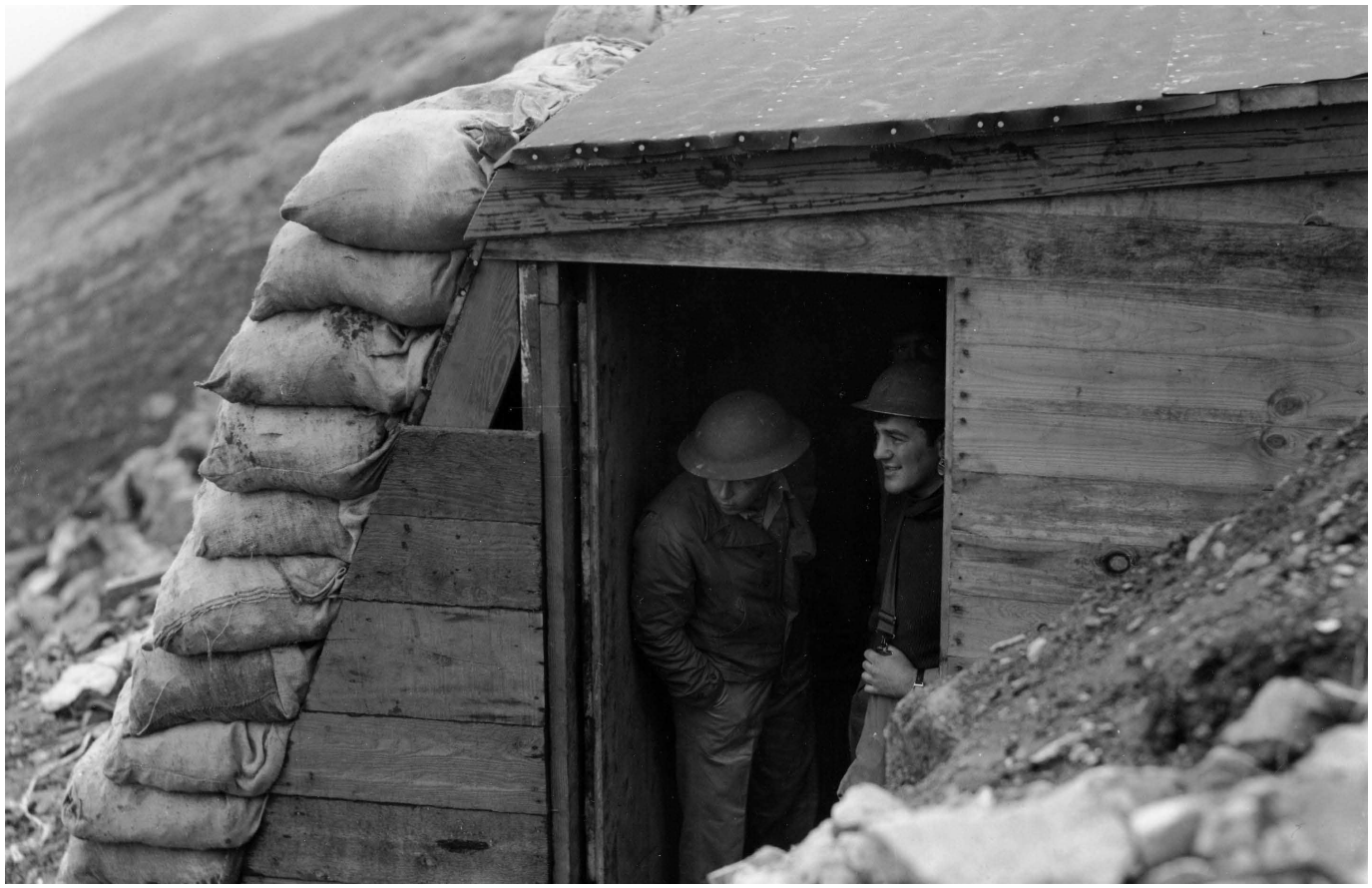
Battery 402 was the center point for the "iron ring" defense of Dutch Harbor – a series of strategically placed defense installations and observation posts along the coastlines of Amaknak and Unalaska Islands. Anti-submarine netting stretched across Iliuliuk and Captains Bay backed up the "Iron Ring". (Fort Learnard and Battery 298 were the other large fortifications.) Smaller installations were constructed at Hill 400 on Amaknak Island, Fort Brumback in Summer Bay, Hog Island in Unalaska Bay and Fort Mears Garrisons in Unalaska Valley provided additional strength.

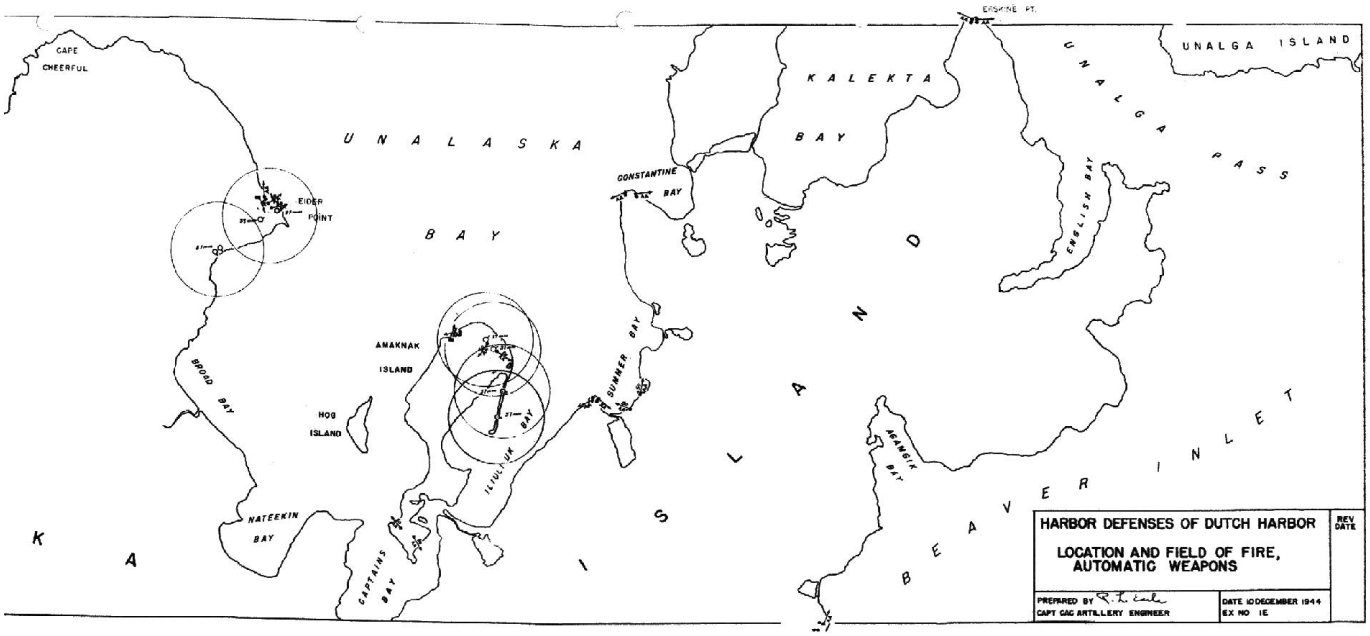
Engineers designed the structures here to withstand bomb blasts, earthquakes, and gale force winds. Today, many of the structures of Fort Schwatka have collapsed, but the gun mounts and lookouts are among the most intact in the entire United States.

"Up on a wind swept mountain,
And what a hell of a spot,
Rattling a hell of a snow storm,
In a land that time forgot…."

anonymous soldier, Mt. Ballyhoo, 1941

Orientation Sign





Stop 1 Enlisted Men's Barracks

"At night when the wind is howling,
It's more than a man can stand,
Hell no! we're not convicts,
We're defenders of our land…."

anonymous soldier, Mt. Ballyhoo, 1941

Stop 1

To locate Stop 1, facing the orientation sign, follow the road on your left around the head of the valley to its end. There you will see a sign indicating the beginning of the self-guided tour.

This is the remnants of one of four large barracks of Fort Schwatka (above). Of the four barracks, three housed sixty-three men each and one forty-five men. The opposite page shows one of Fort Schwatka's wood framed barracks. The building design, typical for this era, is the Army's standard 700-series architecture.

In the immediate vicinity of this stop, you will notice all that is left of many wooden buildings are piles of lumber and weather flattened walls and roofs. Before collapsing, these buildings withstood many years of harsh Aleutian storms with heavy rain, strong winds, and deep snow. The intensity of the climate is why much of what remains of Fort Schwatka is rusting metal, rotting wood, and weathering concrete structures.

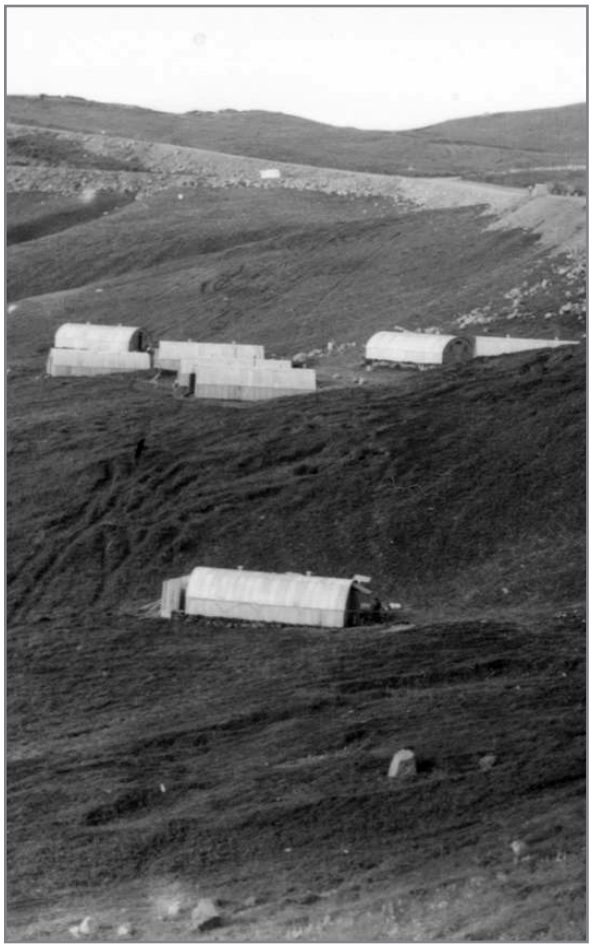
Across the valley, on a clear day, you'll see the shadowy imprints of foundations on the steep hillside, tunnels used to access command posts, and rotting remains of the wooden staircases (left) that men used on wet and windy nights to reach their bunks.

Stop 2 Enlisted Men's Recreational Area

"We are only living for tomorrow,
In hopes of seeing our gals,
Hoping that if we ever return,
They're not married to our pals."

anonymous soldier, Mt. Ballyhoo, 1941

Stop 2



The quonset hut ruins of the enlisted mens recreation center (above) is across the valley and on the slope below the road junction and orientation sign.

For these soldiers of Fort Schwatka (opposite) simply making it from day to day was an ordeal. So they could be summoned to their stations at a moment's notice, the soldiers were garrisoned on this mountain, rather than in the town of Dutch Harbor. They spent days and nights at the ready, waiting in the fog for an enemy that would never come, separated not only from home and family, but from their fellow military men in town. For the demoralized men, a recreation area was essential — somewhere to blow off steam until they could make it to the bar and movie theatres of Dutch Harbor.

Stop 2 a: Looking down the valley towards Unalaska Bay, the two track road (left slope of the valley) travels to a cliff edge overlook. Along this route are several building ruins that were warehouses, garages, and smaller barracks. Some ruins along this route are the semi-circular metal quonset huts (left) in common use during World War II. Fifty-four were constructed at Fort Schwatka, of these many were used as barracks for antiaircraft artillery crews.

Stop 3

Cabana and Enlisted Mens Life in a Barracks

"No one seems to know we are living,
We wonder, 'Do they give a damn?'
Back home we are soon forgotten,
We have been loaned to Uncle Sam."

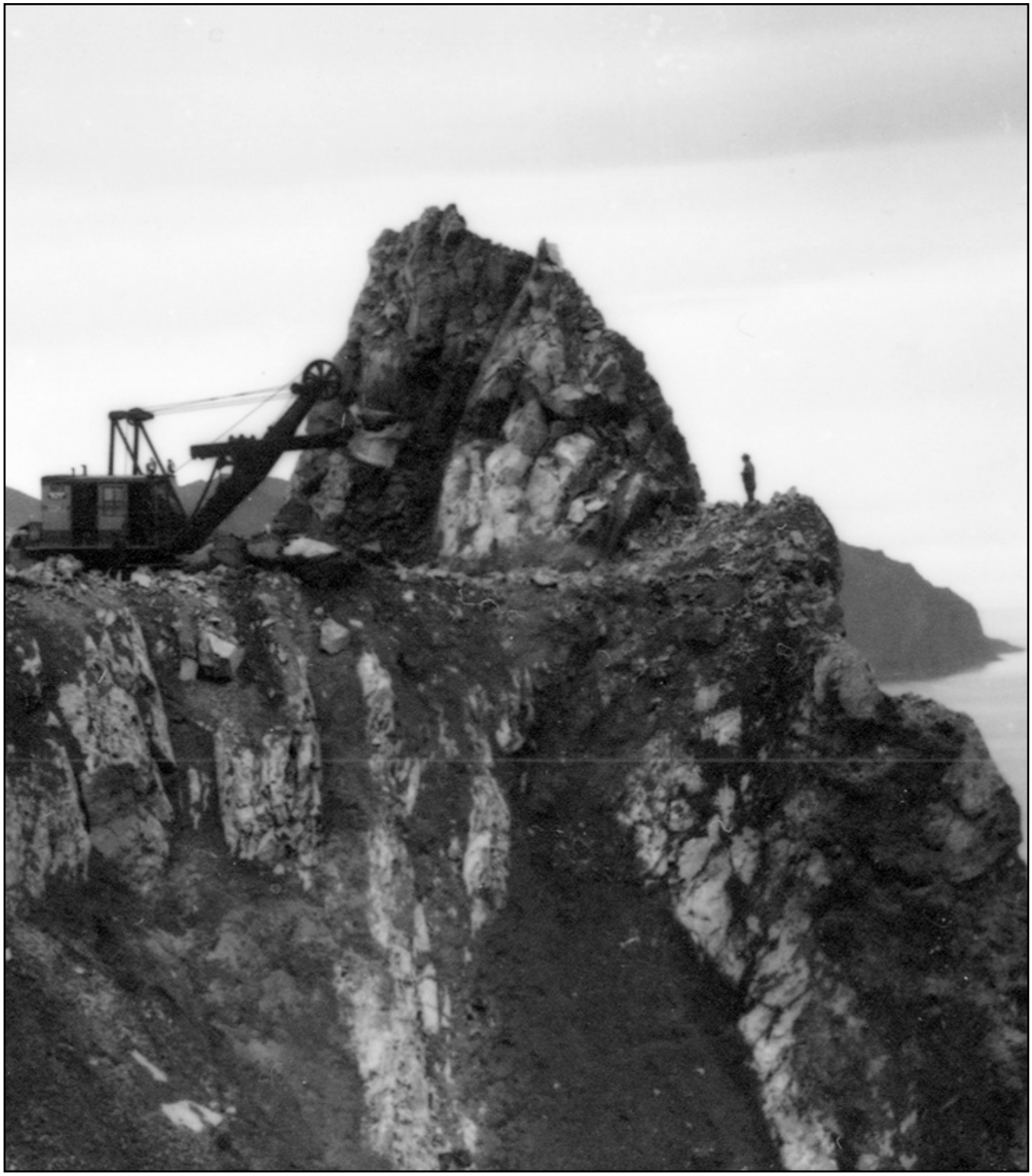
anonymous soldier, Mt. Ballyhoo, 1941

Stop 3

This is the only remaining wooden building standing at Fort Schwatka (above). This "cabana" commonly housed four officers. It was the smallest barracks for the soldiers of Fort Schwatka. Unlike the officers, the larger barracks in this immediate vicinity (including the one you stood by at Stop 1) housed enlisted men that were packed in like sardines (opposite). Many men found the conditions appalling. One wrote years later that "It was absolutely the worst duty that I ever served and I spent 27 years in the army." Others, however, found the exotic location, the entrancing scenery, and the camaraderie helped make this the best time in their lives, writing, "I would not trade my experience in Dutch Harbor for anything. It gave me a much broader outlook on human nature and behavior." At left is a soldier posing in front of barracks.

Stop 3a: The entire fort, gun emplacements, and observation posts relied on electricity to function – an enormous task. The poles that you can see on the slope of Mount Ballyhoo, above the cabana, held electric lines that came from the well fortified power plant in Dutch Harbor. Water pumped from Dutch Harbor was stored in two 25,000 gallon tanks that were located high above the facilities. These tanks are no longer standing.

Stop 4 The Dispensary and Building Fort Schwatka



"...we went up there, what they were doing was blasting out part of that mountain to make it flat."

Pfc Conrad Bitter

Stop 4

The dispensary for the men at Fort Schwatka (located at the road junction directly behind you when you face the orientation sign) was a well-constructed building; being different from the barracks it has a concrete floor. Anyone in need of minor medical treatment came here – the building even had a pharmacy on site and a few beds for patients needing bed rest. Besides Battery 402 and its base end stations and command posts the only other facility with a cement floor is the latrine. The latrine ruins (above) are located down slope from the turnout by the intersection of Stop 5b. Note the sink and plumbing drains.

The building remnants leave memories of the skillful work of laborers, carpenters, plumbers, and electricians dedicated to the defense of their country. The need to defend Dutch Harbor pressed men to complete arduous work tolerating the incessant rain and long winter.

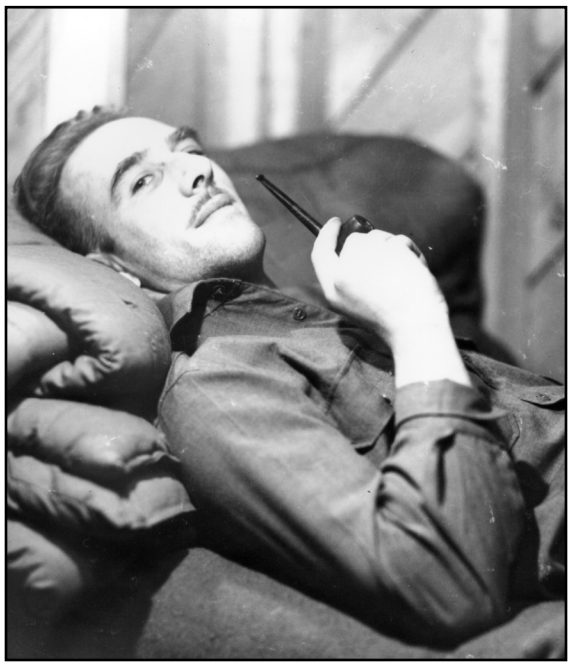
In summer 1941, civilian construction workers from the Seims Drake Puget Sound Company (opposite and left) and the 206th Coast Artillery Regiment built the original defenses and quarters. Beginning in February 1943, it took the Seabees of the 51st Naval Construction Battalion about one year to construct Battery 402 complex and the upgraded facilities of Fort Schwatka.

Stop 5 Administration, Personnel & an Officer's Life

"We enjoyed airmailed editions of national magazines, such as Time, as well as paperbacks."

Sergeant Ben Keh

Stop 5



This was the administrative center of Fort Schwatka. The buildings in this area have mostly vanished, but in Fort Schwatka's heyday, this area was bustling with day-to-day, non-combat operations. Food storage, administration and personnel buildings, and a small ammunition magazine were in this area. It was here that all the endless paperwork would have been handled. On the opposite page a soldier in a dress uniform poses with his assigned vehicle.

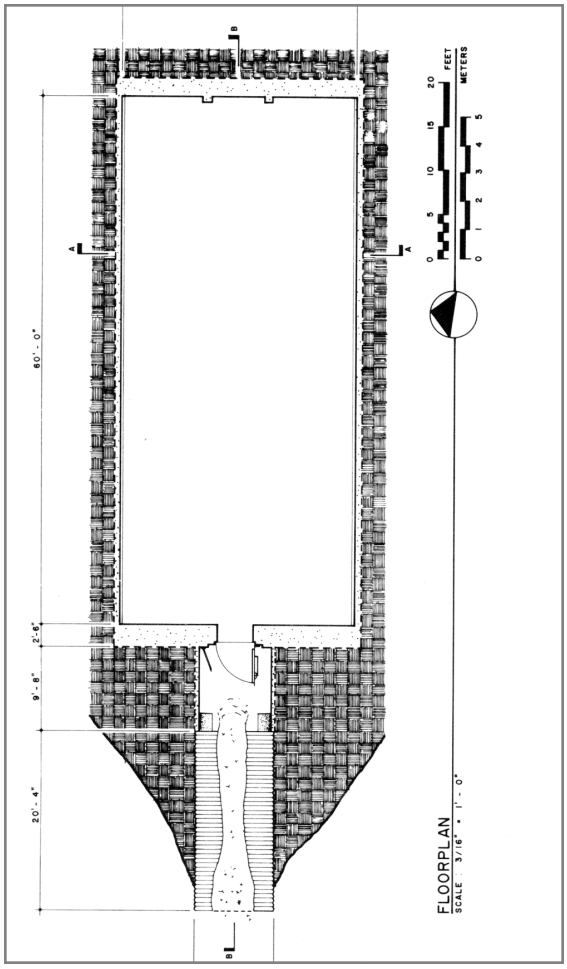
Other nearby ruins are the Officers' Quarters (Stop 5a) and the 250 man mobilization mess hall (Stop 5b). While the enlisted personnel were in open barracks, the officers lived relatively privileged lives; sleeping in a Cabana or a Yakutat hut (above and left). Officers had their own latrines, recreation facilities and NCO Clubs where alcohol was available. The Battery Commander had his own private quarters nearby.

Stop 6 Ammunition Magazines

"We had no definite relief that we could count on. There were always rumors about going to the states or elsewhere."

Sergeant Ben Keh

Stop 6



This munitions magazine is known as an "elephant steel" shelter or Armco hut. The shelter design is shown in the left diagram. These structures were built on a cement foundation with panels of heavy-gage corregated steel bolted together and covered with soil. A turf covered bunker embedded in the hillside made it nearly invisible from the air. If a Japanese plane flew over, the pilot would see another contour on the mountainside. Other magazines are located at Stop 6a and 6b.

The magazine across the road from this stop is shown in the above photo. The historic photograph on the opposite page shows the same shelter prior to being covered with turf. In this photo it is easy to see the concrete walls and heavy metal doors designed to protect it from a nearby bomb blast.

Other nearby ruins: To the left of Stop 6 are the ruins of a machine shop and warehouse. An officer's quarters once stood at the intersection. Just across the road and down the slope was an electrical transformer and multiple quonset hut barracks.

Stop 7 Harbor Entrance Command Post

"Nothing [was] going on, and some of the boys couldn't take it."

Pfc Garland Jackson

Stop 7

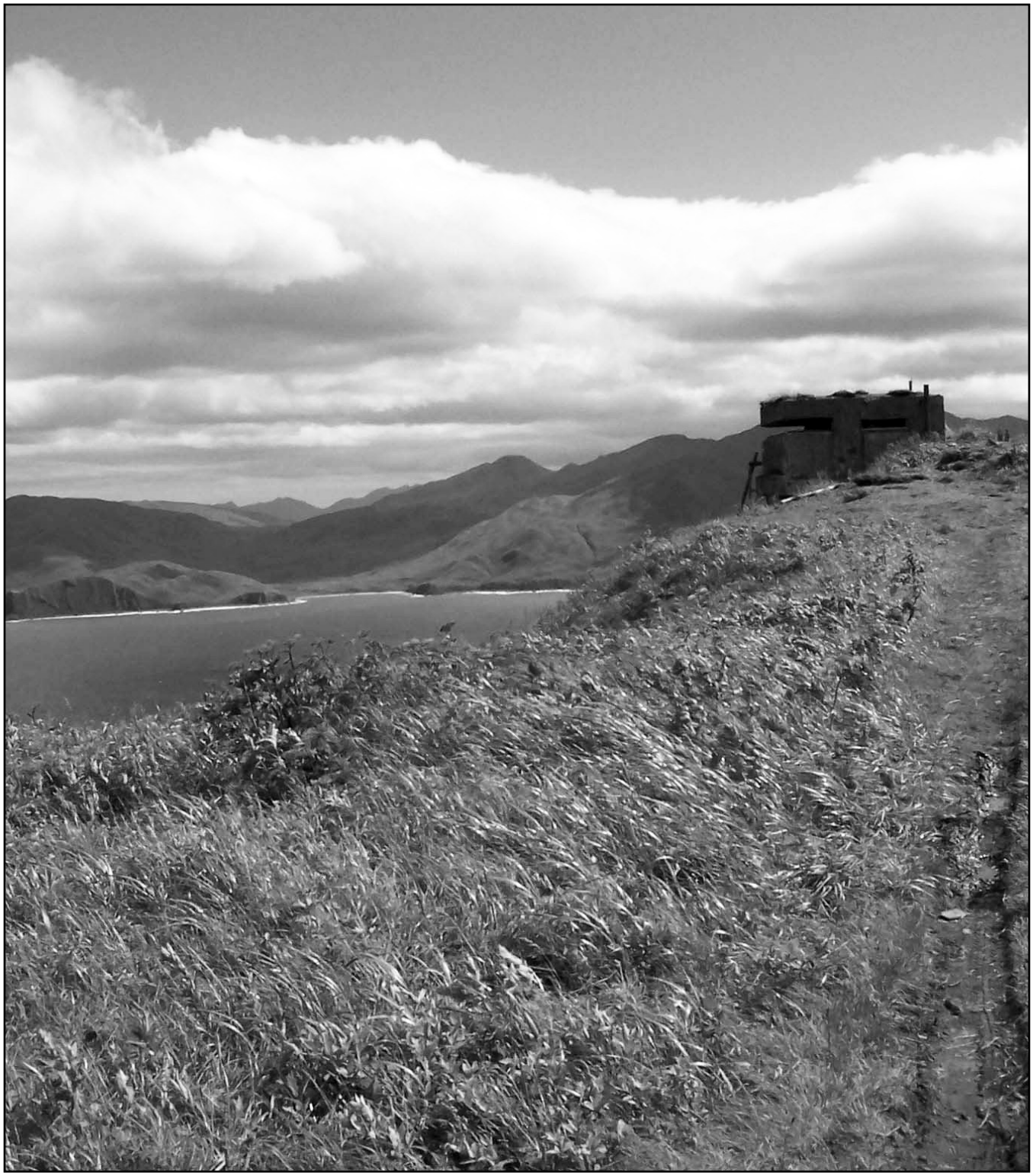
This is the Harbor Entrance Command Post that was constructed in 1943. Soldiers used the tunnel (below) to access the underground operational center and the embedded observation post (above). *Please use the trail to the left of the tunnel to travel to the observation post.* Traveling through the tunnel and into the underground facility is unsafe.

The underground command post was entirely self sufficient with its own power, ventilation, and plumbing. Protecting it were heavy wooden blast doors (opposite). Contained within were a radar, plotting and intelligence rooms, and chemical warfare service equipment. A steep stairway connects the below ground center to the observation post. An airlock manhole door separated the two areas and would have provided some measure of protection from chemical agents.

To determine if they were friend or foe the soldiers would monitor all vessels approaching the harbor entrance. If they suspected enemy vessels they would activate an alert status; then this post would be under control of the Harbor Defense Commander. By the time it was operational, the war moved west and the threat of attack of Dutch Harbor diminished. Without an enemy threat, this facility then provided navigational assistance to ships and aircraft entering the harbor.

Stop 7a: Just south of Stop 7, along the road, is the radio station for the harbor defense. The buried elephant steel radio room has concrete entrance corridors leading to a short staircase on one end and to a ladder leading to a manhole on the other.

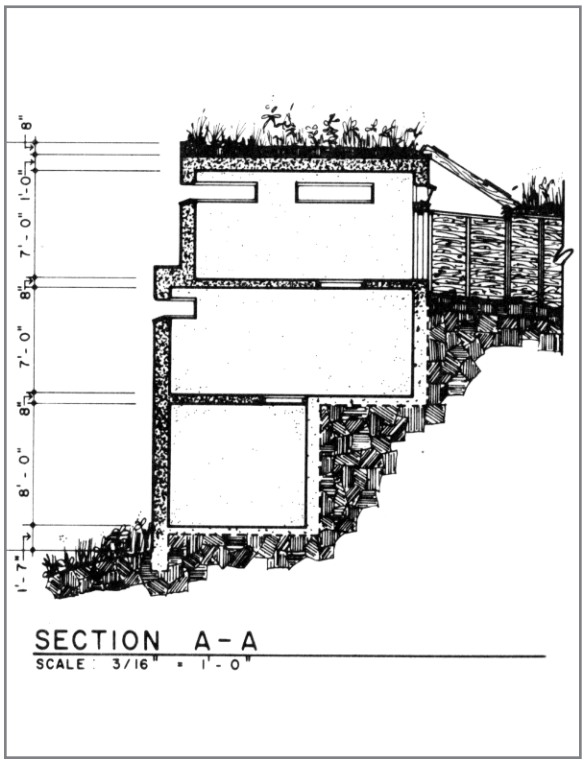
Stop 8 Battery Command and Base End Station



"I could see plainly the bomb bays opening and the bombs falling over the fort (Fort Mears). From our position we could see quite a bit of action. We were not engaged militarily."

Sergeant Ben Keh

Stop 8

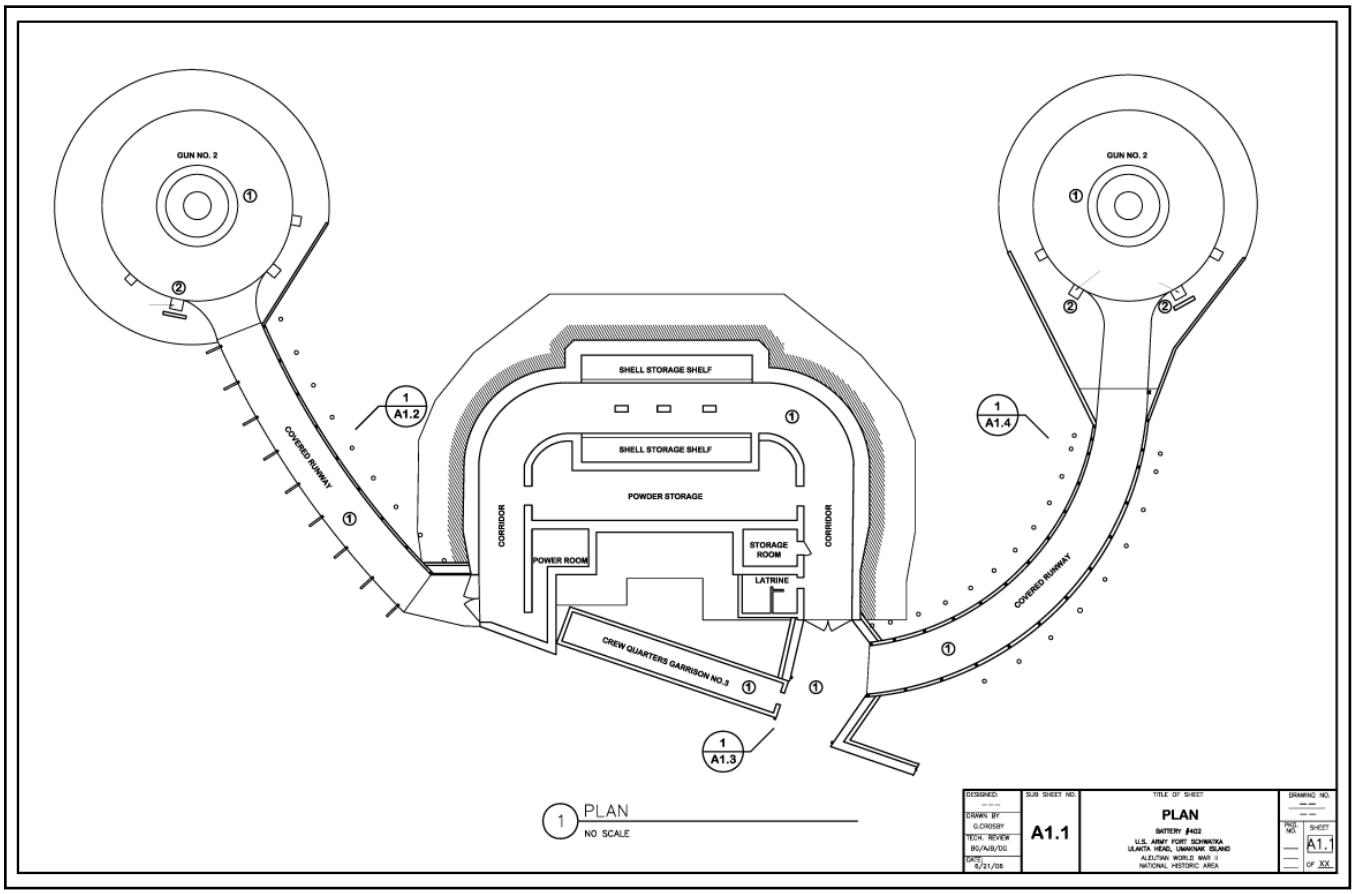


Battery 402 complex was completed in January 1944 and was assigned its sequential construction number which was "402." This is the Battery Command Station and one of the base end stations of the battery (above, left, and opposite). On the upper level the Battery Commander would coordinate all operations of the battery including target acquisition, targeting priority, ammunition type, and firing orders. Directly behind the base end station is what remains of the state-of-art SRC 592 radar room and the once earth covered tunnel that leads to the concealed below ground plotting room.

On the lower levels of this base end station spotters using an M1910 Azimuth instrument would scope and train on the target and feed information to the engineers in the plotting room located down the hill and across the road (Stop 8a). The engineers in the plotting room would use this data to triangulate on the target, obtain its range and then telephone these coordinates to the 8-inch gun battery station.

Radar provided the battery with target tracking information when visibility was poor due to weather or darkness. This was one of two radar stations at Fort Schwatka; the other one was at Stop 7.

Stop 9 Battery 402



"No one said we were glad to be in this place, but there was a sense of mission. We were all aware of the bombing missions to Attu and Kiska in the latter part of our stay."

Sergeant Ben Keh

Stop 9

This is the magazine complex of Battery 402 with its two 8-inch gun platforms. The horseshoe design with the connected sod-covered roadways (opposite lower) supplied both guns. The ammunition needed for immediate response was stored on the cement shelf of the ready ammunition room, located in the middle of the corridor (opposite upper). Using carts, shells were wheeled through the thick wooden blast doors to the gun positions at the end of each roadway Powder sacks were stored in the central room and fuses in another.

The semi-circular quonset room (left of the right side entrance to the battery) was the quarters for the ready crew who manned the guns. Entirely self sufficient, an interior latrine was provided for the ready crew. Two diesel generators housed in a separate room supplied backup electricity to the entire battery including the guns and searchlights (left).

During darkness, if an unidentified ship came into range, searchlights would illuminate it and the spotters in the base end stations could then track the target.

Stop 10

8–Inch Gun Platform

"We only fired the 8-inch guns about three times. They would take a tug boat and pull a large target hundreds of feet behind and we would track on that and fire."

Kenneth Sprunger, target spotter

Stop 10

The circular concrete platform directly in front of you is a barbette carriage. This mount is for one of the two 8-inch guns of Battery 402; the other shown in the above photo is on the opposite side of the battery. These 8-inch guns were the largest caliber weapon in the "iron ring" defense. The huge MkVI, Mod 3A2 gun was 30-feet long and weighed 51.5 tons. These guns could fire a 240-pound shell up to 22 miles, dwarfing the range and power of the older 155mm guns that it replaced.

The gun was mounted in the center of the platform (opposite). The nearly 10-feet deep bowl provided space for ballast necessary to balance the cannons heavy barrel. The circular shape gave it a full 360 degree rotation. Notice the narrow table directly behind the gun barrel; this is the ammunition loader (these loaders are now in the semi-circular quonset hut of Battery 402). The shells were carried from inside the battery on wheeled carts, then placed on the trough and rammed into the gun barrel. Manned by the Battery "A" of the 264th Coastal Artillery each gun had a 25 man crew (left).

The guns had a short life. They were placed in service in late 1943 and destroyed by explosives in August 1946. Only small pieces of these huge guns remain.

Stop 11 Wooden Sled: Hauling Materials

"Donkey engines had to do an awful lot of pulling and that's how we got the guns up there."

Pfc. Conrad Bitter

Stop 11

In summer 1941, for the initial defense of Dutch Harbor, this sled (above) was used to haul materials up the slope of Ulakta Head. The photos (opposite and left) show a heavy 13-ton 155mm gun moved up the steep slope. On the beach of Dutch Harbor, by the park entrance, a large engine mounted to a frame would winch the guns and sleds up the slope by using cable running from top to bottom. At the top of the slope a firmly anchored sled called a "donkey" held the cable (below). When the winch rolled the cable in, the sled moved up the steep slope. Later that summer, as Fort Schwatka developed, construction of the road eased the burden of transporting materials to Ulakta Head.

Stop 12 Panama Mounts and 155mm Guns

"We had one pratice with live ammunition (155 mm) with a towed target in Unalaska Bay."

Sergeant Ben Keh

Stop 12

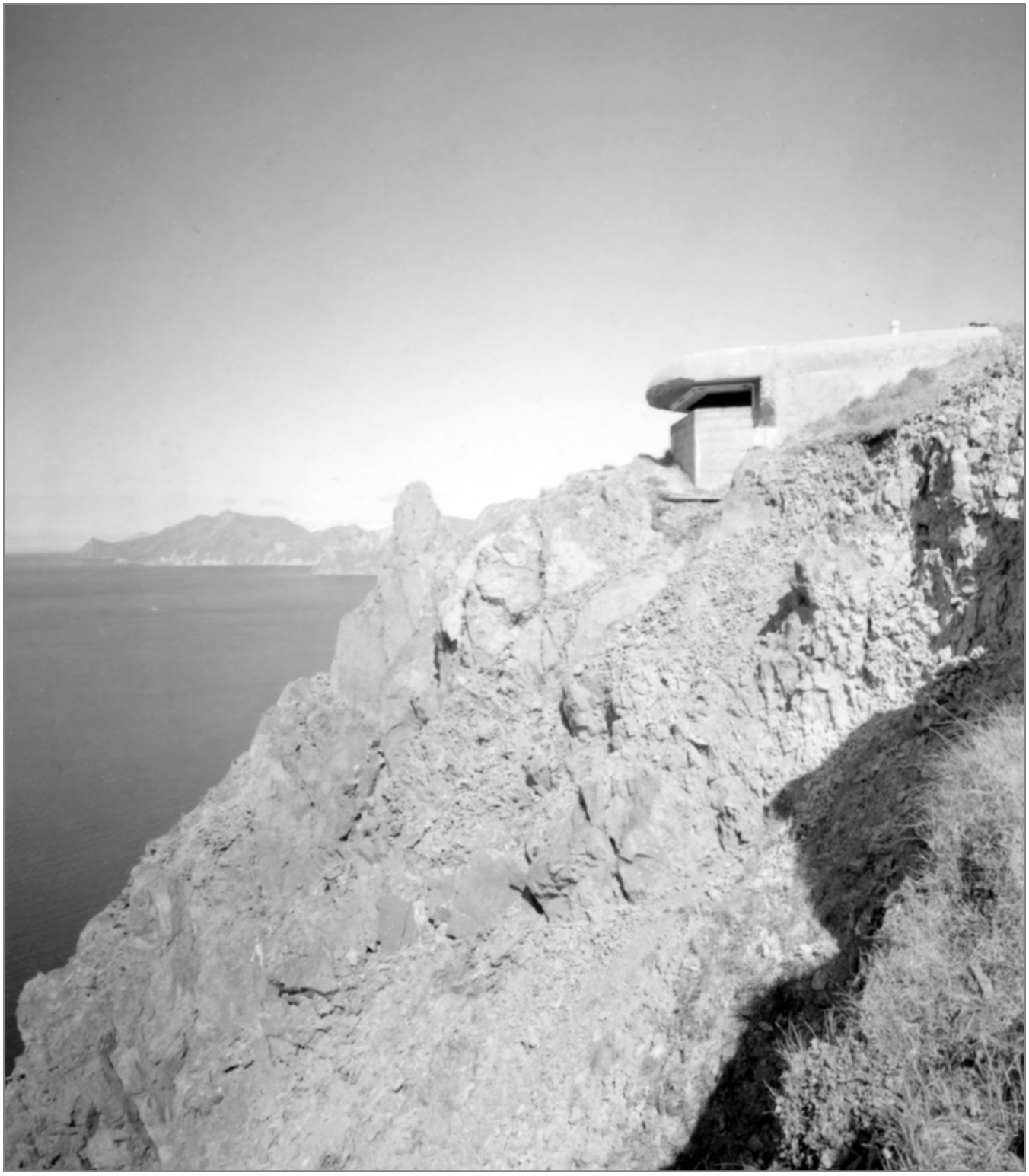
This circular concrete structure is the one of the four Panama mounts on Ulakta Head. Constructed in the summer of 1941, these were the original gun emplacements. It is named a Panama mount because the initial design was first used for defense of the Panama Canal. The 155mm guns placed on these mounts had solid rubber tires that would rest on the "pintle" or concrete cylinder in the center of the mount. The guns' split-trail carriage rode on the outer rail giving them a full 360 degree rotation. The 155mm gun, a hold over from World War I, is known as American M1917A1 cannon. The barrel of the cannon was 18 feet long and the gun weighted nearly 13-tons. From Ulakta Head the cannons could fire a 95-pound projectile 12.5 miles. Each gun had an 18 man crew.

The photo (opposite page) shows men of "B" Battery of the National Guard Unit 250th Coastal Artillery preparing to fire a gun. The crew is posing with a shell (left) and gun (above). The 250th served here until May 1943.

Battery 402 was constructed over the top of the Panama mount #2. The Panama mount #1 (by Stop 8) is nearly covered with dirt from Battery 402 construction.

Stop 13

Base End Station: Defense & Observation



"They used Eagle Rock, a pinnacle at the entrance to Agamgik Bay in Beaver Inlet as a target from Ballyhoo."

Henry Swanson, lifelong Unalaskan

Stop 13

Once inside the base end station (above and opposite), you will notice an iron mount bolted to the floor. The mount held a M1910 Azimuth scope that was used to find the location and distance of the target. Telephoned to engineers (left), this data would allow them to triangulate on the target and obtain its range. Data from at least two base end stations were needed in order to triangulate and calculate the speed of a target.

From here locations of elements of the "iron ring" are visible: Eider Point with its Fort Learnard (NW) and Fort Brumback across Iliuliuk Bay at Summer Bay (SE). Constantine Point is prominent to the northeast.

Fort Schwatka was largely abandoned by 1948 and in 1950 the Coast Artillery was abolished as separate branch of Army. Coastal defenses are part of a by-gone era – remnants of the general thinking by the public, Congress, the military about national defense that existed prior to World War II. After World War II, radical new forms of weaponry – jet aircraft, nuclear bombs and guided missiles – as well as our greater vulnerability to attack anywhere in the nation made these structures obsolete. The thin strip of protection along the nation's shores would no longer suffice.

Era 1943, Dutch Harbor Spit and Ulakta Head Road under construction

Era 1943, View of Dutch Harbor and Ulakta Head Road

Aleutian World War II National Historic Area

During World War II the remote Aleutian Islands, home to the Unangan (Aleut) people for over 8,000 years, became one of the fiercely contested battlegrounds of the Pacific. This thousand-mile-long archipelago saw the first invasion of American soil since the War of 1812, a mass internment of American civilians, a 15-month air war, and one of the deadliest battles in the Pacific Theatre.

In 1996 Congress designated the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area to interpret, educate, and inspire present and future generations about the history of the Unangan people and the Aleutian Islands in the defense of the United States in World War II. In a unique arrangement, the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area and visitor center are owned and managed by the Ounalashka Corporation (the village corporation for Unalaska) and the National Park Service provides them with technical assistance. Through this cooperative partnership, the Unangax are the keepers of their history and invite the public to learn more about its past and present. The site is a National Historic Landmark, designated in 1985.

Photographs:
The historic photographs are courtesy of the Museum of the Aleutians, Unalaska. Kenneth Sprunger, a spotter in the battery command post during 1943, provided the historic photos for Stop 10. Contemporary photographs are provided by the Alaska Region, National Park Service.

Sources of information are the National Park Service, National Historic Landmark records and the National Park Service Report *The Artillery Positions on Ulakta Head Defending the Naval Base: Dutch Harbor* by Jeff Dickrell, December 2002. The stanzas on Stops 1, 2 and 3 are from one poem: An Alaskan Soldier's Lament, written by a 250th Coast Artillery soldier in July 1941. Source: *The Williwaw War: the Arkansas National Guard in the Aleutians in World War II* by Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon. University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, AR. 1992.

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Unalaska, Alaska

50 Caliber antiaircraft crew on Ulakta Head

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