

SCOTCH CAP DIARY

Westdahl 78
local experience

Written by Richard E. Clark, assisted by Bob Villegas, Mike Stanley and Ray Standridge

Introduction

The Alaska Peninsula displays a few tortuous twists and turns before it finally comes to an end, marking the birth of Unimak, the first and largest island in the Aleutian chain. At the northwest corner of Unimak Island there is a Coast Guard Loran Station. Twenty-one men are there.

Some twenty miles to the southeast coast is Scotch Cap Light, now unmanned. The present concrete and steel structure contains dormitories, a kitchen, recreation room, storage rooms and housing for three generators. It was built soon after the prior Light was destroyed by a Pacific tsunamis which, in 1946, claimed the lives of all five coastguardsmen stationed there.

I came to Cape Sarichef in January, 1978, to teach sociology courses on behalf of Chapman College. But midway through my courses, I became the recipient of a life-experience lesson that I shall never forget. It begins on the day that I decided to be a member of a group of four men who journeyed to Scotch Cap Light. The following story is taken from my diary. I present my thoughts, unchanged, as they came to me.

Friday, February 3, 1978

Left Cape Sarichef about 1:15 p.m. with Chief Bob Villegas, Mike Stanley and Ray Standridge in a Thiokol 602 tracked vehicle. Beautiful, sunny day. None of the fellows wore coats, and doors of the vehicle were often open as were windows. Weather cannot be stereotyped at Unimak.

Stopped at Kiss-On Rock, 3 miles away.

Arrived at first five mile station—a house trailer.

Arrived at Dump Creek, near the shore. Named because of pileup of debris from the ocean. Flotsam and jetsam. We crossed the creek in the vehicle.

Arrived at Sennet Creek. Survival shelter there is an old navy building. A runway, long abandoned, is there. It was once a navy air strip.

Headed toward the shore and went along the beach. We looked for bottles as we traveled. Saw five or six sea lions offshore.

Near Boneyard Creek, past the elephant (an old abandoned earth-moving machine), we were high offshore when we saw a lone caribou running along the beach, but just within the edge of the water. Ray figured it was being chased. Sure enough, three of our Cape Sarichef Huskies were on the chase. Ray shot into the sand near the dogs to discourage them. It worked.

Saw extensively strewn remains of a ship. Very large pieces of metal were scattered about. Went between Scotch Cap and the Pinnacle. Took pictures. Saw three eagles. Pinnacle has a square opening, like a door, through which frothy water surges.

We arrived at Scotch Cap about 4:00 p.m. My first request was to see the room in which Jake, the resident ghost, remains. Chief took me to it.

During the night, Mike and Ray had nightmares. Both men, coincidentally, dreamed that they were in Africa.

The men appeared to be somewhat uneasy about their dreams.

Saturday, February 4, 1978

Went on my first tundra stomping trip at Scotch Cap. Left the Lighthouse Station at 1:15 p.m. Nice clear day, but windy. Saw the ruins of a munitions ship scattered on the beach.

To the east southeast, far back in the hills away from the beach where we were walking we saw two mushrooming white clouds. They were very turbulent. We realized they were not ordinary clouds. Suddenly, we knew we were watching a volcano! We suspect Westdahl Peak became active today.

We climbed to the highest ridge within reasonable reach and saw an awesome sight: Great billowing clouds of steam with a drifting black backdrop that suggested falling ash. The wind was blowing strongly from the south-southeast. Then we saw a bolt of lightning followed by thunder. We estimate it was eleven miles away. The lightning was east-northeast, under the clouds. We could smell sulphur. Suddenly, all was mysteriously quiet--no wind at all. It was like being in the eye of a hurricane. There was another flash of lightning, then the wind came upon us harder than ever, but this time from due south.

The lightning continued as we hiked back to the station. We arrived back at about 3:30 p.m. By 4:00 p.m. the cloud had become much broader and dark. We could see swaths of melting snow coming down the hillside. The cloud came nearer, and we could smell sulphur again. Then the men started to feel the sting of ashes in their eyes. We estimate that there have been more than ten lightning flashes at this time. By 4:30 p.m. the ash was thick and we could feel it in our eyes. At 5:00 p.m. we were still hearing thunder. The cloud is billowing well and there is much falling ash. We reported the volcano to Cape Sarichef at 3:30 p.m. We are having an exciting time, filled with wonder and some awe. We wonder, now, if an eruption will follow or if there will be tremors. We realize that Scotch Cap could be in danger with Westdahl only eleven miles away, but we are all keeping a sense of humor. There is much laughter here. We are fascinated and excited. At 5:20 p.m. we could see ash on the snow of the foothills; they are shaded with grey now.

At 6:45 p.m. we experienced hail; small stones. The stones are dark. The ash has actually been seeding the clouds! We have noticed small bits of cinder from the cores of the hailstones. Thunder and lightning continues. Hail core centers are as big as half-pinheads, or larger. A larger hailstone struck Ray's neck, and we see a red spot at the place of impact.

At 7:05 p.m. hailstones are larger than lightning. Cannot see any glow on the mountain, but the air is very overcast and dark outside. Cinders are larger than pinheads. At 7:10 p.m. we are having a thick storm of hail and cinders. At 7:15 hail, ash and electrical activity are intense. My overall impression today is that Seaton Cap is a rougher place to be at when compared to Cape Barichef. At 7:25 p.m. the storm continues as does the lightening. At 7:35 p.m. we saw about a foot of cinders built up at one end of the door. It decreased to about nine inches at the other end. Storm has suddenly slowed. Seems to be mysteriously quiet at this time. Cinders are just drifting under the wind—a bit like snow would. At 8:00 p.m. hail and cinders are coming down again, moderately; wind estimated at about 35 knots.

At 8:30, the storm and lightening revived in earnest—hail and cinders coming down hard. Cannot make radio contact with Cape Barichef at this time. At 10:00 p.m. the lightening struck close. Intermittent storming, sometimes severe. Wind blows cinders all over the place. Cannot reach Cape Barichef, and vice versa. Radio signals are garbled.

At 10:45 p.m. we are having a heavy cinder shower, but no more hail. Just ash now. Haven't heard the thunder lately.

At 11:15 p.m. thunder resumed. Ray and Chief drove the Thiokol up to the reservoir to check a pipe that could become clogged if position is not changed. Planned that they arrived there, changed pipe without any problems. Said they'd check the water tank on the way back from the reservoir. Heard loud clap of thunder at 11:25 p.m., 11:28 p.m. Men reported that they were at water tank. At 11:32 p.m. Ray and Chief radioed that they were on their way back from the water tank. At 11:35, Chief and Ray returned all covered with dust. They said they got lost briefly on two occasions while trying to reach the reservoir. And when they got there, they found the reservoir full of cinders. Chief says the cinders felt like BB pellets. They said the lightening looked red--sulphur in the air probably made a difference. They said the bolts were near. Reported that the grass is well covered over. Figured there is between 8 and 12 inches on the ground. Road is no longer eroded, as it had been. It is smooth because of ash buildup. But they couldn't see the roadway—that was a problem. The road would appear, disappear, and then appear again. Said it is like walking on a beach outside. Men had cinders in their eyes, ears. Figure the reservoir will have to be dug out.

Heard more thunder at midnight and a louder rumble at 12:10 a.m. Ray figures the lighthouse beam isn't visible very far over the water. Another clap of thunder at 12:13, 12:15, 12:18 and 12:20 a.m. Good God! I am going to lie down for a while. Here in the comitory room I hear cinders falling on the roof like rain. It stops, starts, stops, starts, on and on.

Sunday, February 5, 1973

9:00 a.m. The cinder and thunder storm lasted all night--sometimes it raged. At about 3:00 a.m. there were several very close bolts of lightning. It is very dark out at this time. The lighthouse casts a dull, clouded beam. At about 5:00 a.m. the cinder storm had some breaks in it as it apparently moved out of our range, but the thunder can be heard at this hour. And the sound of cinders hitting the roof is never absent for long. It is supposed to be morning high. But not here at Seaton Cap. Now today.

The men slept easily through the night. At about 3:00 a.m., when the thunder was clapping so loudly, Chief started to talk in his sleep. He said, "weapons and wounds! Those were in the good old days! bonofabitch!" The ash is grey, maybe even a little yellow; don't know how deep.

At 11:05 a.m. the wind suddenly came up hard, we think from the south. We are having a whiteout. We have no visibility. We even have a fog inside the building, and dust is gathering on the floor, in fact, everywhere. This is a dust storm, the likes of which I have never seen.

11:20 a.m. All of the sudden it is very dark and the wind seems to be taking the ash straight up into the atmosphere. Up it sweeps! This is very eerie.

11:30 a.m. Mike swept much of the dust off the floor. Yes, we note it has a slight amount of yellow in it. Sulphur.

At 11:40 a.m. Mike, Ray and Chief went to the lighthouse to repair a generator. The minute they left the storm turned very bad. Just black outside. Never saw anything like it.

1:10 p.m. This has to be the worst storm I have ever seen. It's the combination of cinders, high winds, complete darkness, thunder and lightning that really get through to me. The men are still at the lighthouse, and with this horrid storm in session, I'm worried. How can they get back? What will this stuff do to their lungs?

1:30 p.m. The storm has let up, thank heavens. Our original plans were to return to Cape Parichief today. Instead, we are stranded at Scotch Cap, but good!

2:30 p.m. The man returned from the lighthouse. It was futile to attempt to repair the generator, but the coasties gave it one hell of a good try, and came all covered with thick dust from head to foot. Showers and washing of clothes ensued.

At about 3:00 p.m. we actually see some clearing. Chief even saw some blue sky. This is the lightest that it has ever been today. Now we can see a huge, long billow of smoke southeast of us, and heading south. We also hear thunder in that direction. We had some hash today--first meal we've had. At 3:30 p.m. we see the huge volcanic cloud drifting over the ocean with bolts of lightning coming down from it. The sun casts sickly orange highlights on the edges of the clouds. Awesome!

At 4:00 p.m. we cleaned house--it was very, very dusty. Now the wind has calmed, and light snow is covering the cinders. We hope the snow will have a settling effect on the ash.

4:30 p.m. Mike and Ray have headed to the lighthouse to see if they can clean the dirt off the lenses and the surrounding glass encasement. The dirt really caked the light over well. When they returned, Ray remarked that they removed about 30 pounds of ash away, and Mike wondered how in the world the system managed to function when it was so badly clogged up.

11:10 p.m. It has turned colder and is snowing generously. Chief and I studied his religion course all evening long.

6:00 a.m. Awoke about 5:50 a.m. heard a clap of thunder in the distance thus indicating that the volcano is still active. But it appears that the wind has changed since this time yesterday, when the lightning was so close. The weather has turned colder. I cannot see out of the windows because they are frosted over thickly. Inside there appears to be no additional dust, thank goodness.

7:12 a.m. How eerie--I just cannot completely recover from the sound of this rolling thunder! There it was again, in the midst of winter on an Aleutian island. Wonder what the hell is happening with that mountain!

8:00 a.m. Took a look outside. Heavy winds and snow. Drifting. Appears to be coming from the northwest now. Very cold out there.

At 11:30 a.m. we had a lunch of "Poor Boy Eggs Benedict" and oatmeal prepared by the Chief. We decided that we would attempt to leave for Cape Sarichef at 1:00 p.m. We were kept busy shutting down the generator, draining the water system, cleaning up dishes, packing and loading the Thikol. We left on time. Weather conditions were not good, and as we traveled further we noticed that there was no improvement. But we knew that there were road stakes all the way back to Cape Sarichef, so we followed them carefully. At times they were hard to locate, the storm was so heavy.

We came to a small creek which we crossed, but a steep hill ensued, covered with thick ash and snow. The Thikol showed its first sign of reluctance with regard to negotiating the hill, but Ray, our driver, is skilled. A few backups and runs were needed for him to create a ramp of packed snow. It worked. After a few minutes we were on our way again.

Then we came to the first big stream. I wondered if runoff from the volcano had widened the streams that would need to be crossed. The stream was no deeper than it had been when we crossed it in order to arrive here. I felt relieved. We were about two miles into our journey. We crossed the stream without any difficulty. We carried on, waiting once in a while for intermittent whiteouts to clear up.

We crossed Second Bridge. The water did not seem to be abnormally high, although it appeared that the stream had recently risen above the banks and then receded back to normal again.

We passed through a grassy area, and, although the snow had cleared up a great deal, we were suddenly amazed to see the huge cloud of billowing volcanic smoke that we temporarily faced as the road took a short jog to the east. We stopped momentarily while Chief took a couple of snapshots.

We came to First Bridge. Again, the water was not abnormally high, but we faced a steep hill on the other side. The ash, we think, assisted us by moderating the steepness by means of a natural ramp. We climbed to the top successfully. We were about three miles into our trip.

Next, we came to a small creek, but this one was different. The snow had built up high banks that had to be dug out. This was not unusual, because ~~previous~~ past experience demonstrated that this had been necessary on previous snowy occasions. The men dug out the snow successfully. Made it.

Then we came to Boneyard Creek--the second major stream to be negotiated. It looked normal. We crossed it without difficulty. We passed Boneyard shelter; we were five miles into our trip.

We came to a small creek past Boneyard. The men noticed that it had widened considerably. Everyone was surprised. It was ice from shore to shore. Ray saw it ahead and remarked, "This is the end of the road." Our spirits fell. The men got out, walked over it, stomping through ice with their heavy shoes. It appeared to be 8 to 10 inches deep. Ray directed us to get on the other side and wait. Then he took a good look at the creek ahead of him, backed up the Thiokol a bit and lunged forward through the creek with ice and water dashing all around the machine. I never knew the vehicle could move so well. He made it. Everyone was relieved.

We approached an area called the Moon--a wide, flat glacial valley noted for its desolation, its roughness and hard volcanic composition. As we approached an area where a six foot galvanized culvert lay beneath the surface, Ray remarked, "Something doesn't look right up ahead. I'm going to get out and take a look." Chief went along. The culvert was gone! Instead, we were near the brink of a 30 foot dropoff. It was at least one-hundred yards to the other side. The ditch that had cradled the culvert had normally been no more than 20 feet wide. Now we knew where the melting snow had found a primary course of escape. The men started walking eastward, hoping to find a crossing point. No hope. The beach was a short distance to the west. But that course offered us no hope either. Chief radioed Cape Sarichef to report the washout, then he told the radiomen that we would be turning back to Scotch Cap. It was bitterly cold weather; Sarichef reported that it was 17 degrees, not counting the chill factor. It was 3:50 p.m. and we were about seven miles and three hours into our trip. We had to decide if we could make it back before dark; darkness would not be one of our better allies. We turned back.

We made good progress. The weather had cleared some more, and we could easily see the orange-topped road markers. We came to Boneyard Creek. It had risen! The engine took on water as the fan became immersed, but we made it.

We came along well until we approached the stream that the men had dug out. Just as we were at the bottom of the stream, the Thiokol stalled. Just stopped dead! I sort of died with it. The whining of the starter and Ray's swearing composed an ominous duet that ended as the engine chugged back into life. But then the engine was knocking! Great scott! Was it tappets? A rod? Perish the thought! Ray pulled ahead slowly, heading on up the hill. The ~~pin~~ knocking subsided. What a relief!

We crossed the two bridges. The water had risen in both cases. We knew we had one more major stream to ford, and we wondered what it would be like. Ray picked up speed; we made good time. When we came to the creek just discussed, we noticed that it had risen, but we crossed it successfully. Chief said, "It's only half a tire!" when we came up out of the water, however, the knocking resumed--this time for keeps! It was getting darker, the weather was worsening, and Chief warned us that a whitesout was coming up from behind us. We couldn't stop now.

It was worst in the old airport area, only about two miles from Scotch Cap Light. Visibility went to very near zero, and the engine sounded sicker as smoke began to creep into the cab while the oil pressure started a gradual drop. At one point, Ray remarked that he couldn't see fifteen feet ahead. Just how we managed to find all the road stakes, I will never know. I find this part of my story beyond words, and I don't think I will even try to ~~describe~~ describe it. Suffice it to say that somehow, we made it back to the building. Nor shall I attempt to describe my elation upon returning.

Tuesday, February 7, 1978

1:20 p.m. Tried to radio Cape Sarichef. Too garbled. Asked them to send help. At 1:40 p.m. a hot water pipe started leaking over the kitchen sink. Ray taped it while Mike closed the main valve partially to cut the water pressure. We discussed preparation plans for any emergency--we cannot tell just what a volcano may do. We agreed that it would be very hard and risky to walk out of this place. At 2:25 p.m. we tried to contact Sarichef. Again garbled. No luck. It is discouraging. Told them we would try at 3:30 p.m., but we cannot tell if they can make out our words any better than we could make out theirs. The volcanic ash cloud may be heading toward us again. At 3:30 p.m. we radioed Cape Sarichef. Garbled, but we believe Sarichef has called Juneau for help to evacuate us. We think Sarichef wanted to know something about the Thiokol 602. Hard to know just what they said.

4:10 p.m. Ray and Chief went outside to watch the volcano. Ray says the xx rumble of it can be clearly heard now. It has definitely grown stronger. The smoke is blowing south-southwest, high and full of billows.

5:15 p.m. Everyone is quiet now. Chief is cleaning his boots, Ray is reading, Mike is resting, and I vacuumed the rugs. I think we are all tense this evening. The men sealed the doors with masking tape about a half hour ago. All we can do now is hold tight.

6:20 p.m. Cape Sarichef tried to reach us. Just garble.

7:35 p.m. Mike, Ray and I looked outside. Happily, there was little overcast, and we could even see a few stars! Pleasant surprise.

8:00 p.m. Cape Sarichef called. Dave Hackney. Message was garbled, but we understand that a helicopter is at Cold Bay, temporarily grounded because of bad weather. Sarichef wants us to bring Mocom 35 and wiring harness. We think the helicopter left from Juneau to Kodiak and then on to Cold Bay. Very good news!

8:30 p.m. Decided to lie down. Got up again at 11:00 p.m. Mike and Chief were listening to KEX, Portland, on the Hallierafter's set. It was 46 degrees in Portland, Oregon.

Wednesday, February 8, 1978

4:00 a.m. Yesterday was, for me, like an "emotional roller coaster." There is the hope and discouragement that make the ups and downs. The volcano activity looked enlarged and seemed to be sending ash in our direction again. That was a "down." But news of the helicopter was definitely an "up."

I have gotten up early. It's a combination of things that keeps me awake: the "gronk-gronk" of the fog horn, the squeaking of one room heater and the moaning of another, and all those additional mysterious noises that sound like anything from volcanic rumblings to the creaks and bumps of Jake, our resident ghost. My main hope this morning is that the ash will not come our way, and that the weather between Cold Bay and here will be good.

9:00 a.m. Mike and Chief called Cape Sarichef. Garbled again. But seemed to say that they weren't sure the helicopter at Cold Bay was for us. (We later learned that we had not properly received the message because of such poor reception.) The weather is calm and clear, and the volcano is more clearly visible than it has ever been. The smoke is not so diffused, and the silhouette is crisply defined. The smoke is flowing to the southwest. It looks very near, just beyond the hill. If that volcano ever decided to really blow its top, I suspect we'd have to bid the world a fond farewell.

10:00 a.m. Cape Sarichef called. Steve Schwartz. Told us that the helicopter at Cold Bay is for us. Told us that helicopter would attempt to pick us up. Said we would be notified.

10:05 a.m. Ray went outside. Wondered if volcano was actually at Westdahl. (It was.)

10:15 a.m. Sarichef called. Helicopter is on route to Scotch Cap. Great!

10:30 a.m. Everybody is very busy shutting down systems, pulling the Thiokol wiring harness, packing, cleaning and so forth. Ray collected a sample of the ash. We are prepared to leave at a moment's notice now. At 10:50 a.m. Chief asked if anyone wanted a last cup of coffee. We all declined.

10:52 a.m. The men are outside. It is very still in here; all alone in this building. The fog horn has a mysterious tone, as if it were trying to communicate with me. The light above it casts a beam over the wreckage of a past tragedy, and then it swings into the direction of the smoking mountain.

11:00 a.m. Cape Sarichef called. Garbled. But said helicopter will contact us on bogear frequency. Helicopter is here! It is a Coast Guard H-3, ~~arriving~~ gingerly, slowly, carefully in our yard.
descending

The rescuers moved professionally, methodically, and they appeared to be very gentle, kind, people. Yet it was mysterious, as if they had come to us from another planet. I was very excited. I'd never ridden in a helicopter before. At 11:30 we landed at Cape Sarichef for lunch. I was extremely happy to be back. I look back on it now, remembering what the Chief said: "It builds character." (Kindly excuse typing and spelling errors.)