



Elders of the village of Akutan sit in the city offices and listen to representatives of OCS. The villagers in Akutan were evacuated during WWII.

World War II Internment:

Aleut story to be told

What did the Aleut people and the American-Japanese have in common in World War II? Both were loyal American citizens; both were uprooted unceremoniously and taken thousands of miles from their homes to be placed in relocation camps where they lived in marginal conditions with minimal or nonexistent medical care, and where family life was disrupted and broken up by the shifting tides of war.

Now Congress, after an initial investigation begun by the Aleutian-Pribilof Islands Association, has passed legislation creating a committee to investigate the treatment during World War II of these American citizens.

Speaking of the Committee, Mike Zacharoff, executive director of A-PIA, said "We are recommending only one Aleut and one Japanese on the committee. We want it to be independent and non-biased. We seek only to find the truth and perhaps some kind of compensation to the ones who suffered."

The Aleutian-Pribilof Islands Association initiated the study earlier in the wake of the much-publicized project to clean up the Aleutian Islands wartime debris. "We found it strange that they were so concerned whatever for the suf-

ferings endured by the people. So back as long ago as 1977, we began investigating this, interviewing survivors. In 1978 we decided to ask Congress for a full-scale investigation. Now it's happening, and it was through the efforts of the Aleutian-Pribilof Islands Association that it came about."

The original study legislation was for the purpose of investigating the treatment of loyal American-Japanese during World War II, but through efforts of Senators Ted Stevens and Mike Gravel, the legislation was amended to include the Aleuts who suffered similar injustices, and whose plight remains virtually unknown.

The original intentions were good; to remove the occupants of the Aleutian Islands from the line of fire. But there remains a ques-

● Aleut story to be told

(Continued from 1)

tion: why only the Aleuts? Why were not white residents of the same islands also evacuated?

There was plenty of reason for evacuation of civilians. It was war; and as always in wartime, there was confusion, apprehension, and a fear of what might happen next.

On the island of Attu lived people whose ancestors had occupied that is-

land for at least 3,000 years. On the morning of September 17, 1942, they were at church, singing the rich chants of the Russian Orthodox faith. The services were drawing to a close when the Japanese approached from the direction of the hills, firing their weapons and taking the entire populace prisoner; about 43 Aleuts, a white schoolteacher and his wife. The people of Attu were herded aboard a military vessel and taken away. After a stop at Kiska where the people were transferred to a larger vessel, they sailed for Japan, in the hold of the ship all the way. Kiska and Attu were the only two islands occupied by the Japanese, but Duch Harbor was also bombed. The story might have been vastly different if the Aleutian Campaign had not been intended merely as a diversionary effort, with

Midway the major target.

Meanwhile, the American military decided to evacuate the Aleut people from their home islands. They were taken out in several groups, on different ships. In South-eastern Alaska they were relocated at Funter Bay, Ward Lake and Burnett Inlet. The Pribilovians were located at Funter Bay, where the St. Paul people were housed in an abandoned cannery on one side of the bay, the St. George people in old gold mine buildings on the other, and the Atka people were relocated in a cannery at Killisnoo, not far from Funter Bay.

There, in drafty quarters with no privacy, the Pribilovians who were used to having their own separate family housing, tried to put up blankets and whatever they could to make quarters for their families. Medical

attention was sporadic at best, but it was the crowding, the lack of privacy, the dense, gloomy forest all around that took the worst toll. To people used to the open grassy spaciousness of the Aleutians, the steep fjords and heavy timber were oppressive, and they suffered almost universally from claustrophobia.

Now, nearly forty years later, it is still called the "longest two years" of all. (Some stayed three years.)

Eventually they were returned to their own homes, only to find that many of their possessions had been stolen from their homes. But the joy of return, there was little bitterness over these losses.

For the Attuans, it was much worse. They say their Japanese captors were not cruel, but they were, after all, prisoners of war. They were fed the rice that was the Japanese staple, but

to the Attuans it lacked the nourishment of the sea mammals they were accustomed to. In the harshness of their captivity, about half perished. Of the five babies born in captivity, only one survived.

At war's end, they 24 survivors of this captivity were returned to America, to California, and it was another year or so before they came back to Alaska, only to find that they would not be allowed to return to their home island because everything had been destroyed there. In stead they were relocated to Atka, never to see their home again.

All the events and injustices suffered during this bitter period will be investigated by the committee, and recommendations of the committee will say what reparations, if any, are due that Aleut and American-Japanese people interrupted during World War II.