

# Technician Makes Unusual Trip to Diomede to Repair Phone

From Rural Communications

By MARY PAT MURPHY

Since many of RCA Alascom's bush telephones are located in villages which can be reached only by airplane, charter flights for telephone maintenance and repair are commonplace for bush technicians.

The village of Diomede, however, poses problems unusual even for technicians who are used to the remoteness of Alaskan villages.

Diomede, a rocky island in the Bering Strait just three miles from the Soviet territory, is cut off completely from the outside world during parts of the year and getting there is tricky, the year around.

Diomede has had an RCA Alascom bush telephone since July of 1973 and for the past year and a half the job of keeping it in working order has gone primarily to Karl Welm, technician in charge of RCA Alascom's Nome office.

"I've been to Diomede just about every way you can get there," says Karl, who made his latest trip to the village aboard the Bureau of Indian Affairs supply ship North Star III late in October: Karl has traveled to Diomede by skinboat, by helicopter, by float plane and by ski plane; and twice he's been stranded, once by weather and once when the helicopter broke down.

In the fall, the North Star is the only sure means of reaching Diomede before the Bering Strait freezes enough for a ski plane to land on the ice. Each fall, the North Star delivers winter supplies to Alaskan villages before the winter ice closes in.

Karl and several other passengers boarded the North Star at Shishmaref to make the trip to Diomede. The telephone on Diomede was working, but needed some adjustment and the North Star visit afforded a good opportunity for a technician to reach the island to do the necessary work.

The North Star was three weeks behind schedule because of bad weather and ice at Barrow and Point Hope, and time was running short for reaching Diomede before ice closed in there.

The ice at Shishmaref was hampering unloading efforts, further delaying the ship's progress. Passengers bound for Diomede—including about 10 villagers returning home for the winter—boarded a landing craft late in the afternoon of Oct. 29 and started out to the ship. The trip which would have taken only a few minutes in clear water took an hour and a half because of the ice.

The North Star remained anchored about a mile offshore from Shishmaref after the passengers boarded. The ship's crew was prepared to leave the area in case the ice made further unloading impossible,

but most of the supplies bound for Shishmaref were unloaded before the North Star had to sail for Diomede.

The village of Diomede was running out of supplies by the time the North Star arrived. On Oct. 18, the BIA had chartered a helicopter leased by RCA Alascom in Nome to airlift supplies to the village, but those supplies were nearly gone.

The North Star reached Diomede early in the morning on Oct. 31. Unloading began at daybreak and the passengers were taken ashore to do their work.

Other passengers included Father S.J. Greif, a Catholic priest whose parish includes Diomede; several social workers, a nurse and a legal services attorney. Everyone was cautioned to watch the beach and be ready to go back to the ship. If the ice at Wales became too thick, the captain had said, the North Star might make the short trip to unload there, then return to Diomede to complete the unloading.

If the wind picked up, the landing craft would return to the ship and the passengers could run the risk of being stranded on the island if they

weren't aboard.

But the seas remained calm and the unloading continued. Karl replaced the dial on the village telephone and made the necessary adjustments to the radio equipment. He also checked the "telephone pole" he had rigged from whale bone during one of his previous visits.

Since the only wood on Diomede is the driftwood which sometimes washes up onto its rocky shores, the whale bone was used to run wires from the power plant in the school to the telephone in the armory.

The North Star headed toward Wales after the unloading at Diomede was completed, but ice made it impossible to unload supplies, including a store building for the village. The ship also had to bypass Brevig Mission because of ice and it appeared the passengers would have to remain on board until the ship reached Dutch Harbor, some 1,000 miles to the south.

But the passengers were able to get off the ship in Nome before the North Star headed back to the Wales area to see if

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the ice would move out enough to allow the unloading. Eventually the remaining supplies aboard the ship had to be unloaded in Nome for transport to the villages.

But all the supplies had been unloaded at Diomedes, the one village which cannot be reached by alternate means. And Karl Welm had completed what is probably one of the most complicated telephone repair trips anywhere.