

# Just a hop, skip and jump from Russia

By Daniel Bloom

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The flight from Nome to Little Diomed Island takes, in a small plane, just over one hour. A note on the map behind the pilot's seat where I am sitting reads: "Pilots should use extreme caution when flying near Soviet Union airspace along the International Dateline." Below us: the ice-choked Bering Sea.

Little Diomed is about as close to Russia as an American can come while remaining on American soil. The Eskimo village of Diomed faces directly toward Big Diomed Island, four miles across the frozen Bering Sea, and with a good pair of binoculars you can see a Russian guard house on this larger of two islands sitting like granite ducks in a vast ocean of ice.

Once, before there were datelines and boundaries and cold wars and Russian-American politics, the Eskimos of these two islands were cousins and neighbors, related by language and culture and hunting patterns. But no more. The Russians have taken their Eskimos away to the mainland, 30 miles away. The Little Diomeders remain, after all these years, a hardy and isolated clan of Alaskans, far out from the U.S. mainland on their own ancestral rock.

The island rises 1,300 feet

above the ice-pack to form a flat table-top summit where there is nothing but rock and snow. Down below on the western slopes of the island is the village itself, built of wooden houses perched on stilts and poles and tucked into the extremely steep slope of the land.

More than 100 people call this island home and a school, a church, a health clinic, a recreation hall, and a food store support the subsistence lifestyle of the islanders here. Radio signals bring national and international news to the Eskimos here, and on Sunday the teen-agers can listen to the Top 40 pop songs as they are counted down on the Casey Kasem Show. M.A.S.H. is a popular TV show on Little Diomed Island and when the cartoons come on you can bet there will be a bunch of children watching.

The children here have last names like Milligrock, Ihykuk, Ozenna, Asila, Kimunuk, Kunayak, but their first names sound more familiar: Tracy, Tanya, Jacob, Bobbie, Connie, Bernadette. The island has been home to their ancestors for thousands of years, long before Christopher Columbus ever set sail for the Americas, even before the time of Jesus and Moses and the beginnings of what we call Western Civil-

ization.

Whalers and hunters of the abundant sea life that gave sustenance to their fragile existence at the edge of a frozen sea (the ice is gone for about five months each year), the people of this island have seen whaling ships from Boston and military destroyers from Russia come and go through the icy strait that separates them from their sister island. Teachers, Bureau of Indian Affairs officials, missionaries, Alaskan governors, marine mammal researchers — all have made Little Diomed Island their temporary home, but only the islanders themselves call their rock home.

Percy Milligrock is the village police and safety officer on the island and he lives in a warm house heated with oil overlooking a spectacular view of the arctic ice. From his kitchen window you can see a small trappers' cabin on the eastern slope of the Russian

island four miles away, surrounded by majestic snow-capped peaks.

"It's a good life out here," Percy says. "No major problems. We've got electricity and oil and radio and TV mail service and daily flights to Nome. The kids go to school and the recreation hall has a telephone and a pool table and bingo games on Saturday and Wednesday nights."

Tom Asila, 69 years old, was born on Little Diomed Island and descended from the people who once inhabited Big Diomed Island. Today he lives in Nome.

"I haven't been back to my island since I was a little boy," he says, "but I remember those old days when I lived there. That was before the Russians made us get passports to visit our relatives on the other island. You know, we used to visit them all the time, in our skin boats. In winter-time you could walk across the ice if you wanted to. Now it's

against the law to cross the border to Russia, I guess. So I don't know where my people are now."

Asila left Little Diomed Island when he was eight. His mother took sick and sent two of her children to a Catholic mission on the Alaskan mainland. That's where Tom learned English and some carpentry skills and where the Chicago priest baptized him with the name of Thomas.

But today his lone island remains populated by a new generation of Eskimos and if you visit the pre-school where a group of smiling, playful children sing and dance and draw and sit like children anywhere you know that the village that once was still is and most likely will be for a very long time. Already two Apple computers sit in the school room, linking a very old island with a brand new technology.

This is America, just a hop, skip and a jump from Russia.