

Evacuation at Tununak --

Villagers Build Tent Village Before Amchitka Shot

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November 6, 1971—About an hour ago, I returned to my home after a most unusual day for Tununak. Today on Amchitka Island the "bomb" was tested.

For some time now we have been hearing about this proposed test and a number of dates was given before today's was finally decided upon.

It was mid October and I was sitting in the home of a dear Eskimo friend and we were drinking tea. Rather suddenly, Susie said, "Marie you come with us to our tent." Her statement took me by surprise and she then proceeded to explain. The people of Tununak would evacuate on the day of the test. They were sewing their tents and would start moving their belongings up to the hill in preparation for the day. I thanked her and accepted. This was the first of many offers because the Eskimos wanted to be sure that I was not left alone in the village.

Two years ago, when there was an atomic test on Amchitka, these people went up to the hill, but there was not the preparation then that there was for today. The people knew that today's test was to be much more powerful and they were much afraid of a tidal wave. We live about 50 yards from the Bering Sea.

During this past week, the preparations were in full swing. From my window I could see the community of tents building up on the hill. Snow machines and sleds were going back and forth, back and forth carrying the people's meager possessions. The children in school all talked about the "bomb" and learned how to make sounds like a bomb explosion. Their drawings were of bombs. They knew what was going on and I could sense the uneasiness in them. Whenever I met an adult, the conversation was always about

the bomb.

As a rule, I do not panic in adverse situations, but I must admit that these past few days have made me extremely uneasy. The thought of a tidal wave is frightening. And two days ago, when we heard that this issue would go to the Supreme Court, I honestly felt a twinge of relief—I felt sure the Supreme Court would stop the test. Because of time zone differences, we would not hear the Supreme Court's decision until this morning. Having awakened early, I was by the radio for the first newscast this morning. It stunned me for a moment to hear the Supreme Court's decision, 4 to 3 to go ahead with the test. Apparently, the whole village was listening to the same first newscast because suddenly I heard much commotion and as I looked out I saw men, women and children coming and going in all directions. Then they started running all around. About a dozen people came to my door to make sure that I was going up to the hill.

It was not the kind of day I would ordinarily choose to take a walk up to the hill. It was windy and snowing. Old grandmothers and grandfathers were being driven up on the sleds. Younger people were still carrying last minute items they wanted with them. Children brought their puppies and kittens. I was one of the last to leave the village and Tununak looked like a ghost town and the houses were virtually empty. Watching the people through all this struck me as comic and tragic at the same time. I laughed—and then I really felt like crying.

When I got to the hill, I went into one of the tents that had a radio. It was a few minutes before blast off. As we sat huddled silently in the tent, the man on the radio counted down...4, 3, 2, 1, zero time. His voice was very calm as he described what was happening

and telling us that his building had a considerably rocking motion. The Eskimos were immediately relieved when the earth below us did not shake.

Thankfully, there is always a comic relief in such situations. Ten minutes after the blast, one woman looked at me and asked "...when are we going to have bomb?" She had not realized the bomb had gone off and everyone had a good laugh over this—including the woman herself.

Someone then announced—let's have tea and bread! The Coleman stove was brought forward and Paul made us tea. Everyone was now talking excitedly. They had expected an earthquake or tidal wave to occur immediately after the blast and they now felt there was no more need to worry. The lady next to me had a large bag filled with her things and she laughed as she showed me a bottle of cologne she brought with her. Her husband was asking her for a can opener for the can of butter and she said she forgot it. We all teased her about bringing the cologne and forgetting the can opener.

The next hour or so was spent visiting the people in their tents and drinking tea with them. In one tent, a seven year old boy asked his mother why she did not offer me bread with my tea...because I lived alone and did not have a mommy or daddy and maybe I didn't have bread. Such beautiful simplicity!

Everyone now decided that they should begin moving back down. And so for the next several hours they reversed what they had been doing all week. They have stopped for tonight. But they are all delighted to be back in their own little homes.

The scientists, politicians and all the people involved in this test will probably never know the effect they had on 260 people in a small Alaskan village.