

Lynn F. Saupe

on

ALASKA

1964 Earthquake

and

White Alice Communications

The following interview was held in November, 1991, with Mr. Lynn F. Saupe. It was conducted in his home by his daughter, Jeanne Ann.

JAS When and why did you first come to Alaska?

LS I first came when I was in the Air Force. I was in the Air Force Intelligence Service, and we had seven or eight little information gathering detachments scattered around the world. At that time there two or three in Alaska, and I was stationed at the one out on St. Lawrence Is. for awhile in 1954. That was during the height of the cold war- there were a couple of kind of interesting incidents that happened out there that had to do with the cold war. While I was there we were a tenant organization at an ACNW site, and one morning, very early an eskimo hunter came up in his umiak near the station and reported that there was a submarine surfaced just off shore- about a mile off shore. So the station all went on alert, of course, and radioed the information to Fairbanks, so two fighter planed flew out from Fairbanks to Nome, and then on to the island. They found the submarine just off shore from the ACNW site and buzzed it a couple of times, but the submarine just sat there - it did not react at all - finally the planes had to go back for refueling and two more came out. About that time the submarine just submerged and went away. It was just one of the little harassment things that the Soviets were famous for in those days.

Then, the day after I left the island, I'd been there about 2½ months the Soviets shot down an American Navy Patrol Plane off the west end of the island. The plane had been flying just off shore well on this side of the international date line, which is the Airspace division between the

Soviet Union and the United States, but they shot them down anyway. They managed to fly the plane to the island and crashed it on the beach. Some eskimo hunters there saw the plane go down and they went down the coast and rescued the men. Nobody was killed, but there were a couple of them injured. That one very nearly created an international incident, and like I say, this was at the height of the cold war, anyway. They pretty much got away with that...and a lot of other things!

JAS So what was your first job at St. Lawrence Island?

LS Well, like I said, I was in the Air Force Intelligence Service and I was working with some specialized electronic equipment. That's what I did when I was in Alaska during my first visit. I also served out at King Salmon for awhile, several months during that tour of duty, and out at Elmendorf Air Force base near Anchorage.

JAS Then you left and came back?

LS Yes, I left for a few months stateside and came back as a civilian and after a couple of odd jobs in Anchorage I got on with ITT Federal Electric Corporation when they had the first maintenance and operation contract for the Air Force's White Alice system. It was a long range communication system that was developed for the Air Force, primarily to handle all the communications for the military in Alaska: the dewline, the pine tree line, the ACNW network, all the different radio sites. They did communications for The Air Force, Army, Navy, Coast Guard, all the military, but the facilities were more that the military needed, so they leased some facilities to civilian agencies as well. By the time the White Alice system was completely built and manned, there was a network of 45 or 47 manned stations, plus some unmanned repeater sites scattered around Alaska. All interconnected and for many years the system handled all of the long lines communications for the military, and almost all of them

3  
for civilian agency's as well - FAA and long distance telephone lines.

JAS So that's what opened up communications in Alaska?

LS Pretty much, before that almost all communications within and to and from Alaska depended on the old ACS system - which is very, very subject to atmospheric conditions, weather-snow, rain, anything could deteriorate the quality of communications, and sometimes villages or ~~even~~ military sites were out of communications with the rest of the world for days at a time. The White Alice system corrected all that. I worked first with the White Alice system in Anchorage for training, and then briefly at several stations: Aniak, King Salmon, Kodiak, then my first regular assignment was at a place called Kalacuket Creek in the interior. Very remote spot on top of a mountain. No village, no road, no rivers, nothing. Not far from Galena, but the only way in and out was by small planes off a little strip at the station.

JAS Did you have regular flights in and out?

LS Not regular, no about once a week or so they'd try to get planes in, but that didn't always work either. The biggest planes they could handle at that strip was the old DC-3 which brought in most of our supply's - and it occasionally allowed for the people working there to get out to Anchorage, Fairbanks, or go home on vacation. Then I went to Bethel for 2 years and then came to work on Pillar Mt. in Kodiak, where I worked until they closed the station in the late 70's.

JAS You said earlier that it was walrus hunters that found the men that were shot down -did you have much chance to interact with the natives in any of the area's?

LS Not much in St. Lawrence Island, but I did get to meet a few of the upik eskimo's that live there. One family that I got to know pretty well had a hunting camp over near the end of the island where we were

stationed, and they'd come out and spend several months each year and I got to know them. In those days there were a lot of people out in that country who didn't speak any english at all and that family didn't. There was a man and his wife, 2 little children: a boy and a girl, and the woman had her mother with them. They lived out there in a little shack on the beach. for several months of the year they'd hunt seals and walrus they'd do a lot of fishing, and dry it out. They kept a few dogs, but I never saw them used as a dog team, although they did when they went back to their village.

JAS How did you communicate with them?

LS Well, they invited me into their house the first time I met them. I was walking down the beach several miles from the station and was startled when I saw 2 little children coming toward me. And they came up to me and they wanted me to go with them to their cabin. I could see the building down the beach another mile or so, so I went there and they invited me in. We smiled a lot at each other, but didn't have any language in common. They made tea- we sat on the floor on little blocks of wood. The stove was a little flat thing that the top was about 8 inches off the floor with a kettle on it. They broke off pieces of brick tea -I'd never seen that before - ,smashed it up and made tea from it. We ate some of their dried fish, and we smiled a lot-- got along great!!

JAS What were some of the harder things for someone from the midwest to adjust to?

LS I didn't think any of it was hard- in the way of adjustment I just enjoyed it all. I was very interested. Things were so different from what they were back on the farm, but it was all very interesting to me. I liked it.

JAS What were some of the differences?

LS There were no communications like back home, and there were no roads in most of those areas and even in Bethel there were only very few roads. Everything was dependant on Air service and on the revers they used skiffs in the summer and dog teams in the winter. Later they used snow machines, but then that was it.

JAS Did you get much chance to sample some of the native foods?

LS A few times, yes - I became familiar with seal, walrus, musk-ox, sheefish, a lot of different things that most people in the midwest never even heard of much less sampled. I tried Eskimo Ice Cream-in the traditional way it was made with Caribou fat and Seal oil mixed by hand in a bowl till it was a real frothy pure white substance- it looked a lot like crisco, and tasted a lot like it too, but with a distinct seal flavor! At holidays, it was considered a special treat and they'd put berries that they'd picked in summer and stored in a seal poke full of seal oil to preserve them. They'd throw some in to flavor and color it. I had a lot of that, mostly near Russian christmas, and New Years time.

JAS When you moved to Kodiak about 1959 that was when Alaska was declared a state?

LS Yes, Alaska became a state the documents were signed Jan. 3 1959 by the president, and about 6 months later, Hawaii became a state.

JAS Can you tell me some of the reactions of people?

LS Not everyone was happy, but the voting had been pretty heavily in favor of statehood. I think at that time there were a lot of people from stateside coming up to Alaska and they didn't like non-representation and wanted a voting franchise. Besides they thought that we were too dependent on the military as our only source of money.

6

JAS You were working on Pillar Mt. and soon moved up there - you were there during the 1964 earthquake?

LS Yes, at that time we had our home on the side of the mountain just above the KI hotel. In 1964 on March 27, which was Good Friday, in the evening an earthquake hit and it hit very violently. Most of the homes in Kodiak were frame construction, so there wasn't a lot of damage from the quake itself. The seawalls built in 1958 were badly damaged by the quake itself. Torn apart, rocks were scattered and a lot of big sections of it disappeared under water. About 30 minutes after the quake I glanced out the front windows, and I could see the north end of Woody Is. and suddenly saw huge waves spray crashing up on the end of the island. That was my first hint that there might be a Tsunami. I called the people near by and we watched just moments later as the first Tsunami came down the channel between near is. and the town. It circled into what was left of the boat harbor diverted by what was left of the sea wall. It ripped out all the docks and pilings, boats, everything. There wasn't anything left. Pushed it all up into the town into the whole downtown district. The water went up almost to where the police station is now. After a few minutes of destruction, the water receded very fast, and carried most of the stuff with it, including a lot of cars parked downtown and a lot of buildings, and most of the boats that it had hauled up into town. It left the larger boats high and dry downtown. One of the larger ones was up near where Dr. Guys new building is now. There were 2 or 3 down marine way, and a lot more scattered around downtown. After the water receded there was nothing left - not a stick in the harbor!

JAS Was there anything left downtown?

LS Not much. There was a lot of damage most of the buildings within a block and a half- in some places a lot more, were destroyed. Also some of the buildings out at the Shahafka cove area the present beachcomber location were damaged or destroyed, including the old beachcombers.

Another area that was very hard hit was Kalsin bay, where several people were killed in the first Tsunami, when they were trying to go along the old stretch of road which in those days went right along the beach. They were progressing slowly back from the other side for Chiniak area trying to get back to town after the quake, and there were logs along the road left by the first rise of the water. They were going along stopping here and there and pushing a log out of the way so the cars could get through. Because of the shape of the bay, the Tsunami was funneled and it was so deep and violent that it carried all the cars and people all the way back up into the valley. Seven people were killed out there, and about 19 in town. Most of them in the boat harbor, trying to get their boats out.

JAS Pretty much everyone in town knew to get to high ground?

LS Yes, we didn't know there'd be a Tsunami, but when a quake that violent hits, your first instinct is to get away from the ocean. It's a good thing we had about 33 minutes until the waves hit, because that grace period saved many lives. The police and base shore patrol got everyone away from downtown, and it helped that it was after most stores were closed .

JAS The town was pretty much shut down for a matter of how long?

LS Some communications were restored after a few days, through the White Alice system, in the meantime Marine Radio was about the only way to communicate. They relayed messages to and from boats, etc. After White Alice was restored, in the Anchorage and Peninsula areas, normal communications were available. Downtown Kodiak was a mess for a few days, we couldn't drive through the town from the KI. I walked along pillar mt. and over into the Alutian homes to get to work. They immediately got bulldozers out and started creating a path through the debris and rubble so emergency equipment could get through. Later they



did open a road or two so we could get through the downtown, but even then, there was one area where during high tides several days a month you couldn't drive through, because the water covered the road. At the time we had no idea if the quake was a local affair, or not, we had no idea it was as extensive as it was. We soon found out that the epicenter was in Prince William Sound, and that Valdez was pretty much destroyed. The quake did a lot of damage in Anchorage and other area's. It was felt as far west as King Salmon, and as far east as glacier bay. The white alice system when it was restored completely resumed its function for furnishing communications through the state. As it was owned by the military, but operated by civilian entities, through a contract renewed every 3 years. It handled voice communications, teletype, some faxes, and crypto-circuits for the military. It was capable of use for the television, but wasn't used in that capacity. The design was made exclusively for the white alice system, but the system itself was based on another design for television communications between Miami, and Havana. There are different versions of how it got the name white alice, but it came from the wife of one of the ITT executives. The white was attached as a developmental code name for it because of its use in the Arctic and subarctic. It was closed down in 1978 with the launching of the satellite.

JAS So you've seen a lot of major changes in Alaska?

LS Well, yes, there was the pipeline, it provided a lot of jobs, and brought a lot of people up here. A lot of people came up out of a sense of adventure, and wound up just staying!!