



The Battle of Sitka

The Tlingits raised no immediate objection to the Russian settlement up the coast, perhaps because Baranov paid them for the site in beads, brass and bottles. With the Tlingits apparently neutralized, Baranov returned to Kodiak in 1801, and the 300-odd colonists he left behind grew carelessly confident.

Then, in June 1802, a horde of Tlingits fell upon St. Michael (Sitka) while most of its men were off hunting: The Indians killed and beheaded the remaining men and carried off the women as slaves. Three Russian men, a few Aleut hunters and 18 Aleut women escaped the massacre by hiding in the forest.

The survivors were later picked up by a prowling British ship whose captain; one Henry Barber, had a piratical turn of mind. Barber ferried the survivors to Kodiak, held them captive aboard his ship and offered them to Baranov for ransom: fur pelts valued at 50,000 rubles (\$25,000 at the prevailing rate of exchange) Baranov, staring at the muzzles of Barber's guns, paid with all the skins he felt he could part with: 10,000 rubles worth.

Barber's twisted visit brought Kodiak its first word of the catastrophe at St. Michael. Baranov received the news in grim silence, but he had no intention of letting the Tlingits get away with murder. At

present, however, he was helpless; lacking the weapons or enough manpower to mount a punitive expedition.

What he needed was a minor miracle, one that the sailor Honest Joe O'Gain would provide: In the spring of 1804 Baranov set out for Sitka with an military force of 120 *promyshlenniki* in four small ships and 800 Aleuts in half as many kayaks. Months later the armada arrived at Sitka, and Baranov saw that help was already there. In the bay lay a warship flying the imperial Russian flag. The first Russian fighting ship to appear in the Pacific. The vessel was the 450-ton frigate *Neva*, on an imperial cruise to inspect and protect Russian America. She had called at Kodiak after Baranov's departure with his slow fleet and learning of his expedition against Sitka, had come to assist him.

Even with such formidable aid, the capture of Sitka turned out to be a grueling operation. It took a full day for the little kayaks to tow the *Neva* and its cannons into position to bombard the Tlingit stronghold, which was protected by a long gravel shoal and an arc of trees. Once the shelling commenced it went on day after day and produced no practical results.

Baranov, fed up with sitting and waiting, led an Aleut force ashore and tried to take Sitka by storm. But the Tlingits routed them, wounded Baranov in the arm and might well have wiped out the attackers but for covering fire from the *Neva's* guns and O'Gain's artillery on Baranov's four smaller ships. Finally, after the Russians were kept awake many nights by the chanting of medicine men in Sitka, silence fell over the harbor. The Tlingits had abandoned their fortress, leaving Baranov little but, ruins and a few corpses to show for his victory.

Baranov began building a new fort a mile west of the old one. He made it his headquarters and named it New Archangel, but in common usage it would be called Sitka. The move ended Baranov's worst struggles and ushered in a period of massive growth and profit boom time for Russian America.