

FROM: WHERE THE SEA BREAKS ITS BACK

By COLBY FORD

ashes. The following week a pair of hunters, bathing in a hot spring supposed to cure rheumatic fever, were surprised and slain. As punishment for these outrages, Pushkaref put seven of the hostage children to death.

Since it was evident that the natives had determined on complete annihilation of the invaders, the hunting parties were recalled to the ship and Pushkaref set sail for Kamchatka with his spoils, carrying with him twenty-five young Aleut women on the pretext "that they were to be employed in picking berries and gathering roots for the ship's company." When they reached the Kamchatkan coast, fourteen of the girls were sent ashore to search for food. Two of them managed to escape into the hills, and another was killed as she tried to flee. In despair, the remaining eleven girls leapt off a cliff onto the rocky beach. Anxious to rid himself of troublesome witnesses, Pushkaref had all the other Aleut women bound with ropes and tossed overboard.

The islanders did not forget. A year later a vessel commanded by Captain Drushinnin anchored at Unalashka in the late fall, and the crew was divided into smaller groups to hunt and trap over the winter. One shore party of twenty Russians built a hut near the native village. Relations with the inhabitants appeared to be entirely friendly, and no trouble occurred until December 4. That morning five hunters set out to look after their fox traps, and Drushinnin and two junior officers paid a visit to a native dwelling. They had just entered the low aperture when they were set upon without warning by a number of Aleuts who knocked down Drushinnin and one of the officers with clubs, and finished them with some knives they had bought from the Russians the day before. The other junior officer grabbed an axe, and made such good use of it that he succeeded in reaching the winter hut alive, though mortally wounded, and alerted the rest of the party. They opened fire

Year after year the *promyshleniki* pressed farther along the Aleutian chain, leaving a trail of devastation and death in their wake. When one island was stripped of all its otters, the plunderers moved on like a horde of locusts to ravage another. The male inhabitants of a native settlement were enslaved and forced to hunt day and night in their skin boats while the Russians lived ashore with their women. Matchless pelts were purchased for a mirror or a string of glass beads. If the islanders rebelled, they were clubbed as callously as the otters, and their villages were looted and burned. The fur stampede had become a war of invasion and conquest.

Native resistance stiffened as the *promyshleniki* encountered the more savage tribes to the eastward. In 1762, one Sergeant Pushkaref and a party of twenty market-hunters left their vessel to scour the coast in *baidars*, and landed on a previously unexplored island called Unalashka, later Unalaska. In order to safeguard themselves against attack, the hunters seized nine children from the village and held them as hostages. Despite their precaution, a band of natives ambushed the party and killed two men and wounded three others. That night they stormed the Russian encampment in force, murdering four more men and reducing the huts to

on the Aleuts with muskets, but one of their number, caught outside the hut, was thrown to the ground and assaulted with knives and spears until a huge cossack named Korelin, armed with a bear knife, made a gallant sortie and rescued his half-dead comrade.

For four days the Russians were besieged in their hut, unable to venture outside in search of food and water. To add to their fears, the natives displayed in plain view the garments and arms of the five hunters who had gone to visit the fox traps. During the fourth night, Korelin and three other fugitives managed to reach their *baidar* and paddled out of the harbor, the natives making no attempt to pursue them. Once out of sight of their enemies, they landed the skin boat on the beach, and set out across the island toward their ship. It was still dark when they reached the anchorage, and discharged their signal guns, but there was no reply. The sound of firing had betrayed their position to the natives, and they made a stand on top of a lone boulder, holding off their pursuers until dawn with a barrage of musket fire.

Daylight revealed an object on the beach which confirmed their worst apprehensions. It was the main hatch of their vessel, washed up by the waves onto the sand. The four trapped men made a break for the mountains, and secreted themselves in a ravine all the following day. Under cover of darkness they returned to the anchorage, and located the wreck of the vessel and the bodies of their dead shipmates strewn along the shore. Gathering a few bundles of dried fish, they stole back into the hills, hiding among the cliffs and traveling only at night. Nevertheless, they were discovered by the natives and forced to take refuge in a cave, where they held out for five weeks against repeated forays, unable to tend their wounded or bury the dead. It was not until the thirtieth of March that Korelin, the sole survivor, succeeded in signaling a *shitikha* that was

cruising offshore, and swam out to the small boat in a shower of arrows.

Now the islanders, thoroughly aroused, embarked on a campaign of relentless guerrilla warfare. A group of *promyshlenniki* had been shipwrecked on Umnak Island, and the sixteen survivors had erected a temporary shelter of empty casks covered with sea-lion skins. During their first night ashore, a native war party approached stealthily from the sea. Their spears and arrows pierced the flimsy barricade of skins; five castaways were killed outright, and all the others severely wounded. The least disabled seized the fallen spears and launched a counterattack, driving off the savages. Three days later, a hundred and fifty islanders stormed the shelter with muskets, the first recorded instance of the use of firearms by the Aleuts. When their bullets fell short of the mark, they set fire to the dry grass in an effort to burn their quarry out.

After a month of ceaseless harassment, the castaways escaped in a stolen *baidarka* and traveled down the coast in search of help. On the beach they spotted the charred remains of another Russian vessel, and torn garments and broken lances gave evidence of a desperate struggle. They climbed the hill to the ruined encampment, and in a bathhouse discovered twenty bodies, including the ship's commander. Straps and belts tied around the necks of the corpses indicated that they had been dragged to the spot, but no further details of the massacre could ever be obtained.

Some turncoat Aleuts were bribed to join forces with the white invaders, and served as mercenary warriors when the fur-hunters encountered the inhabitants of the Shumagins and Kodiak Island. Years later an elderly native described the arrival of the *promyshlenniki* on Kodiak: "I was a boy of nine or ten years, for I was already set to paddle a *baidarka*, when the first Russian ship with two masts appeared near Cape Alutik.

Before that time we had never seen a ship; some wise men knew something of the Californias, but of white men we did not know at all. When we espied the ship at a distance we thought it was an immense whale, and were curious to have a better look at it. We went out to sea in our *baidarkas*, but soon discovered it was no whale, but another unknown monster of which we were afraid, and the smell of which [probably tar] made us sick. The people on the ship had buttons on their clothes, and at first we thought they must be cuttlefish, but when we saw them put fire into their mouth and blow out smoke we knew they must be devils.

"Among our people there was a brave warrior named Ishinik, who was so bold that he feared nothing in the world; he undertook to visit the ship and came back with presents in his hand, a red shirt and some glass beads. He said there was nothing to fear, 'they only wish to buy our sea otter skins and to give us beads and other riches for them.' The old and wise people held a council in the *kashima*, and some said: 'Who knows what sickness they may bring us; let us await them on the shore, then if they give us a good price for our skins we can do business afterward.'

"The Russians came ashore together with the Aleuts and the latter persuaded our people to trade, saying: 'Why are you afraid of the Russians? Look at us, we live with them and they do us no harm.' Our people, dazzled by the sight of such quantities of goods, left their weapons and went to the Russians with their sea otter skins. While they were busy trading, the Aleuts, who carried arms concealed about them, at a signal from the Russians fell upon our people, killing about thirty and taking away their skins. Those who attempted to escape in their *baidarkas* were overtaken by the Aleuts and killed.

"During the winter the Russians moved about from village to village. Whenever we saw a boat coming we fled to the

hills, and when we returned no *yukala* [dried fish] could be found in the houses. In the lake near the Russian camp there was a poisonous kind of starfish; we knew it very well, but said nothing about it to the Russians. We never ate them, and even the gulls would not touch them; many Russians died from eating them. But we injured them also in other ways. They put up fox-traps and we removed them for the sake of obtaining the iron material."

The Russians resorted to every form of cruelty to cow the rebellious natives. Captives were knouted, blinded with hot irons, tied naked to stakes and castrated before the assembled villagers. A favorite procedure was to line up the men of a settlement in single file, and fire a musket point-blank at the first man, while the *promyshleniki* made bets as to how many in the line would be killed. The best recorded score was nine, the bullet lodging in the ribs of the tenth man.

When terrorism failed to halt the massacres, a hunter named Solovief decided to execute personal vengeance on the murderers of his countrymen. Learning that three hundred natives had assembled in a fortified *kashima*, Solovief marched his punitive force to the village. The Russians were greeted by a shower of arrows from every aperture, but when the defenders discovered that enemy bullets could penetrate their fortress with ease, "they closed the openings, took down the notched posts which served as ladders, and sat down to await their fate." Unwilling to expose his men in a frontal attack, Solovief dispatched some Aleuts to place bladders filled with gunpowder under the log foundations, and touched them off with musket fire. Those natives who survived the explosion and tried to surrender were hacked to death with bayonets and sabers.

The *promyshleniki* were constantly searching for new hunting grounds, hitherto undisturbed by man. In the spring

of 1768 Fleet Master Gerassim Pribilof, cruising north of Unalashka in the Bering Sea, sighted the high cliffs of an unknown island which he called St. George, after the saint of the day. It was the southernmost of the famous group of fur seal islands which bear Pribilof's name today. The shores swarmed with sea otters, as fearless as those which Steller observed on Bering Island during the first winter; large packs of walrus basked on the ice floes; arctic foxes were so tame that they could be caught by hand. With the approach of summer the fur seals returned to their rookeries in countless numbers, the largest concentration anywhere in the world. In his first year, Master Pribilof obtained forty thousand seal and two thousand otter pelts, fifteen thousand pounds of walrus ivory, and "more whalebone than his ship could carry."

Rumors of the untold wealth in furs to be found in northwest America had spread abroad. When Captain Cook visited Prince William Sound, on his third voyage around the world, his sailors traded iron nails for a fortune in sea otter skins. Yankee market hunters came from as far away as Boston to join in the fur stampede. Spaniards pushed northward out of Mexico along the California coast, gathering pelts to send to China in exchange for quicksilver for their Mexican mines. In 1804 a single ship under Commander Baranof sailed back to Russia with a cargo of fifteen thousand pelts.

Third of the nineteenth century, sea otter hunting industry on the Pacific coast. The Francisco Bay, according to early estimates could knock them on the head. The Bay averaged eight hundred a year. Estimated, rivalry among the hunters. Ten years of competitive killing. The population in the San Francisco

area; within a few more years, the species had ceased to exist anywhere on the American mainland. By 1830 — less than a hundred years after Bering's voyage — sea otters had become so rare in Alaska and the Aleutians that Baron von Wrangell, of the Russian American Company, persuaded his government to forbid the use of firearms and protect the remaining animals by rigid conservation measures.

This brief period of respite for the beleaguered otters ended in 1867, when the United States purchased Alaska at the bargain price of two cents an acre. Ignoring the Russian ban on firearms, American hunters substituted high-powered rifles for native arrows and spears. The waste was appalling. Men patrolled the beaches, aiming through telescopic sights at a swimming otter's head and trusting to luck to find the body later if it washed ashore. Countless wounded animals, shot at too great a distance from land, sank and were never recovered. When the American government sought to restrict the taking of sea otters to the natives of Alaska, white men married Aleut women and claimed the right to hunt. By the turn of the century, the islands had been stripped clean. In 1911, a fleet of thirty-one schooners combed the former hunting grounds in vain. Their total kill for the summer was a dozen skins.

That year an international treaty to protect the species was signed, and the Aleutians were declared a Federal Wildlife Refuge. Protection had come too late. Each year the otter count grew smaller, its decline speeded by Russian and Japanese poachers who continued to slip into the remote bays, unobserved in the fog, and slaughter the few isolated survivors. In 1925, an exhaustive survey failed to detect a single otter, and the species was declared extinct.

Six years later Frank Dufresne, soon to become director of the Alaska Game Commission, made a routine inspection tour