

WHY AMERICA CLINGS TO HER ALEUTIANS

Stepping Stones From The West To The East

UNTIL recently the Aleutian Islands meant nothing at all to most people, and to the others they were the islands of Alexander Woollcott's famous pun: "Thank God, we still have our Aleutians." To-day they are a deep anxiety to everybody, and this article, written for "The Listener" by MARGARET M. DUNNINGHAM explains why.

WERE it not for the development of air power this chain of islands — which extends a thousand miles from the tip of the Panhandle of Alaska almost to the Asiatic mainland at Kamchatka Peninsula — would have remained forgotten in the obscurity of their northern fogs. Now we must remember the Aleutians and think about them. Here the United States, the Soviet Union, and Japan are near neighbours. And in this inhospitable region each of these three great powers maintains a naval base.

The Occupation of Attu

The Japanese base is at Paramshiro in the Kuriles — just 650 miles from Attu, the most westerly of the Aleutians, which the Japanese have just occupied. The Hepburn Committee which in 1938 reported on suitable sites in Alaska for naval bases stated that considerations of pure strategy would indicate that the United States should establish a base as far west as possible — Attu Island itself was suggested. However, the authorities were of opinion that Unalaska Island represented the "westernmost point at which a base could be maintained in time of peace without inordinate maintenance charges."

THE NEW WORLD

(Continued from previous page)

find what we call the team spirit idealised. Well, I think in American schools they team up even more. All that is splendid if it stops short of making you forget how to act alone and take decision without needing a crowd to back you up. The unit of democracy is not the crowd but the man. Democracy is up to you and me; not the people on our street. By far the biggest problem of the future is going to be neither unemployment nor war, but leisure. Yes, leisure. Before the war the margin of leisure time was widening fast because machines were taking over more and more of the monotonous work that gave employment to the great bulk of men and women. A time is coming when most of our needs will be met by machines which will want men only to look after them. You cannot stop this margin of leisure widening unless you destroy the machines, and as the machine is a good thing and came out of the mind of man I believe that in destroying it you will be destroying a work of God. So God meant us to have more and more leisure.

Accordingly one American naval base was established at Dutch Harbour on Unalaska Island, the second of the Aleutian chain, one at Kodiak Island along the side of the Alaskan Panhandle, and one down the south coast of Alaska at Sitka. In accordance with the recommendations of the Hepburn Report they are naval air bases, and Kodiak and Dutch Harbour submarine bases as well.

Kiska, the second of the islands to be occupied by the Japanese, was marked on United States maps as a naval reservation and used as a listening post. The weather in that part of the world has been figuring in the news. The climate of these islands is cold, wet, and foggy, like that of the islands to the north of Scotland. Unalaska is said to have two hundred and fifty rainy days in the year and in the summer season the islands are often shrouded in a bank of fog for weeks on end—a very useful cover for Japanese activity.

Russian Naval Bases

It is not only Japan and the United States who maintain naval bases in this region. The Soviet Union has a naval base at Petropavlovsk on the Kamchatka Peninsula. And just recently the rising little town of Petropavlovsk was linked by a regular air service with

Why? Certainly not to swell the crowds at football games or lengthen the queues at cinemas. Obviously he meant it to be used, not wasted. He knew that to fulfil his job on earth man needed all the leisure he could get. And notice this—the people with interesting jobs are going to have far less leisure than the people with dull jobs because the machine can do the dull jobs but not the interesting ones. There is going to be enough interest going abegging to build up civilisation all over again, and unless something is done about it, it will be all frittered away on pleasure. There'll be tedium and demoralisation and the crash of yet another civilisation. Preventing this is the biggest job education has to do.

Leisure is going to be either the saving or the ruin of man, and only knowledge can tip the scale. You can only fight crusades for grand and simple causes, like possession of the Holy Sepulchre. For the old crusaders possession of Jerusalem meant possession of the fount of truth. Well, in that sense surely we are still fighting for Jerusalem, still fighting for the defiled fount of truth.

Khabarovsk, a thousand miles to the south and the headquarters of the Soviet Far East Army. The Soviet Union has also been fortifying the Komandorsky Group, which are really part of the Aleutian Archipelago. The Russians have constructed a submarine base on Bering Island, one of the group. This activity has, of course, been undertaken with a watchful eye on Japan. It is not always remembered that, except for Canada and Mexico, with whom it has land frontiers, the Soviet Union is the nearest neighbour of the United States. Bering Strait, separating Alaska and Siberia, is only fifty miles wide and the two countries come closer than that. America owns Little Diomed Island in the Strait and the U.S.S.R. Big Diomed Island, which is only eight miles away, but on the other side of the international date line.

Peaks of Drowned Mountains

By way of the Aleutians even Japan is not so far from the United States. These islands are the peaks of drowned mountains and are like stepping stones from the western to the eastern world—from America to Japan. Their semi-circular sweep shuts off the Bering Sea from the North Pacific Ocean. The Great Circle Route, by way of the Aleutians, is by far the quickest way between U.S.A. and Japan. The distance from Seattle to Yokohama via the Aleutians is about 4,900 miles; via Honolulu and Midway Island it is about 6,500. Furthermore the journey can be made by way of Alaska in easy stages with no single hop of more than 900 miles, whereas the route via Pearl Harbour involves an initial leg of some 2,400 miles of open sea. By occupying Attu and Kiska, Japan has made herself relatively safe from an air attack launched from American territory.

Triangle of Pacific Defence

Since the Hepburn Report America has strengthened her bases in the Aleutians, but they still remain small. John Gunther says that these Alaskan bases compare to Pearl Harbour as "mice to mastodon." The American taxpayer has not been willing to see his money poured out on defence schemes in remote Alaska, and sums recommended by the Navy and Army Departments to be expended there have been drastically cut in the Budget.

The importance of the Aleutian Islands is that with strong bases there and in the Hawaiian Islands, America's Pacific defences would be based on a giant triangle—from Alaska to Hawaii and to the Panama Canal—and would effectively deny that huge area of the Western Pacific, enclosed in the triangle,

to an enemy force. The Aleutians thus protect the mainland of America, both Alaska and British Columbia, from attack. The Western Pacific could be controlled by long-range flying craft flying the strategic triangle — Seattle, Honolulu, Dutch Harbour.

So it is for strategic reasons that these islands, which are not rich in material resources, and which are largely uninhabited, have become so important. A few years ago, before war clouds loomed in the Pacific an American journalist wrote: "It is questionable whether the Aleutian Islands will ever support any considerable population; so far they have no white population, except for a few fox farmers trying to raise blue foxes. Some talk of using the islands for dairying, but it is doubtful whether it would pay. The climate is so damp that grain will not mature, though grasses of all kinds grow in abundance and on the lowlands there is grass throughout the year. The soil is vegetable mould, mixed with volcanic ash. The country is very rugged and there is no place where farms of any size could be made."

The great wealth of this region to-day comes from the Pribilof Islands, two hundred miles to the north of the Aleutians, which are the property of the U.S.A. These islands are one of the three great seal rookeries of the world, and millions of seal skins have been taken from them with great profit both to the U.S.A. Government and to the companies to whom they have let the concession. The seal rookeries are carefully watched, and these seals have the distinction of being "convoys by the navy" to their breeding place. For many years the U.S.A. has kept a considerable fleet of coastguard vessels in Dutch Harbour to keep poachers of other countries away from the Pribilof preserve.

The Aleutian People

The Aleutian Islands were once part of the Russian Empire and were sold to the United States along with the rest of Alaska in 1867. Russian traders were attracted by the great wealth of furs to be gained in this region, and the islands served as a land bridge by which the Russians crossed to the Alaskan mainland. Kodiak and Unalaska were both old Russian settlements. Unalaska was settled in 1760. To-day there is a customs house there, a Russian Greek Church, and Methodist Mission and orphanage.

The natives of these islands are a distinct people, known as the Aleuts. To-day there are only about a thousand of them, but when the Russians came to the islands there were about 25,000. The Russian traders of those days treated the Aleuts with such barbarity that they almost exterminated them. But at the same time they converted them to Greek Orthodox Christianity. To-day the people are largely of mixed blood, but the pure Aleuts are a branch of the Eskimo family. They differ from the Eskimos of the mainland in language, habits and mental ability. Their culture is adapted to meet a raw and wet, rather than an extremely cold environment. The main occupation of the men is seal hunting and fishing, and the women weave fine baskets through the long winter months.