

Story #5 Vol. III St Matthew Island Alaska - Part 1

St Matthew Island Alaska has the distinction of being the most remote spot in Alaska. It sits alone in the Bearing Sea without road, airstrip or town. The closest village is Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island off the Yukon River delta, a distance of 200 miles. It's a 32 mile long 4 mile wide sliver of tundra and cliffs.

In 1944 the Coast Guard installed a loran (long aids to navigation) station on St Matthew to help U.S. ships and aircraft pinpoint their location. The Coast Guard stationed 19 men to operate the station there. No doubt these men were the first humans to live on the island for any length of time.

USS Anaqua AN-40 was working out of Dutch Harbor, mostly hauling cargo instead of performing Net Duties. The larger wooden Net Tenders like Anaqua were well suited for use as small freighters. They had ample cargo space in their aft, forward and lower (below forward) holds. In August 1944 Captain Tighe informed us that we would be making a trip to St Matthew with a load of cargo. This would be a sea voyage of about 475 miles. Normally it would take about 42 hours without stopping at the Pribilof Islands.

Our port home was the Ballyhoo dock on the north edge of the Dutch Harbor Naval Base and the small village of Unalaska. On Augst 8th we made a short round trip to the Dutch Harbor Pier and took on 15,157 gallons of fuel oil in addition to lube oil. Returning to the Ballyhoo dock we took on fresh water from the dock connection, in preparation for our long trip;

In the evening of August 9th at 2115 the crew with the help of some Seabees commenced loading cargo for St Matthew. A lot of this cargo was loaded oil drums, which along with the rest of the cargo was loaded in the aft, forward and lower hold. At 1715 on August 10th the last of the cargo was loaded and preparations were being made to be underway.

Main engines were started. At 2000 sea watches were posted. Even at this time of the year this was a miserable job. The cold damp winds in the foggy weather still penetrated the heavy foul weather clothing. There was a lot of activity on the bridge. Present there were the Captain, Office of the Deck, Quartermaster, Signalman,

Radar Operator and Helmsman. The Quartermaster had the charts laid out on the chart desk. In the Radio Room the Radiomen had turned on the 3 receivers to listen to and copy Morse Code. They had to monitor 3 different frequencies. The low 500 kc frequency was the distress frequency where a ship would send an S.O.S. if in trouble. This was connected to a speaker. The local 2716 kc frequency was for calls from nearby ships or shore stations. The 3rd one was for copying Fox Schedules. This was messages sent out by the powerful Navy Transmitters at Honolulu (NPM). All message headings had to be copied on the typewriter. The text of the message did not have to be copied unless it was addressed to our ship or to all ships. These last 2 were copied from an earphone on each ear.

Normally the ship was tied up to the dock with 6 lines doubled up. At about 2015 Captain Tighe gave the order "Single up all lines." Ship was port side to the dock and the current coming from ahead, so he was going to pull the stern, swing the bow out and let the current take her out into the stream. His next order was to take in the bow line (#1) and the 2 lines that tended aft and would prevent forward motion unless removed (probably #2 & 4) plus heave round on stern line (#6) Several crewmen would heave on the stern line to bring stern closer in. He probably left the other 2 lines secured momentarily (probably #3 & 5) They tended forward from ship to dock and would go slack as they moved ahead. If everything went right the bow swung gently to starboard as the current caught it, and the ship moved ahead from the wash under stern from turning of the screw. The last order from the skipper was "take in all your lines." Anaqua was underway at 2025, passing through the nets at 2030 (Note: Nets that we never worked on)

We weren't alone on this lonely journey. We were accompanied by US Coast Guard USS Clover WLB-292. She was a 180 Foot Seagoing Buoy Tender.

At 1907 on August 11th we were anchored in English Bay, St Paul Island, a part of the Pribilof Islands. It seemed like the seas were always rough during our sea assignments in the North Pacific and Bearing Sea. Therefore it was nice to be anchored in English Bay in calm waters after bouncing around at sea for a little over 23 hours. After staying here overnight we were underway at 0810 on August 12th for St Matthew Island. Most of the time our speed was about 11.5 knots. At 0420 on August 13th we were anchored in 6 fathoms of water one quarter mile from the south shore at St Matthew. It was about a 20 hour trip from St Paul Island.

St Matthew was a desolate location. There was no harbor, bay or cove there. We were like a cork bouncing up and down out there. Swells from the open sea would continually be hitting the shoreline. A motorized barge from the Coast Guard Ship Clover would be hauling the dry cargo. Oil drums would be floated to shore towed by Anaqua's Motor Launch. This would prove to be a dangerous and miserable assignment for the boat crews. The weather was cool, foggy and windy. Seas were choppy. The cold spray from waves would hit the crewmen. There was also the possibility that the Motor Launch could capsize. That could have been disastrous in the cold waters of the Bearing Sea.

Because of swells and breakers on the beach the barge had to discontinue transporting the dry cargo and by 1750 Anaqua's Motor Launch had to discontinue towing the oil drums. Motor Launch was hoisted onto the ship and boat crews were given an ounce of whiskey due to weather exposure. Captain Tighe decided to move ship further out into deeper waters. He did not want to take a chance of anchor dragging and grounding ship. At 1915 August 13th ship was anchored in 15 fathoms of water 5 miles from the St Matthew shoreline. No further unloading of cargo could be done until August 15th because of the rough seas. Bearings were taken every 15 minutes to make sure ship had not moved. Security watch of 2 men and Radar watch were set. Ship was ready to get underway on immediate notice in the event of trouble.

On August 15th at 0730 USS Clover headed toward the beach. Seas had calmed down somewhat but visibility was only about 500 feet during the day. At 1530 Anaqua was underway to unload cargo and anchored at 1610 in 6 fathoms of water one quarter mile from the beach. At 1930 the last load of dry cargo was unloaded to the barge and oil drums were unloaded into the water to be towed by Anaqua's Motor Launch. Later that evening Anaqua moved to deeper waters for the night and anchored in 10 fathoms of water 1 3/4 miles from shore.

At 0630 August 16th Anaqua was underway and anchored in 6 fathoms of water one quarter mile from shore. At 0830 deck crew commenced unloading oil drums forward and aft to be towed to the beach by Motor Launch and Clover's Whale Boat. Operation was completed at 1945. *A tough job well done by the crew of these 2 ships.*

Anaqua was underway at 2107 August 16th for Dutch Harbor at the Full Speed of 11.5 knots. At 1332 August 18th ship was home tying up to the Dutch Harbor Ballyhoo dock. What a great feeling to be back in calm waters and be able to eat a good evening meal in still waters.

Boatswain Mate 1st class Ford was transferred with bag, hammock and records to the Naval Dispensary for treatment of injuries he received at St Matthew. 4 other men from the St Matthew boat crew were also taken by ambulance to the dispensary for treatment, but would return to the ship later

One more trip would be made to St Matthew in September. Being we stopped at the Pribilof Islands longer than the first trip we were able to observe the seals. This was the largest fur sanctuary in the world. It was an interesting experience to observe these seals all around the ship. Being we didn't have any oil drums as part of our cargo the unloading process went pretty smooth at St Matthew once the seas calmed down. We did have one one mishap. Clarence Mason from the deck crew fell overboard, but they fished him out of the cold water and he recovered rapidly. The crew that went ashore reported that the 19 Coast Guard men on the island seemed

very depressed. They didn't seem friendly to the crew nor even between themselves. That would be understandable. They probably never saw the sun and had little recreation at this no man's land location. On the return triip the motor generator kept going out because of water in the diesel oil tank. This was a continuing problem. 3000 gals of water diesel oil was dumped overboard..

Unbeknownst to us 29 reindeer (24 females and 5 males) were barged to St Matthew Island in August as a backup food source for the 19 Coast Guard men stationed there. We will have more on that in our next follow up story.