

THE CRUISE OF THE BSP 1923

(Editor's Note: Admiral Harry Bailey wrote one of the most complete personal stories that I have read to date. It is of his journey on the BSP 1923 (Boat Self-Propelled). He starts at Seattle and then describes his stops at Dutch Harbor, Adak, Attu and the runs he made from Attu to Shemya. Since there is so little space available in the "MAILBAG" I have edited and printed only the parts about Shemya. Dan Lange)

Attu, in February of 1944 was a well-developed Army and Naval Base. In the nine months since the retaking of the island, many miles of roads have been built, fanning out from Massacre Bay, into the hills and along the beach. The main airstrip was on the westerly side of the bay, along with the naval installations, including two piers and a floating dry dock, which could offer repairs to their ships and, on occasions, Army Vessels. Shemya lies about 35 miles east of Attu. It is one of a group of three islands, the others are Nitzi and Alaid. The running time to Shemya is about 3 1/2 hours. About half an hour after leaving Massacre Bay, Alaid, the most westerly of the islands with a high promontory would come into view and directly behind it is Nitzi and, separated by a narrow channel, lies Shemya. Our arrival brought us to a new experience. The island has no harbor or bay for protection. The dock to be sturdy enough to face the direct force of its northern exposure had its pilings driven side by side. As you approach for mooring the common custom is to pass your main line to the attendants ashore-- not so in this operation. Light heaving lines were tossed aboard which after hauling in were attached to a steel cable, the cables in turn were hooked firmly to power winches on two bulldozers, one at our bow and, the other at the stern. They proceeded to draw us in against the dockside (only one side was usable). Perhaps the only positive thing was that under us was a sand bottom. As we continually bounced off the bottom, a large force of battalion workers would come on board and rapidly unload our cargo. I do not believe that while these conditions existed, we ever spent more than 45 minutes tied up at Shemya. After the cargo was removed, the workers scrambled ashore, we would cast the cables off and stern first, push our way to deeper water and head back to Attu. Sometime in early April, while at dockside at Shemya we saw a freighter anchored offshore, a distance of approximately two miles, and as each power barge was unloaded, it was instructed not to return to Attu but to prepare, each in its turn, to come along the side of the freighter and carry its cargo to shore. This would save the time of the return trip to Attu and back. Early April is not truly spring in the Aleutians and storms are quite common occurrences, but never the less, with heavy seas running, two barges, one tied to each side of the freighter, we began the task. With bow and stern lines as thick as three inches we attempted to hang on. At times a wave would carry us apart by a distance of ten feet, and the next time it would pick us up and pound us against the side of the freighter. Other times the

heavy lines would suddenly pull apart and break like a piece of string.

At Shemya the breakwaters had been completed and two large piers were in place (it was said at a cost of fifty million dollars). Runways were all hard surfaced. waiting the arrival of the new, massive B-29s, which were supposed to bomb Tokyo and other Japanese industrial cities. This never occurred. At one time in the summer Tokyo Rose mentioned that a factory of some sort was in operation on Shemya. I could only guess that a Jap submarine lying off shore could see some of the smoke and fire coming out of the stack of the asphalt plant.

The day before Thanksgiving 1945, we were ordered to carry a group of civilian workers to Shemya. Our skipper informed the workers, approximately sixty, to come aboard and off to Shemya we sailed. Shortly after rounding Alexi Point and into open water, we were into a bad storm with some choppy seas running. As we continued on, the winds increased and the seas became heavier and though our crew could handle the situation, the same was not so for the civilians. Most of them started out on the open deck, but in quick time they sought whatever shelter they could find. Our galley-salon was overflowing with most men standing. The available seating had long been taken. They invaded our sleeping quarters and some had become deathly seasick. After two hours of tossing and turning we come abreast of the westerly end of Alaid Island and through the wind driven rain from a distance of perhaps eight miles we saw a signal light coming from Shemya. Though difficult to read the message was repeated a number of times. We were told to return to Attu. By now we were in a true Aleutian blow, but without mishap we came dockside about eight that evening. One must remember, these solid ground people had now been subjected to about six hours of grueling punishment. As we touched the pilings one fellow asked, "Is this Shemya?" The reply was no, we had returned to Attu. A question remains did that fellow take a second trip? By coincidence, a cargo net was hanging off the dock and our passengers pounced on it with a vengeance and sick as they were, they scrambled ashore, true veterans of the Aleutian weather. The following morning news passed quickly from boat to boat. The storm, the first big one since summer, had devastated Shemya's harbor. The two breakwaters had for the most part been washed away. Half the lengths of two docks were no more than driftwood in the Bering Sea. What for all appearances, was to offer shelter from the winter siege of weather, was taken from us in a few short hours. Another victory for the untamable Aleutian weather! Although the conditions on Shemya were not good they were better than when we arrived in February of 1944.

