ALASKA—BRIDGE OR BARRIER?

By HERBERT TICHY

In the same proportion in which war encompasses new areas, our geographical knowledge and interest are extended. While in the past most of us knew hardly anything about the Malay States or Borneo, we can today without difficulty put our finger on Kuala Lumpur and Johore Bahru, on Palembang and Port Moresby. But even territories which have not yet been directly affected by the war have moved into our line of vision because at any moment the war may extend to them too. Among these is Alaska, after the loss of the Philippines the most important outpost, together with Hawaii, of the United States in the Pacific. In general there is not much known about Alaska even in the United States. Mr. Hague, the well-known mayor of New Jersey, for instance, said in a speech dealing with the crime problem of the United States: “Let us deport the criminals to Alaska, where, far from Americans, they can do no harm.” This surprised and annoyed the American inhabitants of American Alaska.

The author of the following article is a young journalist who has roamed the highways and byways of Alaska. While working—according to the American custom—at various odd jobs (gold-digger, sailor on Yukon steamboats, etc.), he has obtained an insight into the life of Alaska. When he told a friend in New York that he intended to go to Alaska he received the reply: “Alaska? Alaska? I have heard the name somewhere. Isn’t it a Danish colony near Greenland?”

In the following pages you will read what Alaska really is.—K.M.

In steep curves the pilot had brought the plane to a greater altitude, and the sea, which, seen from a height of only a few feet, had looked wild and stormy, now seemed smooth and peaceful. It appeared like a slightly corrugated sheet of metal, and from the rise of every wave the sun shone back at us in a thousand reflections. In spite of our dark glasses we were dazzled by this opulence of light; the glare confused us and made our eyes tired. There is hardly a place in the world where the days are so brilliant as in Alaska. In the spring, when there is still snow on the ground while the sun is above the horizon sixteen hours a day, one has to wear sun-glasses even inside the house, for through every window pours a flood of light, unbearably dazzling after the twilight of the arctic winter.

When we took off from the airfield in Nome it had been foggy and dull. Bill, the American pilot, was to supply a gold-mining camp north of Nome with provisions. As he could not land anywhere near it I had undertaken to throw out frozen meat, canned goods, flour, and sugar over the camp. We had done our job satisfactorily—the camp cook had waved a white flag which meant OK—and were flying back to Nome. As Bill had plenty of time and gasoline we flew, instead of keeping to the straight course overland, west of the coast, over the Bering Strait.

A UNIQUE SPOT

Down below in the sea, which seemed to be made of greenish metal, there were two dark spots, a smaller one toward the Alaskan coast and a larger one in the direction of Siberia—the two Diomede Islands. I suddenly realized that I was at one of the most peculiar points in the world, geographically speaking. I saw below me two oceans, two continents, and two days. Two oceans: if I turned round I saw the waters of the Arctic Ocean in
which a few icebergs were floating, looking ridiculously small and fragile. Before me lay the Pacific, or, to be more exact, its northern end, the Bering Sea. Two continents: Asia in the west, America in the east. Two days: the international date line ran below us. For a while, when we kept a course rather far to the west, we were not sure whether it was still Tuesday or already Wednesday. As we were going to land in Alaska again this mild confusion of time was of no importance. Should, however, a Russian pilot stationed at the East Cape in Siberia fall in love with an Eskimo girl of Cape Prince of Wales in Alaska and from time to time pay her a flying visit, he would have to be very careful with his time calculations. Supposing the flight to take half an hour, he would arrive in Alaska 23 1/2 hours earlier than he had left Siberia. He would have to start Monday evening in order to visit her the Sunday evening before.

**TWO DAYS IN ONE**

In Alaska, where anecdotes are very popular, they like to tell the following story. A whaling boat, whose captain and crew were more than rough, was taking a missionary north through the Bering Strait. The missionary asked the captain whether he could hold a service for the crew.

"Yes," said the captain, "but only on Sunday. On weekdays the crew has to work."

The conversation took place on a Saturday, and on the following morning the missionary appeared and wanted to assemble the men.

"What do you want?" asked the captain.

"To hold the service we talked about," replied the missionary.

"What! Today, on Monday? Not on your life!" roared the captain.

But it is not the confusing date line that makes this corner of the world important. It is the 62 miles which separate Asia from America here. The Eskimos cover this distance in their kayaks in a day. Some people are even said to have managed to reach America from Asia in winter without getting their feet wet, by jumping from one drifting ice floe to another—the current is too strong for the sea to freeze over entirely.

These 62 miles were considered by many American strategists to constitute a great danger to the United States. Russia did not neglect its Far North as America neglected Alaska. She built airfields and military bases. In Alaska this caused anxiety, the more so as Russia entirely closed herself in and allowed no one to look into her plans for Eastern Siberia.

**DIAMOND AND THE DIOMEDES**

In Nome I met the American missionary who has for years looked after the Eskimos on (American) Little Diomede Island. Although (Russian) Big Diomede Island is less than two miles away, there was no contact whatever between the two islands. One day during a hunting trip, he told me, he was blown, together with several Eskimos, in a large skin boat (called a umiak) against Big Diomede. As soon as the boat touched land the missionary was seized by two Red soldiers who said to him: "We are sorry for you, but we must arrest you and take you to Siberia."

"On the contrary, I am sorry for you," the missionary replied, and pointed at his Eskimos who had aimed their guns at the Russian soldiers. The missionary was able to return unscathed to the American island.

In Alaska, where hospitality is the supreme law of the land, this incident stirred up feeling, and John Diamond, the Alaskan representative in Washington, thereupon emphasized with increased eloquence the necessity of protecting Alaska against Russia. During last summer it became known that considerable military establishments were being constructed on Big Diomede. However, Russia had meanwhile stepped
into the camp of the Anglo-Saxon powers.

**BRIDGE BETWEEN CONTINENTS**

Alaska's significance as a bridge between the continents has long been recognized. Scientists today are more or less agreed that the original settlement of America essentially took place from Asia approximately in the following manner. Nomads roaming the Asiatic steppes and the Siberian tundra—tens of thousands of years before Columbus made his famous voyage—one day stood at the coast of the Bering Sea. They came from one of the coldest and most merciless regions of the world and suddenly found themselves in a paradise full of salmon. In boats or across the drifting ice—perhaps there was even a land connection between the two continents in those days—they reached Alaska and stood on American soil. From the northernmost part of America they began their migration, filling the prairies of North America with life, populating the jungles of Central America, climbing the high plateaus of the Andes, until their march stopped in Tierra del Fuego. Alaska was the bridge over which this great migration had commenced.

Later on the bridge-like nature of Alaska was repeatedly recognized and attempts were made to make use of it. In 1865 the rivers of Alaska were full of active life. Indian canoes heavily laden with many tons of wire laboriously fought their way upstream against fast currents. The Western Union Telegraph Company wanted to lay a telegraph line from the United States via Alaska to Siberia and on to Russia and Europe. The first wire connection between Europe and America was to be created. But while huge amounts of wire were still being transported to the North, the trans-Atlantic cable was laid by Cyrus Field, and the plan of an Alaskan telegraph line was abandoned.

"NORTH TO THE ORIENT"

As a center of intercontinental air communications Alaska would probably—had the present war not broken out—have soon played an important role, for airmen are aware that Alaska forms a wonderful bridge between the continents. The air line flown by Pan-American Airways via Fairbanks to Nome was to be extended into Russia. It is quite possible that these plans are now being carried out by military instead of civil authorities.

![Alaska and the North Pacific](image_url)

(According to latest reports a road is to be built, not from Vancouver, but from Fort St. John, about 400 miles inland and beyond the Rocky Mountains, leading behind those mountains via Fort Nelson and Watson to White Horse. From there it will follow the course shown on the map to Dawson and Fairbanks)
For an air service over the North Pole, which will one day undoubtedly become a reality, Alaska also provides favorable landing fields. Some historic flights have already touched Alaska. In 1926 the Norge under Amundsen and Nobile flew from Leningrad over the Pole to Teller in Alaska. In 1931 Lindbergh flew the shortest route over land "North to the Orient." On his way he passed through northernmost Canada and Alaska. In 1937 two Russian planes flew over the Pole and Alaska nonstop to San Francisco. A third plane disappeared before reaching Alaska. All searching for it remained fruitless; it had probably been forced down on sea. But the search flights contributed further to the knowledge of flight conditions over and to the north of Alaska.

**BARRIER AGAINST ASIA**

Today, however, Alaska is not supposed to be a bridge, but a barrier. The growing tension in the Pacific has hit the people of Alaska. Only a few years ago the Alaskans laughed good-humoredly and scoffed at the fear of war "outside," in the USA, Asia, and Europe. They felt untouched by it, as if they were living in another world. But the outbreak of the European war already caused a change in this attitude. More and more articles could be found in American newspapers demanding the improvement of the defenses of Alaska. Old, experienced trappers got in touch with officers of the troops stationed in Alaska and taught them the tricks of leading a bearable life at fifty below zero and especially how to fight at that temperature. The pioneers among the pilots of the Far North, who had been flying for years over the silent forests and lonely tundra, exchanged their experiences with their military colleagues. Alaska faced her third rush.

**THE FIRST TWO RUSHES**

The first rush had been caused by furs. Russian fur hunters, not a few of them exiles to Siberia, had reached the Bering Sea on their eastward march. Just as the nomads a few thousand or ten thousand years before them had crossed the sea, these Russian fur hunters also crossed over to Alaska, which had been discovered for the white man by Bering. They founded "Russian America" with the capital Sitka, and Russian influence reached as far as California. Hundreds of Russian trappers were lured to Alaska by the "fur rush." But the stock of fur-bearing animals was not equal to the cruel pursuit, and less and less furs were sent to St. Petersburg to deck the shoulders of beautiful women. When the stock was depleted the fur rush slowly came to an end. Russia lost her interest in Alaska and in the end was glad to be able to sell it to America in 1867.

At first the Americans did not derive much satisfaction from this over-exploited fur country. But in 1896 George Cormack found gold on the Klondike in such quantities that for a time it was thought that the yellow metal would lose its value. That was the beginning of the second great rush in Alaska, the "Gold Rush." Herdsmen from Australia, bank clerks from Germany, shiftless adventurers from all parts of the world, came to the new paradise. Up to this day the population of Alaska reveals a most international composition, although the Nordic element is in preponderance.

Yet of the tens of thousands who came, only a few found gold. The majority found a hard life, and many an early death in the icy storms, on the deceptive ice, or in the wild rapids. One, however, found neither gold nor death, but the basis for his later fame—the author Robert Service, who, better than anyone else, described the beauty and magic of the North. Soon it became quiet again in Alaska; the large gold deposits had been exploited, and the majority of the gold-diggers left the country again.

Today Alaska, about one fifth the size of the United States, is inhabited by slightly more than 70,000 people.
Half of them are white, about a quarter Eskimos, and a quarter Indians. The number of Indians has decreased rapidly during the last few years. Tuberculosis and other diseases, which probably accompanied the white man into the country, are mainly responsible for this.

TALKING CANS

The white population of Alaska probably represents the most interesting conglomeration of human beings to be found in the world. The loneliness of the country, the long winter nights, the glaring summer days without sunset, have left their mark on them. The trappers and prospectors, who have for years been roaming alone through the forests and tundra, are strange people. It is said of them that they have "missed too many boats," meaning that they let too many ships sail for the south without taking the opportunity of leaving the country. If one has missed "one too many boats," that means that one has got used to the rough frontier nature of Alaska. Those, however, who have missed "many too many boats" often go mad and end up in an asylum near Portland, Oregon, which is maintained exclusively for lunatics from Alaska.

One such man, who had "missed many boats," turned out to be a wonderful traveling companion. We drove together in dog sleighs through forests where the snow lay deep. In the evening we sat by the warm stove and chatted for hours. The man seemed to me to be absolutely sensible and, indeed, very intelligent.

One evening he told me how in the winter, two years before, he had nearly starved to death in his lonely log cabin. "It was the very devil—for days I didn't get so much as a glimpse of game. I was so hungry my stomach hurt me, and I noticed that I was gradually getting weak. I still had a few cans, but of course I couldn't eat those," he said.

"Why?" I asked, "had they gone bad?"

“No, but whenever I wanted to open one it spoke to me and said: 'Don't open me, I am dead meat, throw me out into the snow.' In the end I had thrown them all away."

"But cans can't speak," I attempted to object. The trapper looked at me rather angrily and replied:

"If I tell you they spoke, you can believe me. I know what I am saying, for I am not mad."

REMNANTS OF YESTERDAY

One meets remarkable people in sparsely populated Alaska. I remember the evenings I spent in a trapper's tent by the Yukon. This man had lived thirty-five years in Alaska; he had never seen a car or a movie. He knew he could never return to America, that modern American life would be too much for him after three decades in the forests. He was a typical Alaskan. The loneliness and tranquillity of his life had left him time to reflect on the most varied problems of life. From time to time he got hold of a newspaper or a book, which he then read with what to us city folk would seem incredible calm and deliberation, to ruminate just as long afterwards over their contents. This man, who had spent almost his entire life as a fur trapper on the Yukon and who knew even the biggest settlements in Alaska only by hearsay, was excellently informed on many political questions, and his views were clear and sound.

On another occasion I met an old drunkard of a prospector who was preparing for a long prospecting trip. He had three books in his luggage—Hume, Spengler's Decline of the West, and the Bible. These old-timers are the remnants of the Alaska of yesterday, of a hard frontier country in which only the hardest survived.

FERTILE "MUDDY WATER"

The Alaska of tomorrow will be an astonishing country, differing greatly from our general idea of this land. We can already get an idea of this
tomorrow in Matanuska. Matanuska means in the Indian language “muddy water,” and it is the name of a little place in the south of the country.

It was here that the first large-scale experiments were made at trying Alaska out as farmland. Some hundreds of farmers from the Middle West of the United States, whose farms had been ruined by successive dust storms, were sent to Alaska at the cost of the government. The government gave them land, built them houses, provided them with tools and the necessary cash.

There were many difficulties and disappointments in the carrying out of this government project which became an object of dispute between the two political parties in America. But the purely agricultural results were satisfactory. In the short, hot summer, which has up to twenty hours sunshine a day, all the grain and vegetables which can be planted in the north of the United States thrive. Moreover, they grow three times as fast as in more southern latitudes and are bigger and better-tasting than in the States. Alaskan potatoes won first prize at various exhibitions, and strawberries reach an enormous size.

Jack London, who has told us in his excellent books about the cold in Alaska, unfortunately forgot to tell us that the summer in Alaska is not far behind the winter in other extremes. 85 degrees Fahrenheit (30 degrees Centigrade) is by no means rare, and—we are not joking—sun helmets are then the most usual headgear.

MOTORING TO ALASKA?

The greatest strategic as well as economic disadvantage of the country is that it has no overland connections with Canada and the United States but is entirely dependent on maritime communications. These might easily be interrupted and could not be replaced by air connections.

Almost a hundred years ago, when gold was found in British Columbia and British engineers built trails through this wild, mountainous region, the plan of a connecting road appeared for the first time. But up to now the plan has not got beyond the stage of discussion. Alaska, Canada, and the USA are equally convinced of the importance of such a road, but so far they are still squabbling over dollars and privileges. Washington is of the opinion that, five sixths of the new highway being on Canadian territory, Canada should bear a corresponding share of the cost of construction. Canada, on the other hand, says that the United States needs this road for its northern territory and that Canada is being kind enough to permit the construction through her sphere of sovereignty and to offer to contribute a little toward the cost; more could really not be demanded.

There are some 1,300 miles to be built. The estimates on the cost of construction vary greatly. Louis Johnson, former Assistant Secretary of War, estimates it at 78 million dollars and insists that the road could only be used for the four summer months every year. On the other hand, the engineer Donald McDonald of Fairbanks, who knows the entire terrain, declares that the road would cost only 12 million dollars and would be open throughout the year, for there is less snow in these regions than in New York.

THE OPPOSITION AND THE INLAND PASSAGE

Several routes for the projected highway were worked out. One of them was to lead along the coast and would probably have filled all tourists with enthusiasm. But, after all, it was not supposed to be an excursion road but a strategic means of communication. And as such it could not be exposed to an attack from the sea. So the route was planned through the interior: the highway was to protect Alaska, and Alaska with her mountains and valleys was to protect the road.
In Washington, however, some voices were raised against the construction of a highway. They pointed out the fact that the steamship connection between Seattle and the ports of Alaska runs through the Inland Passage, a chain of innumerable islands and islets stretching many miles from the coast out into the open sea. Scenically the Inland Passage is an unforgettable experience. As through a canal one passes close by steep, densely wooded islands, over whose dark green tops the sparkling white of a glacier may sometimes be seen. However, this beauty is only visible on the few perfect days of the year; mist and rain usually envelop the scenery mercilessly in a monotonous gray.

This, then, said the opponents of the highway, forms an absolutely safe and protected route for American ships which could hide in the maze of islands without the slightest risk of being found. This theory seems to be rather onesided, for it can be applied equally well to the enemy. The latter could gain a footing at a strategically favorable point and be able from there appreciably to hinder or even entirely destroy the connection with Alaska.

400 SOLDIERS AND DEFECTIVE TEETH

At the beginning of January 1941 the first news items appeared in the press which clearly indicated that the war was at last approaching Alaska. President Roosevelt signed a bill providing for a "territorial guard" for the protection of towns, power plants, and important industries. This guard has, without being sanctioned by law, existed for about six months and is entirely independent of the regular army. It is formed by volunteers, chiefly workers from the gold mines, but is supplied with arms by the War Department.

When the present European war broke out, there were about 400 soldiers in Alaska and a few coastguard boats which were used mainly to take American doctors during the summer to the little coast settlements which are otherwise hard to reach. When these government-paid doctors had filled a few bad teeth and otherwise done their duty, the "Alaskan Navy" steamed south again.

Now 400 soldiers and a few motor launches are not exactly adequate to defend thousands of miles of sharply indented coast line like that of Alaska against a possible attack. In the current war preparations into which America was suddenly plunged, Alaska was also given considerable attention. In the spring of last year, Congress voted a sum of 75 million dollars for the defense of Alaska; meanwhile larger expenditures have probably been decided on.

SMART FOLLY

It is, by the way, quite interesting to note that the figure named is exactly ten times the price for which Secretary of State Seward bought Alaska from Russia in 1867. At that time America was not at all enthusiastic over the deal. "What are we to do with that piece of frozen earth?" people asked in the USA, and Alaska was called "Seward's folly." Just the same, it was a folly that paid well and proved to be one of the best business deals in history, for so far the profit from furs, fish, and gold has amounted to approximately two billion dollars. Today the salmon catch brings in on an average twice as much as gold mining, while the income from furs follows far behind.

So Alaska has, from a business point of view, been a very satisfactory investment for the United States. It will now be able to prove its strategic importance in the next few months.

According to the latest available reports, the following defense constructions were under way or about to be commenced in the summer of 1941:

DEFENSE PROJECTS

(1) At Fort Richardson in the vicinity of Anchorage a northern army
headquarters was to be built. 5,000 civilian workmen and 4,000 soldiers were employed for this construction for which 24 million dollars were voted.

(2) In Women's Bay on Kodiak Island a naval base was to be established, mainly for submarines, but which can also accommodate three bomber squadrons.

(3) In Dutch Harbor the docking facilities for submarines were to be extended at a cost of 13 million dollars.

(4) An air and naval base was to be built on Japonsky Island near Sitka (cost: 10 million dollars).

(5) A central airfield and training ground were to be laid out at Ladd-field near Fairbanks.

In addition, an airfield was planned for Annette Island near Ketchikan, which was intended as a halfway-station between Seattle and White Horse. Furthermore, military establishments were built at Yakutat and Metlakatla; and on Kiska Island, one of the westernmost Aleutian Islands, an observation and listening post was constructed.

Canada also decided to build airfields along the coast at intervals of 200 miles, in order to facilitate the air service between the United States and Alaska, which, on account of the frequently foggy weather, is not easy to maintain. The meteorological service, already established by Pan American Airways, was to be placed on a broader basis, for in the changeable arctic weather it forms an indispensable condition for all flying activity.

Such were the details concerning the defense of Alaska available in the summer of 1941. In the meantime, particularly since December 8, a great deal has happened which has remained unpublished.

ONE JAW OF A PINCER

What is the significance of Alaska in the present Pacific conflict? Since America and Russia are in the same camp, the Alaskan defense measures are on longer directed against the danger from Russia but against Japan. It is even possible that there will be cooperation in the Arctic between the USSR and the USA. On November 13, 1941, John Diamond proposed in Washington that Soviet bases especially on Komandorsky Island (off Kamchatka) should be leased in order to increase the strategic value of Alaska. But for the time being any development in this direction depends on the relations between Tokyo and Moscow, and so far Moscow seems to show little inclination to pick Far Eastern chestnuts out of the fire for Washington and London.

Against Japan, Alaska forms a good basis of attack. Dutch Harbor on Unalaska Island is an important naval port of America, shrouded in secrecy. Airfields on outlying Aleutian Islands are in dangerous proximity of Japan. Together with the line of attack of Hawaii-Midway-Wake-Guam-Manila, the Aleutians formed the second jaw of a pair of "trans-Pacific pincers," pointing threateningly at Japan. The southern jaw of the pincers has already been broken, and the northern one is hence imperiled and at the same time of increased importance for America.

For Japan, Alaska offers besides being a threat—the possibility of gaining bases on the American continent, from which to carry out air attacks on Canada and the United States. The tundra in northern Alaska is in places so flat and level that even large bombers can land without difficulty. The southernmost part of Alaska, the "pan handle," where warships could find a base, is warmed by the Japanese Current and has a considerably milder climate than Washington, D.C. or New York, hence rendering war activity possible all the year round.

How long will it be before Alaska, so long neglected and forgotten, appears on the front pages of the world's press? One of the results of this war will undoubtedly be the recognition of the fact that Alaska is one of the great unexploited countries of the future.