

## The Russian influence

One of my lunch stops en route to False Pass was a gravel beach below the abandoned village of Belkofski. On a bare grassy slope overlooking the beach the most ornate and grandiose building was a Russian orthodox church. All the other buildings apart from the school were ramshackle cottages Originally established as a Russian trading settlement, Belkofski was a centre for rich sea otter hunting grounds. Although Russia sold Alaska to the USA in 1867 the village remained under the tyrannical dictatorship of a priest. This pontifical pirate charged the Aleut natives a fee of sea otter pelts for marriage ceremonies, births, christenings and funerals. He had such a hold over the Aleuts that when he rang the church bell, no matter what the time of the day, they had to attend a service.

Belkofski was a favourite stopping place for whaling ships, partly because the vessels could stock up on fresh food but also because the priest always had a considerable stock of rum and whisky. He was also an avid poker player. One evening, during a game with the captain and crew of a whaling ship, the priest had a bad run of cards and ran out of money. Although it was long after midnight, he rang the church bell and donned his vestments. The locals took some time to wander bleary eyed into the church. The priest chanted a few prayers, took up a collection and then disappeared back to the poker game.

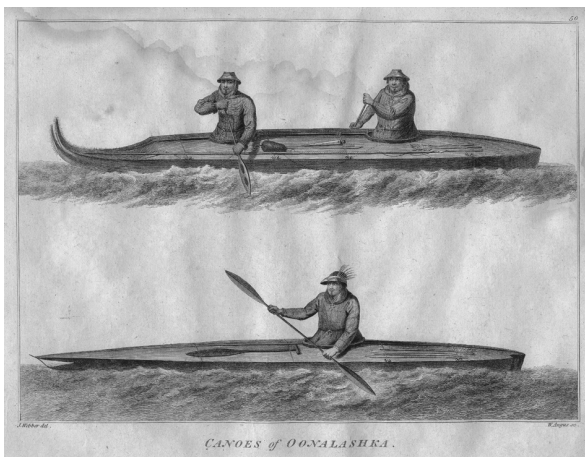
The Aleut sea otter hunters had developed the skills of kayaking and hunting to a state of perfection. Captain Cook was amazed to find that the Aleuts experienced no trouble in keeping pace with his *Resolution* while it was sailing at a steady seven knots. Their kayaks, called baidarkas, were works of technological achievement, the only kayaks in the world to have shims of polished ivory or bone inserted between the lashed pieces of wooden frameworks. These shims prevented wear and added flexibility to a kayak's framework. Four or five sealion skins were cut to shape by the men and sewn by the women over the baidarka frame to form a completely waterproof skin.

It was a great tragedy that the Russians first discovered Alaska in 1741. Reports of seas teeming with sea otters led to a stampede by Russian hunters to make their fortunes with what became known as the golden fleeces; the Chinese were insatiable buyers of the short haired pelts. These Siberian hunters, who became known as the Promyshlenniks, were the low life of Russia. Bone and ivory tipped spears and arrows were no match for Russian firearms and poison. Localized efforts by the Aleut villages to repel the hunters led to bloody massacres and razing to ground level of villages.



Paul Caffyn photographs

The abandoned Aleut village of Belkofski where, sadly, the most grandiose buildings is the Russian Orthodox church.



Baidarkas of Prince William Sound and Unalaska, drawn by John Webber during Cook's 1778 voyage.

One of the worst recorded incidents was perpetrated by Ivan Soloviev, the commander of two trading vessels. At the village of Kashega he tied 12 Aleuts front to back in single file and then fired a musket into the first native. The bullet lodged in the ninth Aleut, nine skilled baidarka men killed with a single shot. By the time Captain Cook visited the Aleutian Islands in 1778 the Aleuts had been completely subjugated by the Russian hunters. Of an original population of 16,000 less than a half remained. They never recovered.

On several occasions in the old Aleut hunting grounds I had an eerie spine tingling feeling of not being alone at sea. I felt a distinct presence around me I could only sense as the spirit of the old baidarka men.

## False Pass

By late afternoon of 28th June I was 'racing in the streets' for the shelter of False Pass. The day was turning into a bit of an epic. I'd rounded up into the lee of Egg Island for lunch and a brief respite from a breaking southeasterly swell. I disturbed a mob of sea otters resting on a rock shelf and grinned when the mothers grabbed their wee pups in their teeth and dived into the sea.

Twenty five miles of exposed weather shore remained to the entrance of False Pass. Since Egg Island had no fresh water and no level areas to camp I had to either shoot the gap for False Pass or paddle across to a sandy beach on the mainland. Several times I climbed up onto a high point to gauge the density of whitecaps and feel the wind strength. Deciding it was absolutely marginal I kicked out for 10 minutes to see if I could cope with the conditions. On a five foot breaking chop, buffeted by williwaws and a showery 25 knot southeasterly, I crossed a deep bay and commenced a four hour struggle to keep a little distance between me and surf breaking on a jagged rocky shoreline.

Apart from my arms steadily grinding in 38 paddling strokes a minute, the only thing that kept me from being driven against the rocks and cliffs was the deep draft oversterne rudder. Of all the 89 days of the 1990 trip this was the one when the rudder was absolutely magical. The wind, gusting to 30 knots with hard driving rain squalls, was square on my beam. To correct for wind and chop drift I had to maintain a course well south of the coast. Although I was mostly within a mile of shore the rain was so heavy at times that I was forced to rely on a compass heading.

More and more cockpit curlers began breaking over the decks. I tried a little bit of forced singing for a while but then, as the wind strength kept increasing and my body began chilling down, I had to pull the drawstring of the parka hood into a tight circle with only my nose and eyes peeking out. No more singing.

My first glimpse of the Palisade Cliffs, a vertical tier of sheer rock that guards the entrance to False Pass, brought a shadow of relief. I took note of the compass heading before the vis soaked in again and gritted my teeth for the last four miles. The wind was raging at a steady 35 knots, driving before it a seven foot high breaking chop. Rain was pelting down. My concentration was riveted on making the shelter of the pass. Closing on the cliffs, their tops hidden in cloud, I cast fleeting glimpses at waterfalls toppling out of the cloud base. Now, with the wind and chop on my stern quarter, I was flying along but holding back on the surfing runs as the chop was too short and too steep, no time for an end over loop.

Bouncing into the shallows and at last clear of the breaking chop, I took note which way the long brown streamers of kelp were lying. The flood tidal stream sets north through False Pass at speeds up to eight knots and it was almost high tide. I bounced through a big rapid with a series of standing pressure waves and was chuffed to find the tide with me, only five miles to the village of False Pass. On a flat sea, broken only by tide races, huge bubbling boils and the odd small overfall, I flew through those five miles at about 12 knots with a little help from the tide and wind. I'd been warned to steer well clear of Whirl Point. The whirlpool was so big and swift it would suck the kayak down or so the fishermen had reckoned.

The rain was still belting down but the wind had eased to about 20 knots. Keeping out in mid channel with just enough vis to sight the shore on either side, I shot past Whirl Point almost before noticing it. Two miles to go and the village should have been in sight. Bounced from side to side by big boiling eddies, at last I glimpsed a bright light though the clag and began a long ferry glide towards shore. Still steaming along at 10 knots, I shot under a long wooden jetty and could see buildings and houses of the village. Totally shagged but wearing a whisker of a smile at the corner of my mouth, I ground the bow onto a gravel beach and staggered ashore. I had just passed the half way mark to Nome, 1,354 miles down and about the same number to go.

**Paul Caffyn.** Next issue: False Pass to Nome.