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DIASASTER AT SCOTCH CAP



In the dark hours of April Fool's Day of 1946, a tsunmai exploded over Scotch Cap on Unimak Island, Alaska, destroying the almost new reinforced-concrete Scotch Cap Lighthouse and killing the five-man crew. The octagonal frame structure behind the lighthouse is the first one built on Scotch Cap and was obliterated by the tsunami, too. **(Official U.S. Coast Guard photo.)**

by Don Rutherford

When a watch keeper at the Coast Guard radio-direction-finding station on bleak Unimak Island in the Aleutians reported for the midwatch on the last day of March in 1946, he looked forward to another dark, dull Aleutian night. Instead, it proved to be a death watch. At 1:30 a.m., a sustained earthquake rocked the headland known as Scotch Cap. The nervous watch keeper noted the event in the log and checked by radio telephone with his opposite number at Scotch Cap Lighthouse at the foot of the headland. Even though the temblor lasted for almost a minute, no damage occurred at either installation.

It was another story 70 miles to the southeast, out in the Pacific. Twenty-seven minutes later a massive segment of the wall of the Aleutian Trench collapsed and roared down to the bottom, more than 20,000 feet below the surface. Above the collapsed wall, a series of seismic waves or tsunamis raced outward across the Pacific at hundreds of miles per hour. A few moments later, another jolt, shorter but much sharper, rocked Scotch Cap. Again there was no damage at either the direction-finding station or the lighthouse.

Twenty-one minutes after the second temblor, the first tsunami ap-

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proached Scotch Cap. As the wave moved into the shallow water near shore, it slowed dramatically and reared up into a near vertical wall of water later estimated at over 100 feet high. Millions of tons of seething seawater exploded as the wave engulfed the headland, destroying everything in its path. The water surged up and over the high cliffs behind the lighthouse and swirled around the buildings of the direction-finding station, flooding the engine room that housed the generators.

The off-watch crew station rushed out of their quarters and into the operations room where the commanding officer ordered them to higher ground. He knew that more giant waves might follow. As they left the building, one looked seaward and cried, "The light—the Scotch Cap Light! It's gone out."

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Not only had the light gone out, the fog signal and the radio beacon were both mute. Attempts to raise the light station by telephone and radio failed. The commanding officer groped his way in the dark to the edge of the cliff and looked down. All was pitch dark. It was a long night for all hands.

At last, with the coming of daylight, the Coast Guardsmen made their way to the cliff top and peered down. Below, they saw only a concrete platform and a few pieces of broken concrete—all that remained of Scotch Cap Light Station. That April Fool's morning, a numbing message from the direction-finding station on Unimak clattered out from teletype machines at other Coast Guard installations,

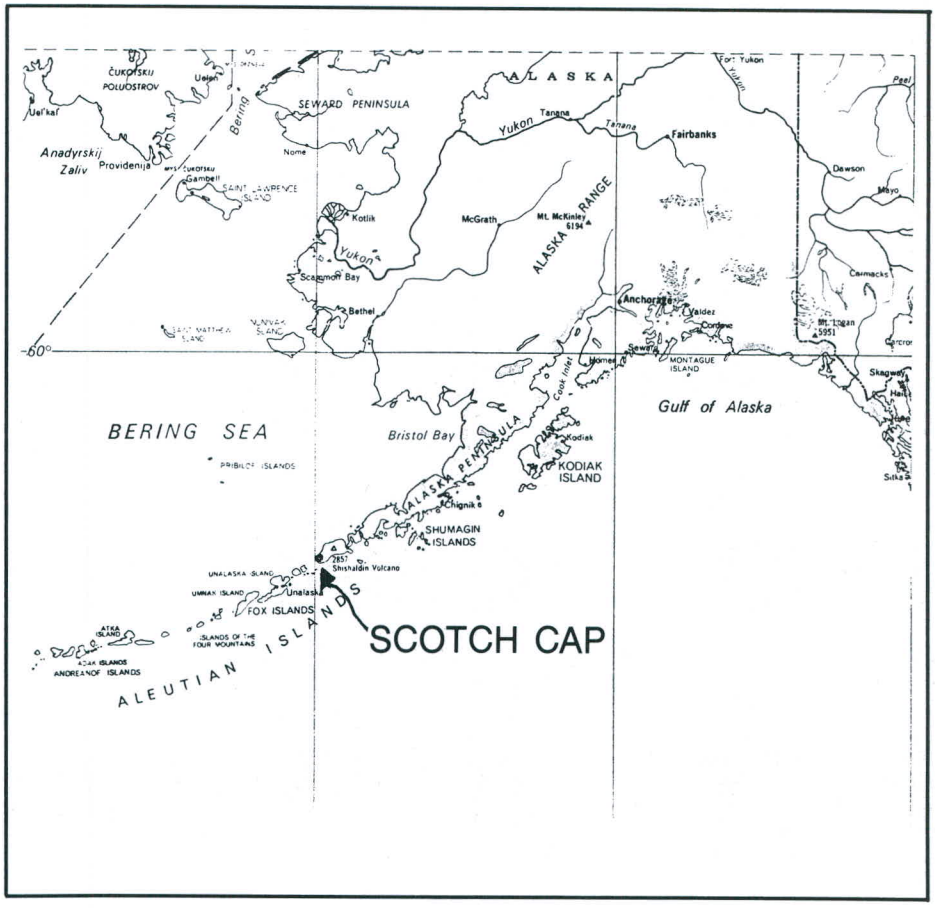
"TIDAL WAVE PRECEDED BY EARTHQUAKE COMPLETELY DESTROYED SCOTCH CAP LIGHT STATION WITH LOSS OF ALL HANDS X TOP OF WAVE STRUCK THIS UNIT CAUSING EXTENSIVE DAMAGE BUT NO LOSS OF LIFE X ENGINE ROOM FLOODED OUT BUT EXPECT TO MAINTAIN EMERGENCY POWER IF NO FURTHER DAMAGE EXPERIENCED X WILL SEARCH FOR BODIES OF SCOTCH CAP PERSONNEL AS SOON AS POSSIBLE X REQUEST INSTRUCTIONS."

A search for the five Coast Guard keepers found nothing—no bodies, no clothes, no papers, only a piece of human intestine. The five men had vanished. Several days later the sea cast up the bodies of Jack Colvin, Dewey Dykstra, Anthony Pettit, Leonard Pickering, and Paul Ness on the beach, identifiable only by their dental records.

A short time after the disaster, a temporary unwatched light of 300-candlepower with the same characteristics as the destroyed lighthouse was installed on a small white house, and a temporary radio beacon was installed at the direction-finding station.

By 1950, a new lighthouse had been built higher on the bluff above the remains of the wrecked light. It is a flat-roofed, rectangular, concrete building with a short metal tower that supports a 240,000 candlepower aero beacon, 116 feet above the sea and visible 17 miles seaward. The station also has a diaphone fog signal and radio beacon and was automated in 1971.

The first Scotch Cap Lighthouse was built in 1903 at the south entrance to Unimak Pass, the entrance to the Bering Sea closest to the mainland. At the time, it was the most westerly lighthouse in the United States. The following year Cape Sarichef, at the north end of the Pass, won the honor by less than



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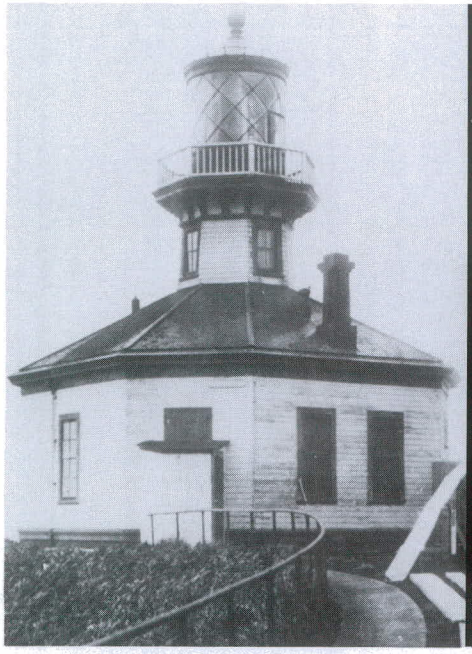
a mile. Located on a low bluff near the beach at Scotch Cap, the one-story, octagonal, frame building supported an octagonal tower surmounted by a black lantern. It housed a third-order fixed white light of 2,300 c.p. and a 10-inch fog whistle. Oil houses, three dwellings, a barn, and a boat house were built nearby. The peak of the black lantern was 45 feet above the ground and 90 feet above sea level. The lantern ultimately housed a 31,000 candlepower light visible for almost eleven nautical miles. Periodically the station was further improved; radiotelephone in 1923, new fog signal engines and compressors in 1928, and a radio beacon in 1931.

In the fall of 1940, the original beacon was replaced by an 80,000 candlepower light housed in a $150,000 reinforced concrete lighthouse only fifty yards away and protected by a seawall. Little good that did when the tsunami overwhelmed Scotch Cap a few years later. The black lantern and lens from the original light was mounted on the tower of the new reinforced concrete structure. The lens beamed an 80,000 candlepower beam with a 3-second flash at 15-second intervals. The new light was 60 feet above the ground and 92 feet above sea level. A diaphone fog signal was installed in the same building and the radio beacon nearby.

Scotch Cap Light, and Cape Sarichef, its Tombstone Twin are the most isolated of United States lighthouses. Because of the hazards and the difficulty of access, the early keepers served for three years and then went on leave for a year. The two lights got their nicknames because of the many shipwrecks in the area.

For this reason, the keepers often had guests, guests who stayed a long time. In 1909, the cannery supply ship *COLUMBIA* ran afoul of Unimak Island and the men aboard made their way to Scotch Cap Light. Two weeks passed before a ship arrived to take the 194 castaways back to civilization. During World War II, the Russian freighter *TURKSIB* went aground near the light. The captain and one of the crew drowned. The keepers hosted the survivors for several weeks when severe storms prevented rescue ships from picking up the Russians.

Ghost stories are not unknown in lighthouse lore. After the April Fool's Day disaster, Scotch Cap joined the ranks of haunted lighthouses. One night, both generators broke down. Without power, no beam swept the darkness and the foghorn and radio beacon were silent. A Notice to Mariners went out on Coast Guard radio alerting ships and aircraft. A Coast Guard cutter cruising within sight of Scotch Cap, however, raised the station on radiotelephone and asked why the Notice to Mariners had been broadcast. The cutter reported that the light was in view and burning brightly. While the official reason for automating the facilities at Scotch Cap was economy, some old-timers exchange knowing nods.



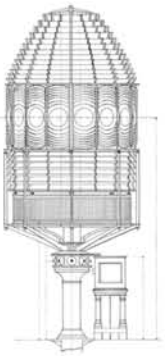
The original 1903 Scotch Cap structure was also destroyed by the Tsunami.



All that remains of Scotch Cap Lighthouse which was constructed in 1940.

(Official U.S. Coast Guard photo.)

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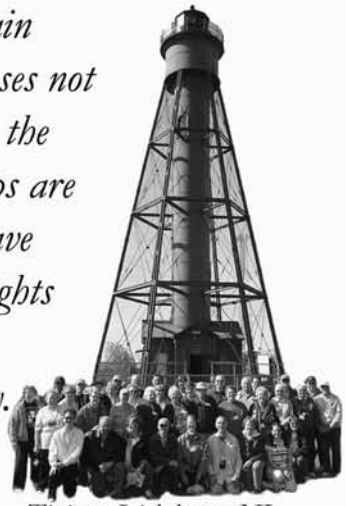
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