

THE WRECK OF THE ST. NICHOLAS*

The Russian ship St. Nicholas sailed from New Archangel (Sitka), Russian America, September 28th 1808, for an exploring and fur trading voyage along the shore of what is now the State of Washington. The commander was Nikolai Isakovich Bulagin and the supercargo, or prikaschik, was Timothy Tarakanof, who preserved the story of the voyage and the varied experiences of the crew in a manuscript which was deposited in the archives of the Russian American Company at Sitka for many years.

Land was sighted on October 10th at Cape Juan de Fuca (Flattery), and the ship then lay off the coast of Vancouver Island in calms and light winds, while the officer mapped the shores and traded with the Indians who came to the ship in their canoes to the number of hundreds in a day.

The canoes were generally of small size, carrying from four to ten passengers each and the Indians brought sea otter skins, deer, goats, and fish for sale. For a large halibut the Russians paid a quarter arshin of blue coral beads, five or six vershocks of glass beads, and some thread. The Indians refused with contempt all offers of beads, nankin cloth, or iron implements for sea otter skins, and demanded cloths of the kind similar to that used in the jackets of the Russian sailors.

The arms of the Indians consisted of arrows tipped with deer horn, iron spears without stocks, bone spears with long handles, and weapons made from whalebone, half an arshin in length, blunt on the sides, about two and a half inches wide and a quarter inch thick. These last were used in night attacks on their enemies.

After working as far north as Clayoquot Sound they sailed south to the vicinity of Destruction Island, off the Washington coast, and began work on the survey of that part of the shore in latitude 47° 33' North. While so engaged the wind fell to a calm, the swells drifted them into dangerous reefs off shore and they were compelled to put out their anchors to hold themselves off the rocks. The cables chafed and broke and the ship was finally thrown on the beach by a southeast wind and struct at high tide, becoming a total wreck. The vessel struck in latitude 47° 56'

* While in Juneau in 1916, Mr. Andrews found in the Alaska Territorial Library Golofuin's *Description of Remarkable Shipwrecks Suffered by Russian Mariners*. From it he translated the account of this first shipwreck on the coast of what is now the State of Washington. Golofuin had used Tarakanof's manuscript. Mr. Andrews has condensed the account.

EDITOR

North on November 1st not far from the mouth of the Quillayute River.

The crew reached the shore without loss of life and were fortunate enough to save arms, ammunition, some tents, sails, provisions, and other goods. During the time they were taking the goods ashore the Indians appeared and thronged around, stole small articles and finally attacked the Russians with stones and spears. The Russians then fired on them with their muskets, killed two and drove others away.

The Russian ship *Kodiak* was to sail for the coast of California and was expected to meet the *St Nicholas* at Gray's Harbor before proceeding farther south. The survivors of the wrecked ship decided to attempt the journey to the place of rendezvous by traveling along shore on foot and accordingly, taking arms and ammunition and a small amount of food, after throwing the ship's cannon and other equipment into the sea, started along shore on their journey. The way along the beach was difficult and natives with whom they met showed them a path through the forest and assured them that it was much more passable. After three days on this road, harassed by hostile natives at different points, they reached a river which was too deep to ford. A native camp of bark shalashes or huts was on the bank and the Russians hired the inhabitants to ferry them across in the canoes. Two canoes were brought, into one of which were loaded nine men, into the other Anna Petrovna, wife of the captain, and a native of Kodiak, an Aleut, and a young Russian. In midstream the Indians pulled a cork from the bottom of the larger boat, then sprang overboard and swam ashore while their countrymen on the opposite bank attacked the inmates of the boat with spears and arrows. Fortunately the boat drifted near the shore from which they embarked and all landed safely except several being wounded by the arrows of their assailants. The other canoe was taken ashore near the huts where Anna Petrovna, the Aleut (and the Russian boy were made prisoners. The Russians fired on the Indians from such muskets as had not been wet in the river, killed two, and wounded several. One Russian, Sovasnikof, was wounded so severely by an arrow that he soon died.

After this encounter the Russians withdrew to a small hill at a little distance and made a camp for the night, all in mortal fear for their lives, for there were some two hundred Indians opposing

them, and Bulagin was frantic over the loss of his wife. Rain fell incessantly, their muskets were wet, their provisions were exhausted, hunger oppressed them, and they were in desperate straits. They searched for mushrooms, wood fungi, plant roots and other possible food that might support life. They ate the leather soles of their shoes and the sea-lion throats which were in their kamlikas.

Bulagin resigned the leadership of the party to Tarakanof who took command. On the 14th of November in sheer desperation the Russians went to the river determined to fight the Indians but found that their enemies had departed and from the huts they took as much dried salmon as they could carry and went back to their camp.

A day or so later Tarakanof, the hunter Ovchinnikof and an Aleu went out to scout for a route toward the mountains. They were ambushed by the Indians, Ovchinnikof and the Aleut were wounded by arrows, and with great difficulty they repulsed their assailants and made their way to their own camp. They now gave up the plan of reaching the place of rendezvous and determined to go up in the mountains to a lake they heard was near the headwaters of the river, and there make a winter camp. They made headway slowly, hampered by the rains and the heavy forest. At times they met Indians who were not hostile and bought salmon of them for beads and other trifles. After several days they were overtaken by a native who came with a proposal that the Russians ransom Anna Petrovna. This Bulagin was determined to do and practically all the remaining property was offered. The natives demanded four muskets in addition which the Russians decided they could not give in their already weakened condition. Bulagin then asked to see his wife and the interview was granted. The meeting was piteously affecting and he begged for her return but as the ransom was not reduced the savages took her away with them.

After struggling toward the mountains for a few more days the Russians made a fortified winter camp, building a square log house with sentry boxes at the corners for the guards and otherwise prepared for defense. Here they remained for the winter, during which they built a boat.

On February 8th they went down the river, piloted by an old Indian and Bulagin again in command. At one place Indians were encamped on an island and prepared for hostilities but the

pilot took them down a narrow passage and avoided the hostile camp. At the mouth of the river they camped opposite the village at the place where Anna Petrovna was captured. Here a large number of Indians were gathered and the Russians as a precaution captured two women and a young Indian man and held them as hostages for the release of Anna Petrovna and the others held by the Indians. After a few days, more natives appeared and brought Anna Petrovna. When the exchange was demanded Anna refused to leave the Indians, saying she was well treated and well fed while if she again joined the Russians she would be compelled to wander in the forest half starved. Bulagin was at first furious at her refusal to return and threatened to shoot her but afterward went away dejected with grief.

Tarakanof, finding that the ones captured were not ill treated, proposed to surrender to the Indians and trust to being rescued by some European ship along the coast. In this he was joined by four other Russians and they gave themselves up as prisoners. The remaining Russians attempted to cross to Destruction Island, their boat went on the rocks and was lost together with their provisions, while they narrowly escaped with their lives, only to be captured by the Indians.

Tarakanof was taken by a chief named Utramaka who carried him to his home near Cape Juan de Fuca (Flattery), called by the Indians Koonistchat, where they had their winter habitations. Bulagin was claimed by the same chief but was finally exchanged to another master who held also Anna Petrovna. The prisoners were exchanged from hand to hand among the savages. Anna Petrovna died in August 1809 and her master threw her body into the forest to the great grief of the Russians. Her husband hearing of her fate pined away and died of consumption in the following February.

Tarakanof, by his knowledge of tools, made himself useful to his master and was well treated, was allowed to have a hut by himself, and had many favors granted. He amused the Indians by constructing and flying a kite, which greatly pleased them and they said the Russians could reach the sky. He describes them as "Perfect children, governed by trifles, and a bauble consols them."

In September of 1810 they went to the east far up the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and during the next winter they suffered greatly for want of food.

May 6th, 1811, a brig came to anchor near the shore, Taranokanof, with his master, went on board and found it to be a vessel from the United States, the *Lydia* under command of Captain Brown. The Captain set about ransoming the prisoners and ordered all brought on board.

An Englishman, John Williams by name, was brought, for whom the Captain paid five sazhens of cloth, a locksmith's saw, two steel knives, one looking glass, five packages of powder and five bags of shot. The same amount was offered for each of the Russians and was accepted for all except Bolotof and Kurmachof for whom the Indians demanded higher ransom and it being refused they were taken away, Shubin had been taken to Destruction Island. Captain Brown then seized a chief who came aboard and held him as a hostage for the delivery of the remaining Russian captives, all of whom were brought in within a few days.

Thirteen captives were ransomed, seven died in captivity, one Aleut was later ransomed on the Columbia River by the Captain of the American ship *Mercury*, and one Russian named Philip Kotilnikof had been taken so far away that he could not be found, so remained with the Indians.

On May 10th, they sailed from the Strait and reached Sitka
June 9th, 1811.

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