

CHAPTER 3

CRUCIBLE IN THE NORTH PACIFIC

In the summer of 1943, the *LST 479* crew consisted of a bunch of amateurs. In a matter of weeks, they went through a crucible that by September had turned them into sailors. It occurred during a trip to the farthest reaches of the Aleutian Islands, into a planned battle that never happened.

Kuluk Bay, in Adak, Alaska, is 2,403 nautical miles from San Francisco Bay. Adak is in the middle of the Aleutians, a string of remote spots that separate the Bering Sea from the main portion of the Northern Pacific and stretch in an arc from Alaska's mainland. Dutch Harbor, on the island of Unalaska, is about 900 miles southwest of Anchorage. Adak (Kuluk Bay) is 444 miles west of Unalaska. The island of Kiska lies 246 miles west of Adak and the island farthest west, Attu lies another 205 miles west of Kiska. Attu is more than 1,000 miles closer to Tokyo than it is to San Diego.

A journey there spans three time zones and is so far from the rest of North America that it hugs the International Date Line. Adak, home of a former naval station on the shores of Kuluk Bay, is the westernmost city in the United States. Weather is nasty. The violent and sudden frigid storms there are called "williwaws." The average rainfall is forty to fifty inches per year with the peak in the fall and early winter.

Dutch Harbor today advertises itself as "the number one commercial fishing port in the nation" with the city of Unalaska being a place that's a "little quieter, a little less hurried and a lot less like the rest of the world." It is now known for being a home base of "The Deadliest Catch" fishing fleet of reality television fame.

Adak and Kuluk Bay today are complete contrasts to what they were in 1943. The bay and town now are virtually uninhabited after being abandoned by the Navy after the Cold War. Adak today has a population of fewer than 330 people. At its peak, it had a community of 6,000 Navy and Coast Guard members and their families. This region was a center of U.S. attention in 1942 and 1943.

In the end, though, as Naval Historian Samuel Morison noted, neither side gained any advantage from the Aleutians campaign. He called it the "Theater of Military Frustration."

Said Morison, "both sides would have done well to leave the Aleutians to the Aleuts for the course of the war." The U.S. would have, had the enemy left the islands alone. Ultimately, the amphibious operations there did give the Navy a chance to hone techniques with the new LSTs that would help in future Pacific invasions.

Perhaps because of the location of Attu and Kiska, the Japanese had quickly invaded and taken over the two islands six months after attacking Pearl Harbor. The enemy also bombed Dutch Harbor. As one writer noted, "WWII now became more personal to those who lived in Alaska."

Some historians say the June 1942 Japanese invasion of the Aleutians was an effort to divert American forces from Japan's primary Pacific objective, Midway Island. Allies immediately turned their attention to the Northern Pacific. In August 1942, U.S. troops moved into Adak, and in January 1943 they took over nearby Amchitka Island.

By April 1943, Adak was the center of military operations in the Aleutians and had a garrison of more than 19,000 Army and 8,000 Naval personnel. On Amchitka, 186 miles to the west, a 5,000-foot bomber strip there allowed extensive bombing raids of Kiska and Attu and by the end of April 640 tons of bombs had been dropped on those islands.

In May 1943, Allied forces invaded Attu and, after an intense battle, the island was back in American control. The cost was 3,829 casualties—about twenty-five percent of the invading force. There were 549 deaths, 1,148 wounded, 1,200 with severe cold injuries and 614 with a disease. Japanese losses amounted to 2,351 verified deaths with possibly hundreds more. Only twenty-eight Japanese were taken prisoner.

Invasion planners with the Ninth Amphibious Force estimated that taking Kiska would be costlier. They projected 9,000 U.S. and Canadian casualties. It was with those numbers in mind that planning began for the retaking of Kiska. The operation was given the code name “Cottage.”

Rear Adm. F.W. Rockwell, commander of the attack force, assigned a mission to the “Cottage” operation. It was “Reduce and occupy Kiska and Little Kiska in order to destroy the last remaining hostile forces in Aleutians, to deny Kiska and Little Kiska to the enemy, and to create a base for future operations against the enemy in the Northern Pacific.”

Assigned naval forces comprised nearly one hundred ships, including three battleships, two cruisers, nineteen destroyers, fifteen LSTs, and other transports and smaller vessels. There also were 168 land-based aircraft and a landing force of 34,426 troops.

Among the fifteen LSTs was the 479 and eight others of the new Kaiser-Richmond LSTs. Morison described Kiska as a “caterpillar-shaped island three to four miles wide, with a 4,000-foot volcano at the northeast head, from which the 22-mile long body wriggles southwesterly.”

In the late summer, Kuluk Bay was burgeoning with one of the most massive invasion forces put together to that date in the unfolding Pacific campaign. But the purpose they were there turned out to be for naught.

In Rockwell’s secret report of the operation, filed in October 1943, he wrote that “At the time shortly before D-Day the Japanese succeeded in evacuating Kiska.” He added that the Japanese got away despite aerial reconnaissance—meaning right under the noses of the U.S. forces. The fact the Japanese were missing did not become known until after the initial landing. It took several days for the truth to sink in. Rockwell wrote:

Because of dense fog, with consequent limited visibility, coupled with the time required to push reconnaissance patrols over difficult Kiska terrain, the fact that there was no enemy on Kiska was not conclusively determined until sometime after the initial landings. Thus, Cottage was not a combat operation. (Commander Ninth Amphibious Force, *Report of Cottage Operation—Commander Attack Force*, October 6, 1943, Page 2)

Even with no enemy present, there were more than 300 casualties from friendly fire, booby traps, and mines left by the Japanese. Moreover, for the LST crews, it became a dress rehearsal for what was to come.

Rockwell, in his report, also alluded to the perceived low value of the LSTs in his command. He had cautioned that an LST was not to be classified as an “attack ship” because of its size, slow speed, light armament, and vulnerability. He also noted that the loads carried by the LSTs were more valuable than the ships themselves. “The loss of an LST and its small crew would be no severe handicap in any operation, but should such occur while still loaded with valuable vehicles, equipment, and cargo, it might well result in serious consequences,” he noted.

The trip to Alaskan waters began in mid-summer.

In late June, the 479 was loaded for its first combat operation during a trip to Monterey Bay where it also embarked elements of the Army’s Tenth Mountain Division from nearby Fort Ord. On the trip back to San Francisco, the 479 held several general quarters drills to prepare for what was ahead.

The 479 departed San Francisco Bay in convoy with other LSTs and escorts in the early morning hours of Sunday, July 11, 1943. Aboard were more than 500 troops, using accommodations designed for half that amount. The group of ships included recently-completed Kaiser-Richmond ships, LSTs 476 through 484.

Howard Creager, the twenty-one-year-old 479 crewman, noted in the journal he was secretly keeping that they “sleep on cargo, tables, deck and what few bunks there are, are (used) in shifts.”

It was slow going: the convoy was making four knots and had to slow down more because of breakdowns of other ships in the formation. Several of the LSTs, including the 479, were also carrying smaller landing craft tanks (LCTs) on their main decks.

One of the LCTs, No. 71, was aboard LST 69. LCT 71 would be a central component of the 479’s crucible to come on the trip home.

However, issues also came up on the outbound leg. On the third day underway from San Francisco, the 479’s port engine suffered a broken fuel line that crew members repaired in about twenty minutes. Such breakdowns were to become common on all LSTs during upcoming voyages. The real excitement aboard the 479 began shortly before 1700 on July 15 when its starboard engine caught fire.

While the fire was quickly extinguished, the 479 continued on its port engine and about two hours later left the convoy to head into Port Angeles, Washington, for repairs. The 479 history records the engine problem was caused by a broken camshaft in the twelve-cylinder starboard engine.

By 0800 on July 16, the 479 had moored in Port Angeles awaiting the new camshaft. Meanwhile, the rest of the convoy and escorts continued to the Aleutians.

The anonymously-written post-war chronicle of the ship, *LST 479: A History*, states the 479 “was given attention usually reserved for prima donnas of the fleet” because the Navy dispatched a specially-designated aircraft to fly the replacement camshaft to Port Angeles from Detroit. Four days later, repairs were complete.

After the 479 conducted some sea trials to verify the engine was working correctly, it was underway again by 1600 on July 20. The trip was to be alone—all the escorts had moved ahead with the rest of the Kiska convoy.

In the early morning hours of July 21, the 479 was at its top speed of ten knots. “Sea calm, no land, ships, or objects sighted” noted Lt. (j.g.) D.R. Bryant at the close of his 0400 to 0800 bridge watch on July 23. A day later, he stood the midnight to 0400 mid-watch and recorded they were steaming across the Gulf of Alaska—again, “sea very calm, no land, ships, or objects sighted.”

By noon on July 25, five days and 1,428 miles after departing Port Angeles, the 479 again had company. The ship caught up with the rest of the convoy as it approached St. Paul Harbor at Kodiak, Alaska. By 1840 it docked alongside LST 23 at the Naval Operating Base. “Here the crew found the ever-present sun quite a novelty, especially when they loaded supplies at 2300 and it was still daylight,” according to the 479 history.

Two days later the convoy was again underway, this time for the 1,000-mile trip to Kuluk Bay. Still, there were several starboard engine breakdowns on the 479. This time, it was repaired aboard. By the time it reached Kuluk Bay on August 1, the 479 was the last ship to enter the bay in a single line formation. The LST was able to seek out a repair ship and by 2245 that night had moored alongside the *USS Blackhawk* at Sweepers Cove, Adak. Engine repairs were completed early the next morning, and the 479 anchored in the Bay of Islands, Adak that afternoon (August 2).

The weather was freezing. Engines were being warmed up every forty-five minutes. Over the next several days, the 479 unloaded its LCT and prepared for the upcoming invasion. The ship’s history also records the crew had some time off for salmon fishing while troops it had been carrying were in the Bay of Islands rehearsing for the invasion.

The second battalion, Twenty-Ninth Army Field Hospital reported aboard the 478 and 479 on August 8, and the 479 got underway early the next morning for a temporary Army dock but had to anchor out because of lack of space at the pier.

The 479 headed into the dock at 0925 and into a collision with an LCT there. Buker's diary records the 479 collided with the port side of the fantail of LCT 59, which had been tied up outboard of the Army loading barge. Both ships suffered minor damage. The collision opened a six-by-eight-inch hole in the 479's port bow door, and LCT 59's damage included a split weld on its anchor guard, a split seam on the port side of its fantail, and a bent rail.

Kiska is part of a volcanic group of the Aleutians called the Rat Islands. The chain is twenty-two miles long and ranges from one and a half to six miles wide. The 361 square-mile cluster of Rat Islands—which from west to east include Kiska, Little Kiska, Seguila, Hawadax, Khvostof, Davidof, Little Sitkin, Amchitka, and Semisopchnoi—are so named in honor of their most prevalent occupants.

Attack planners had expected that the Japanese defenders would concentrate in the areas of Gertrude Cove and Kiska Harbor and orient their most robust defenses for an attack from the east and south. Planners split the landing force into southern and northern elements, and LST 479 was attached to the north sector—an area called Broad Beach.

Now with 750 troops aboard, including elements of the Army's Thirty-First Field Artillery and others, the 479's group of LSTs, was underway from Kuluk Bay shortly after 0800 August 14. By noon the ship had anchored in the Bay of Islands, on the other side of Adak, where it embarked half of the Twenty-Ninth Army Field Hospital.

The convoy was underway to Amchitka Island three hours later. That island is seventy-three miles from the expected war zone at Kiska. The convoy included nine LSTs with LST 478 as the guide for the formation and leading a column that also included the 479 and 484, respectively. Destroyers USS *Caldwell* and USS *Coghlan* were screening both sides of the slow convoy. All vessels were steaming at darkened ship.

Creager's journal notes "All of the battleships are ahead of us. They left Adak twenty-four hours before we did to pull a fake attack on the opposite side of the island that the real invasion will be."

The weather forecast on August 15 for Kiska and the area was typical of the region. "Overcast sky with fog and drizzle, ceiling and visibility near zero throughout the open sea areas..."

At 0308 on August 15, the 479 lost all power and both engines due to a breakdown of auxiliary engines. Repairs were quick, and ten minutes later the 479 was heading at full speed to catch up with the convoy. At 0320 the result of the rush to regain station was a near collision with the stern of the 478. Officer of the deck on the 479, Ensign Alex Gay, avoided the crash by putting the ship's engines full astern at 0322.

By 0400 August 15, visibility in the convoy had dropped to 500 yards. Lack of visibility compounded by breakdowns and darkened ships, made bridge watches especially tense. In the early afternoon, visibility had increased. LST 478 officer of the deck Ensign R.J. Keefe was forced to make several quick course changes "to avoid other ships that were out of formation," according to that ship's logs.

The evening before the scheduled landing, Creager, aboard the 479, recorded his thoughts:

Well, in the first place, there is a little fear. I'm scared, and I consider myself average. Tex and Nic, two of my California buddies, say they are scared, too, and none of us are ashamed of it. (Howard Creager, *Personal Journal*, August 15, 1943)

He added, though, that they controlled their fear: "Fear is contagious and if the whole ship got scared and hysterical, a fine beaching we'd make."

Creager also notes that he, Tex, and Nic, all wrote letters to their mothers "to be mailed by one of the remaining in case one or two of us are killed." The 479 history explains some particular reasons for the crew's concerns:

It was known that LSTs were classed as an expendable ship; that the ships in the task group were being called upon to hit the beach once, and no one was too optimistic about their being able to

retract. It was common knowledge aboard the 479 that there were two 8-inch guns embedded in the volcano overlooking the beach on which we were to land. (*LST 479: A History*, Page 5)

The fog had come back after midnight on August 16, the day of the scheduled landing, and caused the most severe incident in the convoy. It involved *LCT 71*.

Ensign S.F. Tennyson had the midwatch aboard a darkened *LST 478* on course 275 at one-third speed in dense fog. Just after midnight, *LCT 71* attempted to cross the bow of *LST 478* and the two vessels collided. Tennyson had backed his LST down at full speed in an unsuccessful effort to avoid the collision. There was little damage to either ship.

By 0330 the fog had cleared, and Tennyson reported sighting the Kiska volcano just off the port bow.

Aboard the 479, final preparations began at 0300 for the landings. Small arms were distributed; shackles and chain lashings that had fastened the Army vehicles to the ship's deck were removed. General quarters was sounded at 0429.

By 0630, the LSTs had anchored in Kiska's Bamboo Bay, a transport area off of Kiska volcano. Those Japanese 8-inch guns that had concerned the crew were silent. *LCTs 71* and *82* came alongside the 479 about 0645 to receive Army troops for transportation to the beach. Anti-tank troops climbed down rope ladders or cargo netting from the port side into *LCT 82* while *LCT 71* came along the LST's starboard side to receive forces of the Thirty-First Field Artillery.

The 479 history relates that as early as 0600, word started filtering back to the 479 crew that there was no resistance on the island.

Late in the day LSTs 478, 479, and 484 finally grounded at Green Beach, a landing area along Kiska's Broad Beach. Because of a shallow slope of the beach, the ships were 200 feet from shore. Work immediately began to unload cargo. Only the 478 was equipped with pontoons used to form a causeway to the beach. Equipment from the 479 and 484 had to be taken through 200 feet of surf to get to the shore. The ships remained there for the next twenty-four hours.

It was on August 18 that *LCT 71* suffered severe damage. While carrying troops and cargo to Broad Beach, it ran aground on jagged rocks. In addition to hull damage and a leak in its fuel tank, it had a flooded engine room.

Also, in the early morning hours of August 18, the Fletcher-class destroyer *USS Abner Read* ran into a Japanese-planted mine offshore of Kiska that blew off her fantail. Ninety crewmembers were blown overboard, but twenty were rescued. Watertight integrity held on the remainder of the ship, and it was later towed to Puget Sound for repairs.

Meanwhile, operation commanders had discovered the absence of the Japanese and sent the landing force to the other side of the island at Kiska Harbor to complete unloading of equipment. The three partially unloaded LSTs retracted from Broad Beach on August 18 and the next day entered the harbor, which had been initially thought to be a Japanese stronghold. The weather was still horrible. On August 20, the 479 reported visibility at one hundred yards in Kiska Harbor. The 479 and the other LSTs remained there either at anchor or on the beach, unloading equipment until August 27.

Even though there was no enemy present, the landing proved to be a lesson in how to load and unload LSTs in future combat operations.

The task group commander's action reports noted that it took between forty-eight and seventy-eight hours to unload the LSTs. It was critical of how the Army had combat-loaded them in San Francisco, calling it "very poorly planned."

Navy Capt. Robert Bolton, the commander of Kiska Task Group 16.10, noted that the LSTs had not only been loaded with powered vehicles that could be unloaded quickly but also with hundreds of tons of palletized supplies "to such an extent that the time of unloading was not a question of hours but days." He recommended that in future operations the LSTs on the initial assault have the powered vehicles and tractor-drawn trailers with the supplies crucial for the landing. Bolton noted:

Then when the area is well secured, and the landing area is prepared to receive and keep cargo on the move from the beach, send in the other LSTs of the force which require the unloading of cookstoves, crated food supplies, reserve ammunition and cargo which of necessity requires considerable handling and requires an LST to remain beached over a period of possibly 24 hours or more. (Commander Task Group 16.10, *Operations Involving Landing Ships and Craft Assigned to Task Group 16.10 in the Cottage Operation*, August 27, 1943, Page 6)

Bolton added it was fortunate the Japanese had left. Had they been there, he said, the only way the beaches could have been secured would have been by undetected landings. "The close location of the transport areas removed all element of surprise" and had the enemy been present, the landings "would have subjected all (U.S. Landing Craft) in the areas to a considerable amount of small arms and light artillery fire."

While the Navy may have been critical of the Army's loading of the LSTs, at least some in the Army were critical of how the Navy handled the landings. The landings were addressed from the Army's perspective in a 1946-47 Infantry School paper written by Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth A. Ward, Kiska reconnaissance troop commander and headquarters commandant Southern Sector. Ward contended it was the Navy's fault for the confused supply situation on the beaches. He wrote:

The Navy appeared to be operating with the sole mission of putting the task force and its supplies ashore with complete disregard for the supply situation on the beachheads. With all beaches jammed to capacity and more coming in there was no alternative but to dump everything in the mud and attempt to straighten everything out when we had time. Segregation by Class of Supply was nonexistent... (Lt. Col. Kenneth A. Ward, *The Operations of Amphibious Task Force Nine in the Reoccupation of Kiska*, 15 August 1943, Page 22)

The trip home began on August 27 when the ships weighed anchor and started heading back to Kuluk Bay. No sooner had the 479 gotten underway when breakdowns continued. Within hours, the vessel suffered a broken fuel line and, later, an electrical failure. However, by 1830 August 28, *LST 479* moored alongside the *S.S. Antigua* to take on supplies and then moved to join *LST 484* at the Adak Navy Pier.

On September 2, as the barometer was falling and the wind was increasing in Kuluk Bay, the damaged *LCT 71* was being hooked up to *LST 479* with a towing bridle to prepare for the nearly 3,000-mile trip back to San Francisco Bay.

The three-engine LCT was less than a year old. It had gone into service the previous November. The ship was 114 feet long, had a beam of thirty-two feet and displaced about 286 tons loaded. Its officer in charge was Ensign Duane A. Burkey, who had eleven sailors in his command. The twenty-two-year-old Burkey had been in the Navy for almost one year.

Going to sea in an LCT was a tough business even on the best of days. Pulitzer Prize-winning World War II Correspondent Ira Wolfert in 1944 wrote a tongue-in-cheek description of the vessels for the Saturday Evening Post:

To the layman, the LCT—landing craft, tank—looks like a tin shed with a false front, traveling upside down and backward through the water. The major difficulty of the LCT as a water-going vehicle is that it has no sense. Instead of trying to ride the waves, it tries to club them to death. (*Landing Craft Tank (LCT)*—*Globalsecurity.org*)

The condition of the *LCT 71*, which had made its way back to Kuluk Bay from Kiska, was dire. *LST 479* Commanding Officer Buker noted in his action report that the smaller ship's "starboard main (propeller) shaft was sprung, the armature on her generator was burned up, her ballast tanks were leaking badly, and two of her fuel oil tanks were leaking. We did all we could to make her ready for sea," Buker wrote. That meant it was down to two of its three main engines, had no electric power, and was leaking everywhere.

Tethered together, *LST 479* and *LCT 71* left Kulak Bay in a convoy September 4. Cmdr. G.R. Cooper aboard the destroyer *USS Farragut (DD 348)* was task group commander and Cmdr. Richard C. Webb, Jr., commander of LST Group Seven was aboard the destroyer *USS Dewey (DD 349)*. The convoy comprised nine LSTs with six of them towing LCTs. Destroyers *Dewey* and *Farragut* acted as escorts. *LST 479*, towing *LCT 71*, and *LST 480*, towing *LCT 366*, were in the same section of the convoy. All the LSTs were from the Kaiser-Richmond Yard Four except one: *LST 19*.

At 1400 on September 4, the convoy rounded Sitkin Island and set a course for Unimak Pass. For three days, it was a "perfectly calm sea with a very light northwest breeze," according to Buker's after-action report of the trip. The crippled LCT was assisting the 479 as it could in the tow with its remaining two operational 225 hp Gray Marine diesel engines. Two days out, the 479 transferred fuel to *LCT 71*. That may have been the final "normal" operation of the two ships.

September 6 was overcast with rain and mist in the morning, which cleared in the afternoon. At 1520 that afternoon, Cooper sent a message to Webb requesting his recommendation regarding the weather and the condition of the LSTs and LCTs. Cooper wanted to know whether Webb thought the task unit should head to less open waters to either avoid or wait out storms. Webb recommended they continue to San Francisco "via the shortest route." The LST group commander also informed Cooper that in his opinion, and in the opinion of all LST commanding officers, the ships were in excellent condition.

September 8 began bright and turned overcast later in the day with rising winds in the late evening. Cooper suggested to Webb that the LSTs increase their interval in the columns to 1,000 yards "to reduce the danger of collision during steering casualties" and close the formation to 500 yards when fog was encountered.

Problems began on September 9. The 478, shortly after midnight, had a steering casualty and fell out of the column until repairs were made at 0100. As it rejoined, there were driving seas from the southwest with force-six winds and a rapidly dropping barometer. The convoy was heading into, what one crew member on a nearby LST recalled as, "the worst storm we had seen up to that time."

John Dougherty, aboard *LST 481*, wrote: "The waves were coming directly against our bow and were so tall that we could look over at the LST sailing next to us and see daylight under the ship for almost half its length as it went over the crest of a wave." The crewman also related the problems all LSTs were having below decks. In the crew's quarters, which also served as the mess deck, "mess table benches were crashing and flying around, as was anything else not securely fastened down." Dougherty wrote that tables "had legs which were permanently bolted to the deck, and the men sitting in front of the table legs had to wrap their own legs around those of the table so the entire bench full of men wouldn't topple over."

In the early morning hours of September 9, Ensign W.W. Shafton was the officer of the deck aboard the 480. The ship was underway in the formation at full speed (ten knots) with 700 feet of wire that connected *LCT 366* to the LST. Seas were coming from the southeast and winds reached a force-six as the barometer dropped.

Five minutes after the 478 suffered its steering casualty, more critical problems erupted aboard the LCT under tow by *LST 480*. Its bow ramp dropped and then broke off, opening the bow to the sea. Shafton immediately maneuvered the 480 to assist. He backed down to close the distance between the LST and the stricken LCT.

Meanwhile, the destroyer *Dewey* also dropped back while the rest of the formation continued on course. Webb had directed the other LSTs to take a track into the wind to miss the storm center.

At 0100, all engines aboard the 480 were stopped as the crew worked for about thirty minutes to put another tow line over to the LCT. At 0145, the 480 was underway again with the LCT under tow, and at 0152, 400 feet of wire connected the two vessels. By 0800, as the 480 worked to regain its position in the formation, winds were hurricane-force with heavy seas and rain. At 0837, the 480 was attempting to shorten the tow wire to 200 feet, at the request of the LCT. Three minutes later the left leg of the towing

bridle slipped out and unwound the towing cable back to 400 feet. The 480 deck crew wrestled with the tow for the next forty-five minutes but at 0917 the towing bridle was lost, and the LST maneuvered to rescue personnel from the foundering LCT.

The LCT crew included twelve men, led by Lt. (j.g.) Frank Robert Moran. At 0940, the first four LCT crew members were taken aboard the 480, and by 1010 the LCT was alongside the 480's starboard side. As the high seas caused the two vessels continually to crash into each other, the rest of the LCT crew was rescued. Moran, the officer in charge of the LCT, sustained a puncture wound to his right ankle. That was the only injury recorded.

The 480 sustained damage during the operation, including holes in its hull plating. There was one four-by-three-inch gash in one compartment and separate two-by-two-inch holes in two other compartments.

After the LCT was abandoned, Webb directed the *Dewey* to sink it by shell fire, but *Dewey* commanding officer Cmdr. J.P. Canty advised the LST group commander he considered it unwise due to the large waves and the rolls his ship would take searching for the LCT. He also feared losing contact with the 480, which had become separated from the rest of the convoy.

The war diary of the Commander Destroyer Division Two shows the 480 could not communicate with the other ships. Webb reported that the destroyer was attempting to catch up to the 480 on the afternoon of September 9 but was unsuccessful. "They were unable to head him off or overtake him due to the state of the sea and could not communicate with him (the 480) directly or through any ship in the unit..."

Communication with the 480 was lost for two days, according to the diary. Throughout this time, the 480 was by itself and had missed a formation course change as it headed on the original route to San Francisco. Webb, the LST group commander, was able to regain contact with the 480 at 1942 September 10 and, according to the 480 logs, the ship rejoined the formation about 2100 September 11.

The storm, which had abated, came back with renewed strength September 11. The weather report in the task group war diary noted light drizzle in the early morning but heavy seas and high winds with driving rain for the rest of the day. Winds ranged from force-five to hurricane force-twelve with "heavy, periodic mountainous seas."

The storm ultimately proved fatal to another LCT. In the afternoon of September 11, the port towing bridle connecting the 479 to LCT 71 gave way. Less than an hour later, the starboard bridle parted. Officer of the deck Ensign Paul McFarland immediately started maneuvering the LST into position to regain the tow. By 1700 deck crews on the 479, led by Chief Boatswain Mate Jack N. Ziemba and Boatswain Mate First Class Edward Slavin, had rigged an emergency towing bridle between the two ships. The task group's weather report showed that winds were reaching hurricane force-ten to twelve and stayed that way until about 2300.

Other LSTs in the convoy also were having problems about this same time. The 484, towing LCT 278, had a jammed rudder, and the 476 stood by to assist.

According to 479 skipper Buker's report, LCT 71 could not stay behind the 479 and was swerving side to side, chafing the towing bridle until it broke. The 479 stopped all engines, allowing the LCT to come closer to its stern. Ziemba and his crew shot a seven-inch line over to the LCT, and it was reattached to the towing bridle.

Ziemba was no stranger to sea-going fights. He was one of the few 479 crewmen with experience and had been recommended for the Silver Star a year earlier for action off of Guadalcanal, where he'd fought fires aboard the transport *USS George F. Elliott* that was damaged and ultimately lost on Aug. 8, 1942. Slavin also was a veteran with two years of sea duty before reporting to the 479.

For a while, the emergency tow worked well, and by early evening on September 11, the 479 with the ship in tow rejoined the convoy. The storm continued to worsen.

According to Dougherty's recollections, it increased in ferocity as time went by "until the convoy was unable to make much headway at all." He reported, "We finally had to turn and sail with the storm for a time, which made it a slightly smoother ride."

Meanwhile, conditions aboard the *LCT 71* were miserable for its twelve-man crew. Without power, the small vessel had no heat and little drinking water because of seawater contamination of the ship's freshwater tanks. The rough seas also meant they had little sleep.

Shortly after noon on September 11, the LCT lost the second of its three main engines. "By 1400 the sea was very rough, and the wind was now blowing at sixty to seventy miles per hour," Buker reported. Due to continued chafing and the additional strain of the LCT operating on only one engine, the seven-inch tow line parted again at 1450.

The *479* was directed to stay with *LCT 71* and try to get another line over to her. Buker reported that his ship "was almost impossible to control" because the high seas and gale-force winds made the ship's high freeboard act like a sail.

However, the *479* was finally able to maneuver to get the LCT on its lee side, protecting it from the wind. With the *479*'s port side to the LCT's starboard, Ziemba's crew could get another line to the LCT, and at 1530 the two ships were again linked by a one-inch wire cable. Five minutes later, the massive seas resulted in the cable parting again.

Again, maneuvering to keep the drifting LCT out of the wind, the *479* opted to use the cable attached to its stern anchor. As the two ships came side by side, though, a swell carried the larger *479* into the LCT, opening two large holes in the skin of the LST. Crewmembers again shot a line to the struggling LCT, which was hooked to the *479*'s stern anchor cable.

For the next thirty-five minutes, the exhausted LCT crew fought to get that cable on board and hooked to their ship. They finally had to let it go because of the weight of the cable and their poor physical condition. Meanwhile, the driving storm-churned spray made visibility poor and numbed the hands and faces of the men out on the open decks. The *479* kept up its attempt and about two hours later was able to maneuver to get a line over to the LCT. That line parted almost instantly.

"The LCT tossed helplessly behind us, and though she did appear as a proverbial bouncing cork, the sight of her was grim when you thought of the men aboard her," the *479* history records.

At 1910, a housing was torn from the LCT's main deck, and the vessel lost its last engine. Compounding problems aboard, its engine room was flooding fast. Webb, the LST group commander, asked *LCT 71* skipper Ensign Burkey if he was willing to risk abandoning his ship and the officer reported he was. At the time, his engine room was flooded with four feet of water.

The *479* was ordered to prepare to rescue the crew and at 1930 had the LCT on its leeward side, protecting it as best as it could from the driving wind. The *479* history describes how the LCT crew abandoned ship:

The sea added a few more tricks to her wild routine. Picking the LCT high, she lifted her above our main deck and then let the craft down, so she bumped and scraped along our side. Each time the LCT rose, a few men scampered over the side and jumped to our deck. For exhausted men, their timing was good. It had to be... (*LST 479, A History*, Page 7)

LST 479 crew members also assisted by reaching over and grabbing the LCT crew members as they jumped off their crippled ship and onto the *479* deck. In seven minutes, Burkey and his eleven-man crew were aboard the *479*. The LCT was then set adrift. The *USS Dewey*, at about 2000, hit the derelict *LCT 71* with fire from its 3-inch, 5-inch, and 40-mm guns. However, it reported to the task group commander the LCT "might float 'submerged' for some time."

Meanwhile, the fight continued aboard the *479*. It was dealing with damage sustained from the rescue, including holes and dents in its hull and damage to its rudder. It also lost a blade on its port screw. Dougherty, in *LST 481*, was told the *479* crew used mattresses to plug holes in the ship's hull. "Fortunately, according to my source of information, the damage was confined to sections of the hull which were above the waterline and *479* continued to sail with the rest of the convoy," he wrote.

Buker's report noted the ship's damage-control party "to the best of their ability and with equipment available, tried to preserve watertight integrity." He said they were successful except for a hole in one compartment at the waterline that was isolated. "The water flows in and out and is at a level of three inches."

By 2000 on September 11, the rescue operations were over, and *LST 479* was limping along with a jammed port rudder. Due to the damaged port screw, one engine was shut down.

The *USS Dewey*, on the night of September 12 and early morning of September 13, attempted to take the 479 under tow after the LST's starboard engine broke down and it lost steerageway. Although the line parted, the LST was able to make repairs on the engine and proceed under its own power by 1100 on September 13.

The *Dewey* continued to escort the 479 on the final leg of its transit to San Francisco. At 1738 on September 19, the *Dewey* passed responsibility for the 479 to the Navy Tug *Bagaduce* at the mouth of San Francisco harbor.

As it arrived in San Francisco, Cmdr. Canty, the *Dewey* commanding officer, sent a message to the 479 complimenting the LST crew for the rescue of personnel from *LCT 71* "during as wild a gale and ocean as we have seen in a long time." Canty noted, "In our opinion, this meritorious rescue at sea could not have possibly been accomplished without a skillful combination of superb seamanship, courage, and daring."

In his report, Buker singled out Ziemba and Slavin "for expert seamanship, leadership and courage displayed..." He also praised the deck crew for its "brilliant cooperation rendered in the face of bitter weather in first attempting to salvage *LCT 71* and then in affecting the successful abandon ship operation." Noted Buker, "All hands performed gallantly throughout the four and a half hours these events took place."

The arrival in San Francisco marked the end of the Kiska operation.

Cooper, the task group commander, in his report on the operation, recommended that in future convoys of this kind, a seagoing tug accompany the ships to retrieve lost tows. He noted the fourteen-day voyage was "very strenuous" for all the LCTs. "The excellent seamanship evidently displayed by LSTs 479 and 480 in rescuing all personnel from abandoned LCTs in such heavy seas is commendable." He requested that the LST group commander Webb "make recommendations of personnel if they are considered deserving of special commendation" directly to the commander of LST Flotilla Three.

There is no evidence that official commendations were handed out to either the 480 or 479 or their crews for the rescues of the LCT crews. Moreover, the invasion itself—because the Japanese escaped—did not count as a campaign for the LSTs. Ironically, on September 1, 1943—just before the start of the convoy's dangerous voyage home—the Navy announced the commendation of the commanding officer of a tanker for the rescue of the crew aboard a minesweeper in a similar Alaskan storm. While the cause was different, the rescue itself resembles the heroism of the *LST 479* and 480 crews. Waves of a raging storm in the Aleutians jarred two depth charges loose from the minesweeper's racks, and they exploded under its fantail, carrying away a portion of the ship. According to the Navy's Public Information Communique:

With the damaged (USS) *Wasmuth* slowly, but surely sinking, Commander (Alfred J.) Homann skillfully brought the (USS) *Ramapo*, a tanker, alongside after a three-and-a-half-hour battle with the raging sea and took off everyone aboard the minesweeper.

There were 71 LCTs lost during World War II. In the official list compiled by the Navy, LCTs 71 and 366 are merely listed as "sunk." There are no other comments except for the dates they were lost. It was an unrecognized, noncombat operation and a quickly forgotten saga. Nonetheless, it was a crucible that prepared the 479 crew for what was to come.

Title of Book: Unseen Body Blows

Author: William A. Gay

Website: www.unseenbodyblows.com

Added to "Books We Like" <http://www.navsource.org/archives/books/books.htm>

Purchase links: https://www.amazon.com/s?k=Unseen+Body+Blows&ref=nb_sb_noss

https://www.barnesandnoble.com/s/Unseen+body+blows?_requestid=294634