

Chapter Seven

SPRUCE CAPE LORAN STATION

June 1956 to June 1957

LORAN Station (LORSTA) Spruce Cape was a LORAN-A station located, as the name implies, on Spruce Cape, on Kodiak Island, Alaska. Spruce Cape was several miles from the town of Kodiak. It was a pleasant setting adjacent to the entrance of a long channel into Kodiak, with a good stand of spruce trees on part of the reservation. The portion of station land closer to the shoreline was mostly grassy, and there was easy access to the beach area below. The station itself consisted of a complex of WW II quonset huts that contained small bedrooms for the crew, a kitchen/mess hall and recreation area, storage rooms, a garage, generator room with diesel generators for emergency power generation, and the “signal-power” complex that contained the LORAN equipment. Adjacent was the large transmitting antenna array from which we emitted our navigation signals. The station was part of a three-station “net” that provided navigational signals for vessels or aircraft in the gulf of Alaska. Another station was at Yakutat, to the northeast, and Ocean Cape, further east on the Alaska coast. The station’s crew consisted of about a dozen enlisted men and one officer. In command when I reported was LTJG William E. “Wee” Smith, Academy class of ‘53. The nickname “Wee” was no doubt derived from two coincidental sources – his initials “W.E.”, and his size. He was a smallish fellow, less than 5’ 6” tall it seems to me. But his stature had nothing at all to do with his capabilities as an officer.

The year I spent at Spruce Cape was interesting and satisfying. Life aboard the station was generally fairly tranquil and comfortable. Of the crew of 12 or so, usually only four to six of us actually lived on the station, the rest, married with families, lived in rental housing in town. As a result, we who lived aboard “hustled” our own meals on weekends, and in general had the place to ourselves during non-duty hours. There were usually four or five LORAN watch standers, either ETs or radarmen (RDs). The station had one RD assigned, an affable black fellow whose name I just can’t recall. The senior

ET was a chief named Britt, but he left shortly after my arrival and ET1- I can't remember his name - was the senior ET thereafter. Those of us who stood radar watches performed eight-hour shifts in the signal-power building. It was our job to monitor the operation of the LORAN equipment, ensuring that our transmitter was operating correctly and that our signals were properly synchronized with the controlling station at Yakutat. We maintained a voice radio watch as well, a "net" that connected the three LORAN stations. In addition, we were required to monitor a voice calling and distress frequency, 2182 KHZ. The eight-hour watches were mostly routine and often boring, particularly the one from midnight to 0800. Typically, we stood watches for three weeks, seven days per week, then were assigned day-worker duties for a week.

Regularly we communicated with other LORAN stations further to the west. One was located on Sarichef Island, another on Attu, I think. We also served as a frequent radio link with isolated light house stations. These stations usually had four men assigned, for a one-year tour – and "isolated" was surely the proper description for this duty. We would often receive lengthy "LOGREC" messages from these stations – long lists of supplies needed, that were usually delivered by a Coast Guard buoy tender, or sometimes in emergent situations by helicopter.

The Coast Guard had a sizable air detachment co-located on the U.S. Navy base on Kodiak, about seven miles from Spruce Cape. The air detachment performed mainly search and rescue missions, but also provided logistic support to the far-flung LORAN and lighthouse stations dotting the Alaskan coast and on the various Aleutian Islands. One day I was copying a lengthy "LOGREC" message from one of the light stations located up north on the mainland coast. The fellow reading his message to me listed the need for four boxes of regular "Kotex", and I thought I had misunderstood. I queried him about that item, and he said that yes, he needed four boxes. He explained that they were feminine sanitary napkins, in case I didn't understand. I must have sat mute for some time after his explanation, as I knew that no women were assigned to these remote stations, nor were families allowed. Indeed, at the time, we had no "regular" female Coast Guard personnel. I wanted to ask him why they needed this item, but was

a little hesitant to learn more than I needed to know! But he went on to explain to me that the sanitary napkins were absolutely the best item he had ever found to clean and shine the lighthouse's large glass Fresnel lens. Mystery solved!

At that time, the LORAN station at Cape Sarichef was commanded by LTJG G.K. "Kirk" Greiner (USCGA class of '53), who was also an amateur radio operator. I had obtained my amateur radio license while in ET school, call sign W7BKY which I hold to this day. With the permission of my CO, LTJG Smith, I established a "ham" radio station at Spruce Cape, at my own expense using a Heathkit transmitter that I assembled from a kit. I set it up in my own room, and often whiled away spare time "working" other hams around the world either on CW (Morse code) or by voice. I had a frequent schedule with other LORAN stations, and had a station license call sign of KL7CGG. The other stations had call signs KL7CGA, B, C and so on. One day while talking with Greiner, he asked if there was any way I could send him some trees. The request startled me! He said no trees grew out there, but that he thought evergreens might survive, and he'd like to plant some around the station. I told LTJG Smith of the request, and he apparently contacted the Kodiak Air Detachment asking if we could put a couple trees on the next logistics flight. Next I knew, I had "volunteered" to dig up some small trees, bag their root balls in burlap, and haul them to the air detachment. They were loaded onboard one of the detachment's twin-engine Grumman amphibians (UF-1G) and flown out with other supplies. I never heard if the trees survived.

Another time, one blustery day when I was on watch, I heard a "MAYDAY" distress call on 2182 KHZ. It came from a vessel named "DYNAMITE KID, and I answered promptly. The next hour or so were tense and emotional for me, and I can't give a verbatim transcript. The vessel's skipper told me that they were taking on water and sinking, located somewhere northeast of Kodiak Island. He said their small boat had been lost in the storm, they had no survival suits of any kind, just life preservers. I promptly called the air detachment duty officer, giving him all information I had, and he told me that a UF-1G was airborne at that time in the local area, doing training operations. He dispatched the aircraft to the area. I then was able to rebroadcast the

DYNAMITE KID's distress call, and received a response from an Army tug, towing a barge somewhere to the west of where the distressed vessel was supposed to be. He agreed to drop his tow and head for the area. I also had contact from a fishing boat moored or anchored in a cove north of the DYNAMITE KID's location, and he said he'd get underway and try to go to assist. Not long later, he called and said he had to turn back – mountainous seas had shattered pilot house windows in his boat, and he feared for his own safety. Meantime, I had one or two more brief radio contacts with DYNAMITE KID's skipper, and I told him of the aircraft, the Army tug and the aborted try by the fishing boat. In our last conversation, he told me that his boat was close to sinking, that he and his three crewmen were going to have to go into the water. His last words over the radio were, "Thanks for trying, Kid." The aircraft wasn't able to locate them before darkness fell, and vessel searches the next day found only debris from the DYNAMITE KID. I have often dwelt over the feelings of frustration, desperation and sadness I had during and after that tragic event.

One day LTJG "Wee" Smith assembled that part of the crew who were day workers, me among them. He instructed us that we were going to have to clean out the sediment in the station's septic tank, which was nearly full. He had us put on our "meanest" work clothes, and down we headed to the tank, the four or five of us really reluctant as you can imagine. We pried the cover off, revealing the interior of what I recall to have been a huge concrete tank full of foul-smelling sludge. Our job was to dip the "goo" out with buckets and empty it over the adjacent cliff. When Mr. Smith asked for the first volunteer, no one responded. So he grabbed a bucket, crawled down the metal-runged ladder into the tank, and dipped the first bucketful. The rest of us formed a "bucket brigade" to dump the sludge. After perhaps 15 minutes of this unpleasant work, Smith crawled back up to the surface and handed me the bucket. I went down and dipped for 15 minutes without complaint. Each of us did. That was quite a lesson in leadership I received that day.

Alaska was still a territory in the late 1950s, and Kodiak Island seemed a "rough and ready" place in those days. The only apparent law enforcement agency present on

Kodiak appeared to be the town of Kodiak police department. I recall one afternoon three of us from the station were passing through town, returning from the Navy base, and we decided to stop in a tavern for a beer. We were the only patrons on arrival, but a few minutes later another fellow came in and seated himself at the bar. "Ring the bell!" he roared. The bartender rang a bell hanging from a post behind the bar, a signal of 'drinks for the house' and he promptly set the three of us up with a second beer. We thanked the man, and one of my companions asked what the occasion was. The fellow, a huge "rough-and-tumble" looking man, explained that he had just flown in from Anchorage after having been tried for murder. He was acquitted, he said, by the federal judge there. He went on to explain that he had been working on a Navy construction project at the Navy base. He and his fellow workers were lodged in a barracks building, and there had been a rash of thefts of personal items in the barracks. He went on to describe how, one night, he was startled awake by a noise and sat up to see a man rifling his foot locker. He explained that he was so startled that he leaped up and strangled the thief before he was fully awake. We didn't have much to say to his story – I think we wished him well and left as soon as we could!

Not long after I arrived at Spruce Cape, I went to Mr. Smith's office and told him of my ambitions to apply for OCS, and he said he'd take it under consideration. In the meantime, I waited for results of the exams I had taken onboard WACHUSETT, and in due course they arrived. In late fall 1956, Mr. Smith helped with an application for OCS and provided a favorable endorsement to my request. In a month or two, another test arrived, called an "officer qualification test". He had me take the exam, which didn't seem too difficult at the time, and sent it back to Coast Guard Headquarters.

A few weeks later I was ordered to proceed to the Seventeenth District Office in Juneau for an interview to determine my suitability for selection to officer candidate school. It was quite an adventure for me. In those days, travel by commercial airline from Kodiak to Juneau was a two-day trip – to Anchorage the first day, then a wait until the next morning to go on to Juneau. The planes were old DC-3 aircraft, slow but reliable. I arrived in Juneau on the afternoon of the second day, reported to the personnel office,

and was instructed that my interview would be at 0900 the next morning. I was to report to a lieutenant in the operations division shortly before the appointed hour. I checked into a nearby hotel, and spent a nervous night awaiting the interview.

In the morning I groomed myself carefully, put on my best enlisted dress blue uniform and reported as ordered. The lieutenant to whom I reported was a considerate and pleasant fellow who told me he'd be junior officer and recorder on the interview board, and that several other officers would participate. He'd take me to the conference room at the appointed time, which he did. When I entered I was startled to see an obviously senior Coast Guard captain at the head of the table, with two commanders and a lieutenant commander also seated. I was introduced to the four of them, but only remember one – the captain, whose name was Burdine. I nearly swallowed my Adam's apple when his name was spoken. He was the district commander, the most senior officer in Alaska! Later an admiral was assigned to command that district. The board asked me about my Coast Guard experience, current news affairs, I questions about situations I might encounter as an officer, personal data etc. Through it all, Captain Burdine said nothing, just sat and looked at me. I could feel perspiration on my brow! Finally, he cleared his throat and the room fell into silence. He looked at me with what seemed piercing intensity. "Now tell me, son," he asked, "just why do you want to be a Coast Guard officer?" I was almost afraid to answer and my mind raced, trying to figure what kind of answer would be most impressive! Finally, I just told him that I liked the Coast Guard and would like a career in it, but that I wanted to get ahead as well. He nodded, told the others he'd heard enough, and invited me to leave the room. I tried to leave without appearing to be scuttling out in fear and apprehension. In just a few minutes, the lieutenant came out and, with a smile, told me that the board would make a positive recommendation on my behalf. That night I permitted myself a short visit to Juneau's legendary old Red Dog Saloon for a small celebration.

One day in December LTJG Smith called me into his office and showed me a message from Coast Guard Headquarters stating that my orders for transfer to Officer Candidate School were canceled, but that I would be assigned to the first class to convene after

my normal rotation from the LORAN station. That would be about the end of December 1957, the following year. Since we'd never seen the orders in the first place, it was something of a mystery. A few days later, the orders arrived with a Seventeenth District endorsement saying cancellation was directed at the request of the district. The explanation was that I was essential to the station that time – which was a surprise to Mr. Smith and me! About a month later the puzzle was cleared up. The district electronics officer came for a visit, and it turned out to be CDR A.J. Summerfield, who had been in the same position in Seattle when I was assigned to WACHUSETT. It seems he transferred to Alaska about when I did, and admitted that he had had a hand in sending me to Spruce Cape. He seemed to think I would be a good man to help with a major electronics installation scheduled for early in 1957, a change of all the major LORAN equipment. That was why, he said, he had requested my orders to OCS be delayed. While there wasn't much I could say, I was intensely disappointed.

I pondered the situation for several weeks. If I wasn't assigned to OCS until sometime in 1958, I'd probably run into the end of my current enlistment, which was up on 3 July 1958. Moreover, I'd be 24 years of age, which seemed (at that time) late in life to look toward starting college. So, after deliberation, I sat down and wrote another letter to Coast Guard Headquarters asking that they assign me to the next available class in 1957, or just withdraw my request. I tried to explain my sentiments about either getting ahead in the Coast Guard, or proceeding on with my life by going to college to learn another profession. In discussing it with Mr. Smith, he felt I was taking a risk – I'd been promised OCS in 1958, and he felt my prospects were good. I felt that OCS might be a "tough nut", and successful completion wasn't a certainty! Mr. Smith explained that there were no doubt a lot of OCS applicants, and that in lieu of granting my request for the next class, they might just withdraw the promise of the assignment in another year. But I asked to send the letter, so he endorsed it and sent it on.

In the meantime, we started the installation of new electronics equipment, basically completing the job in about two or three weeks with minimum "off air" time for the station.

And not long thereafter, perhaps in April or so, we received a letter from Headquarters, endorsed by the 17th district, saying I would be assigned to the OCS class that was to convene about 1 July 1957. Mr. Smith was transferred to Navy Postgraduate School Monterey, California about a week before I left for OCS.