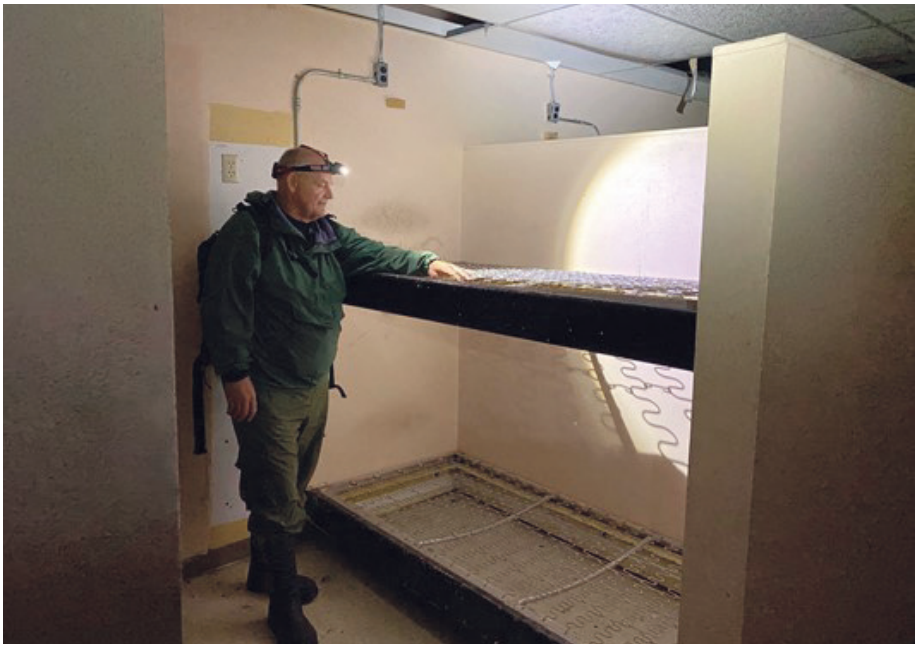
On a recent return visit to Adak, Alaska, Dr. Barry Erdman looks down at the rack he slept on 41 years ago at the Modified Advanced Airborne Underwater Weapons Complex/Compound barracks.



COURTESY OF DR. BARRY ERDMAN

One Marine's Return to Adak Island, Alaska

By Dr. Barry Erdman

Background

The island of Adak, Alaska, is about 1,250 miles west of Anchorage, and sits in the middle of the Aleutian chain of islands in the Bering Sea. Adak is about 32 miles long and 22 miles wide, and the tallest peak is Mount Moffet at 3,924 feet. Adak's northern portion was formerly a military installation but is now owned and managed by the Aleut Corporation, and the southern portion is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a refuge and preserve.

Adak's climate is austere, harsh and demanding for its inhabitants. Due to the extremely remote location, it was considered a hardship duty station for servicemembers assigned there. Many Navy personnel called it, "The Rock," given the volcanic nature, and it was also well known as "The Birthplace of the Winds."

Due to the island's strategic location, it is replete with American military history. On Aug. 30, 1942, the U.S. Army came ashore at Kuluk Bay on Adak. The Japanese occupied the nearby islands of Attu and Kiska in the Aleutians in their advancement in the Pacific. To prevent further advancement, Adak was chosen by the United States as a base of operations to launch attacks on adjacent Japanese occupied islands.

Ultimately, a base was set up on Adak that held more than 100,000 American military personnel during World War II. Two separate airfields were constructed along with a seaplane base. American submarines fighting in the Pacific could seek refuge there for resupply and refueling.

After WW II ended, Adak's strategic importance was diminished, and the base was turned over to the U.S. Navy, becoming Naval Air Station Adak. During the Cold War, Adak once again became a major strategic location, since the Kamchutka Peninsula, a part of the Soviet Union, was only about 450 miles away.

In the 1950s, Adak became a location for fleet communications, listening posts, an underwater sonographic post, and a support base for Navy ships as well as the P-3 Orion, the Navy's anti-submarine patrol aircraft. As the Cold War intensified, so did the need for the strategic placement of weapons of mass destruction, and Adak became a weapons storage facility.

The Marine Corps established a presence on Adak in the 1950s due to the need for base security. The weapons storage facility on Adak was known as the Marine Airborne Underwater Weapons Compound, or to Marines there, "The Pound."

The end of the Cold War and subsequent reduction in the U.S military and its bases resulted in the closure of NAS Adak in 1997. During the Cold War, there were approximately 6,100 military and civilian personnel on the base. That dwindled to 300 residents pre-COVID-19, with about 62 residents remaining today.

Looking east from the Marine barracks in Adak with the Great Sitkin volcano visible in the distance during the winter of 1980.

DR. BARRY ERDMAN

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Ships of the U.S. Fleet in Adak Harbor, during the 1943 campaign. The fleet included battleships, cruisers, destroyers and amphibious shipping.

The Marines on Adak Island

The Marines' mission on Adak during the Cold War was to provide security at the weapons storage compound and other then-classified military installations on the island, such as Naval Security Group Activity and Naval Facility, both listening posts. The Marines also provided backup security for the island's naval police force as needed.

There were usually 150-160 Marines stationed on Adak who were organized into three platoons—an admin platoon and two guard platoons, called the 1st and 2nd guard platoons respectively.

I was with the 1st Guard Platoon. The commanding officer was a major with a captain as his executive officer and one lieutenant serving as a platoon commander.

The Marine barracks were located on Bering Hill and overlooked Adak City. The top decks housed berthing for the single Marines with administrative

SGTMAJ CHARLES ABLES, USMC (RET)

Above: Garages located behind the Marine barracks were used as the enlisted club, which was appropriately named Tundra Tavern.

COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Above: Troops at an Army observation post overlooking Kuluk Bay, Adak, watch an approaching "Williwawa" storm, on April 17, 1943. The storm overtook the post within three minutes.

DR. BARRY ERDMAN

U.S. Navy P-3 Orion anti-submarine aircraft on Adak in 1979.

officers on the first deck. They housed some noncommissioned officers and junior Marines, while base housing housed the officers and married and some single NCOs.

In the mornings when the clouds lifted, I had beautiful views of the Alaskan scenery, the rolling bright green tundra hills and snow-covered mountains. The climate was temperate with average 50-degree summers and 30-40 degree average winters, but high winds drove the temperature down. Precipitation was almost daily throughout the year with rain in the fall, spring and summer, and plenty of snow in the winter. On average, there were about five or six days or so of all-day sun in the summer, and when that happened, schools on the island were closed so the students could enjoy the day.

Snowstorms were frequent and came and went when least expected in the winter. The severe storms were called "Williwaws" by the indigenous Aleuts as the snow would come down horizontally due to wind blasts. These storms were abrupt, without warning, and came and went in an instant. "White-outs" were defined as when you held your arm outstretched and you could not see your hand. These were also frequent in the winter on Adak.

Behind the Marine barracks was the Marines' enlisted club called Tundra Tavern. The Marine Corps Ball and mess night were always held there. At Tundra Tavern, Marines could unwind when off duty with beer on tap, billiards and pinball machines. The open garages that housed bus, patrol and armored vehicles and search and rescue tracked vehicles, as well as a small enclosed and well-protected ammo bunker, were also located behind the barracks.

All buildings on Bering Hill could be traversed via a combination of above-ground and underground tunnels which enabled the Marines to reach recreational facilities including the gym, indoor pools, bowling alley and theater in poor weather. Elsewhere in Adak City, below and southeast of the Marine barracks, were multiple specialty hobby buildings.

The weapons compound where we worked was a short distance from the Marine barracks. The guard platoon would be bused to the compound for a one week

The guard platoon would be bused to the compound for a one week stay. The compound itself was shrouded in mystery. None of us young, enlisted Marines actually saw or even knew what we were guarding at the time as it was shrouded in secrecy.

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After leaving Adak in the spring of 1981, then-Cpl Barry Erdman was assigned to 2/8. He's shown here on USS *Trenton* (LPD-14) off the coast of Beirut, Lebanon.

stay. The compound itself was shrouded in mystery. None of us young, enlisted Marines actually saw or even knew what we were guarding at the time as it was shrouded in secrecy. I later learned that we were guarding up to 70 M57 nuclear depth charges which had up to a 10-kiloton capacity each.

The Kamchutka Peninsula of the Soviet Union contained Soviet nuclear ballistic missile submarine bases, and its submarines roamed the Pacific Ocean. The M57 was destined for those submarines in the event of war. The M57 weapon would be released from a P-3 Orion submarine patrol aircraft and set to go off at a certain depth to cause any submarine in a targeted area to implode. Apparently, there was always a Soviet Foxtrot class diesel-electric attack submarine within 5 miles in waters off Adak Island during the Cold War. The P-3 Orion aircraft had a magnetometer probe on its tail to detect the presence of underwater metal anomalies, as well as drop sonobouys that would float for several days and send signals to the P-3 Orion aircraft to determine sonographically what was lurking below in conjunction with the land-based listening posts on Adak Island.

The weapons compound and adjacent areas on Adak were an exclusion zone where the use of deadly force was authorized. From afar, the compound looked like a well-secured federal prison. The compound had an entrance gate with an adjacent two-story guard tower, an internal as well as external barbed-wire fence enshrouded in layers of razor tape, and an internal "no man's land" in between. Within the compound, there were three primary structures—the weapons maintenance building, the heavily fortified Marine "mini-barracks" that housed the Marine guard unit, and the weapons ordnance bunkers that contained seven bomb-blast protected doors. The first two bomb bunker blast doors housed the nuclear warheads, and they were ready access in the event of war as a short distance away from the weapons compound. The other five bunkers contained conventional ordnance and ammo and explosives.

The compound was heavily guarded all days and times of the year. There were always two armed sentries on foot patrol around the immediate inside perimeter of the compound, each armed with an M16A1 machine gun and 200 rounds of ammo, a flak vest, a radio and a pair of binoculars.

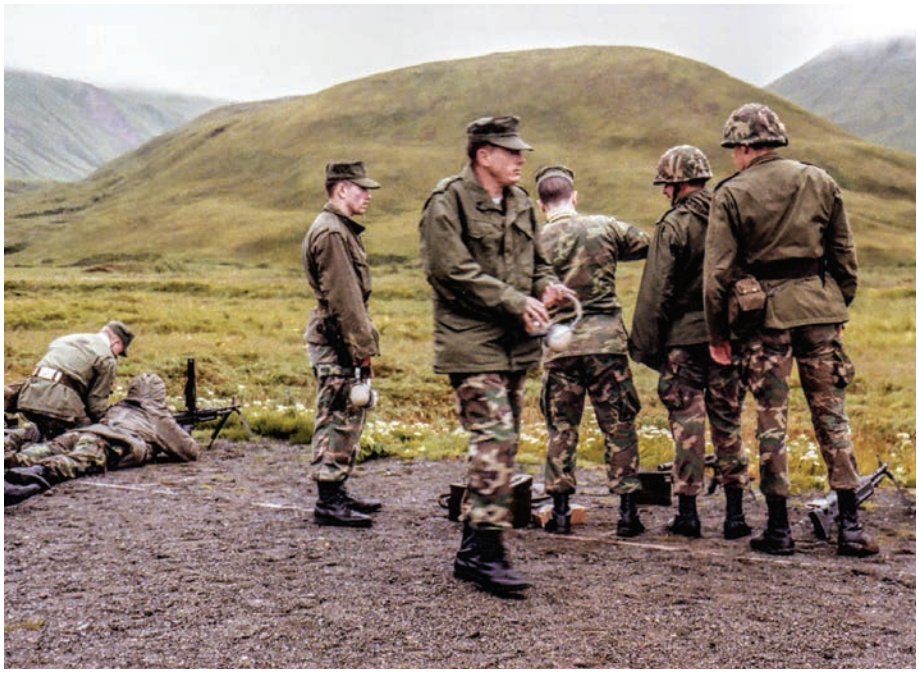
The Marine barracks within the compound, where Marine guards would stay for a week at a time, had its own galley, mini-gym and berthing quarters as well as an armory and ammo bunker. It was completely self-contained. There were enough Marines there within the compound to serve as a quick reaction force until reinforcements from the main barracks arrived if needed.

As a Marine Security Unit, we were trained and equipped to ward off a land-based Soviet attack on the compound. More than likely, in the event of a nuclear war, Adak would have been dealt a preemptive first strike itself with a Soviet nuclear weapon, given its strategic location and what was on the island at the time.

Other facilities for which Marines provided security were the National Security Group Activity Complex and Naval Facilities building at the northern parts of the island near Clam Lagoon. These were highly classified listening posts at the time with underwater sonographic facilities and extensive computer networks.

We had regular react drills but a Marine never knew a drill from the real thing when a react was called. When a react was called, an off-duty Marine on Adak dropped everything and reported immediately to the barracks, ready to do battle in defense of the weapons compound. During a react, Marines at the primary barracks were assigned to certain check and operational points on the island in full battle rattle. The Marines at the Weapons Compound had their own mission in defense of the complex and the immediate surrounding area.

Training outside the barracks entailed a variety of activities, including rappelling



SGTMAJ CHUCK ABLES, USMC (RET)

Marines on the range at Lake Andrew at the north end of the island.

at Checkpoint Two and squad close quarters combat training using old WW II Quonset huts and old cabins in the hills of Adak. Combat training with advancements stomping through tundra grass-laden hills was always a work-out, carrying a rifle or heavy machine gun, with full combat gear through tundra grass that can be ankle, then knee, then waist deep.

Range day happened three to four days per year. All weapons were fired at targets positioned in the tundra. When you fire a .50-caliber in the tundra, we called that "toupee shooting," as when a .50-cal. round impacts tundra grass, a chunk of dirt and tundra grass flies at least 20 feet in the air, straight-up. It looks like a toupee has been blown off of someone's head. Since the tundra is so thick and the underlying permafrost is soft, mortar rounds did not always go off. Efforts to remove unexploded ordnance are still ongoing.

Adak was a two-year duty station for Marine officers and staff NCOs; however, for the young Marines on Adak, it was a one-year duty station. Many Marines took up bodybuilding or a regular exercise program, became music addicts with elaborate stereo systems procured at the PX, ventured out hiking and enjoyed the Alaskan landscape, or pursued either a new or existing hobby such as photography at one of many individual hobby facilities that were available on station. Some Marines pursued education opportunities.

When off-duty, a Marine could spend a weekend hunting caribou, fishing for salmon, or spending time at an old cabin or Quonset hut that had been repurposed for leisure. Other options included "tundra-stomping," which meant hiking the island to various WW II historic sites.

My Story, Then and Now—Adak as it now exists in 2021

I landed on Adak Island in 1979 when I was 17 years old. It was my first duty station in the Corps. I recently returned, over 41 years later, for a five-day visit in August of 2021.

Through the years, I would occasionally think of Adak and wonder what it was like now and how I would react if I returned. The last 10 years or so, I searched many YouTube videos on Adak to try and satisfy my curiosity.

In 2019, I caught up with a childhood friend of mine, Alaska Airlines 737 pilot Fred Ripp. Fred has flown in and out of Adak many times through the years, and we decided to make the journey together.

Armed with far more wisdom and much more educated, older, well-traveled and experienced in life, I came in with a much different and very positive perspective.

The Aleut Corporation gave Fred and me an unrestricted permit to explore all sites and abandoned buildings and structures that are not privately owned on Adak. We stayed at the Aleut Inn which is repurposed base housing for civilian use. We secured a pick-up truck for the duration there as well. We had to fly in our own food as food is extremely expensive on Adak, and the local store is open only a limited time.

The flight to Adak is nothing like it was when I was 17. Back then, Marines flew in on a Lockheed-Electra turboprop airplane. Now, it's an Alaska Airlines 737 with all modern conveniences. Passengers on flights to Adak include commercial fisherman crews, caribou hunters, salmon and halibut fisherman, bird watchers and to a lesser extent, civilian contractor workers.

Boarding the flight to Adak from Anchorage, I felt I was taken back in time. The many thoughts and feelings that raced through my mind, coupled with that melancholy feeling, were incredible. The

The barracks as it exists now is just a shell of its former self. The wax polished floors and polished metalwork are long gone, and the rooms are dilapidated and in disarray, now deteriorated and vandalized throughout with broken glass and graffiti.

The view south from Marine Barracks Adak with beautiful mountains in the background in the winter of 1980.

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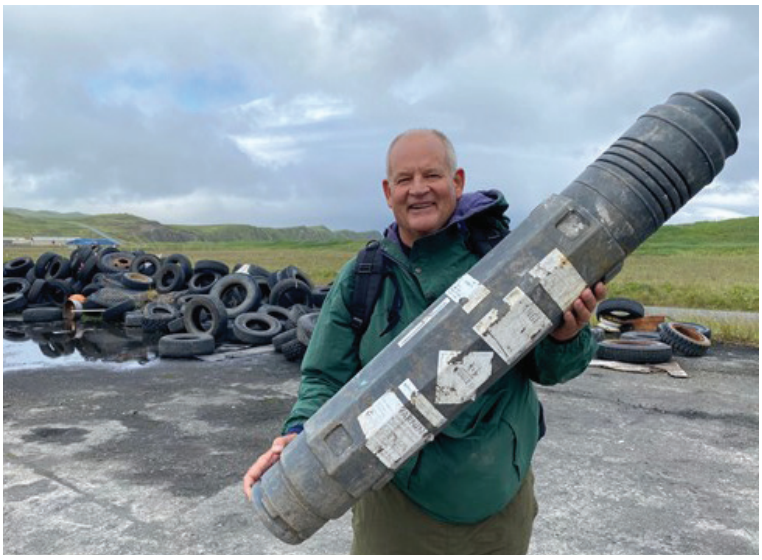
SGTMAJ CHUCK ABLES, USMC (RET)

World War II-era equipment could be found throughout Adak in the 1970s and the Marines stationed there enjoyed exploring what was left behind.



COURTESY OF DR. BARRY ERDMAN

During his return visit to Adak Island in August 2021, Erdman holds a sonobuoy shipping canister that was left behind when the base was closed.

three-hour flight from Anchorage gave me plenty of time to gather my many thoughts.

When preparing to land, we circled the island, and I saw bays and outer islands I did not see so long ago. Adak was enshrouded in clouds and a light mist just as it was when I left. Mount Moffit was to the left. I had looked at that beautiful mountain from my window at the barracks every morning I woke up when stationed there, and I marveled looking out at it. The Marine barracks was to the right. From the air, the barracks still looked intact as I remembered. It felt good to see it.

As we landed, the abandonment of the base elements of Adak City became readily apparent. Many Cold War military buildings had been left to the elements. It had an eerie apocalyptic appearance as if the folks here had just gotten up and left.

Fred and I ventured out to the immediate surrounding areas in downtown Adak City. The downtown area was a shell of its former self. Efforts are underway to clear the island of unwanted debris, dangerous structures and contaminated areas that resulted from the military presence, primarily during the Cold War. WW II structures are pretty much long gone. Those that remain have been repurposed for liberty enjoyment, and even those are in marked deterioration and hazardous.

The next morning, we began at Kuluk Bay, the site of the 1942 U.S. Army landings, the beach that we Marines hiked on when I was stationed there, which seems to be unchanged.

The Marine barracks was next on Bering Hill. Bering Hill was eerily quiet but pulling up to the Marine barracks was an altogether different story. The flagpole was still there but flew no flag. The two-wheeled cannons on each side of the flag are long gone, and missing is the brass plaque on the concrete block pedestal before the flag that said, "Marine Barracks Adak Alaska." The yellow, painted decorative chain fence that surrounded the sidewalk at the front of the barracks by the road is gone. The barracks' cement superstructure is intact, but vandalized, with broken windows and doors ajar.

I ventured through all the floors in the barracks and then the basement. In the basement, the armory and brig had been moved after I left the island, as well as the rooms and offices on that level that once housed the sergeant of the guard, the lieutenant's office and small gym. The laundry and its machines were still there from later guard platoons.

The barracks as it exists now is just a shell of its former self. The wax polished floors and polished metalwork are all long gone, and the rooms are dilapidated and in disarray, now deteriorated and vandalized throughout with broken glass and graffiti.

The ammo bunker at the rear of the barracks is still present but void of concertina wire, and the rear garages and buildings are in various states of deterioration. We proceeded up Bering Hill to the

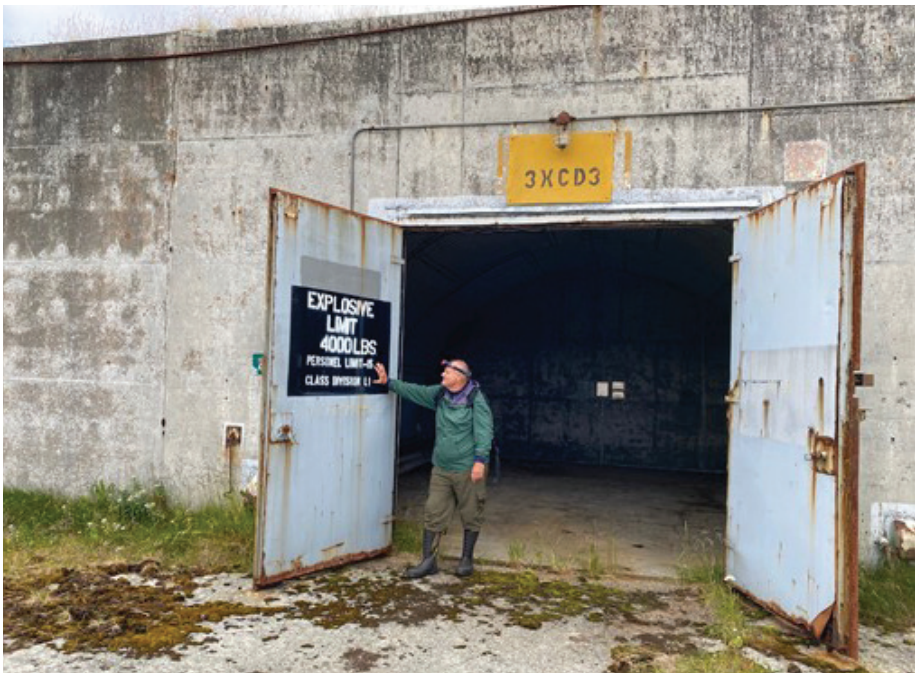
The back lot of the Marine barracks where Tundra Tavern once stood in Adak. (Photo by Dr. Barry Erdman)

recreation center and galley/chow hall, which were also all abandoned and in various states of deterioration as well.

The various weapons bunkers in the Adak countryside remain in fairly good condition and we explored several of those as well as the various cabins and Quonset huts where we spent weekends when off-duty. Many are quite deteriorated and hazardous to venture into today.

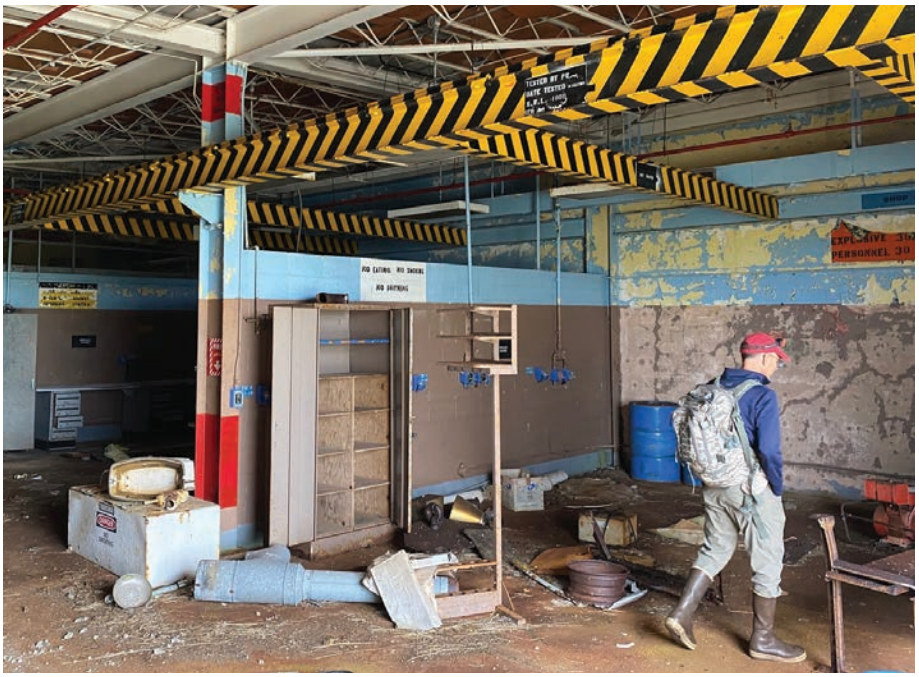
We explored the Marine Weapons Compound that day and most of the next day. The building once had so much security and mystery that I could not believe we were actually in every nook and cranny without any restrictions. It was unheard of back in the day to even be near there if one was not with the Marine Guard or a Navy Weapons Specialist assigned to it. The mystery behind it now exposed and abandoned for all to see and walk into unrestricted.

As I entered the compound, the faces and names started coming back to me. I was one of the Marine flankers on patrol who once walked this facility in all weather conditions with a machine gun and 200 rounds with deadly force authorized, 41 plus years ago. I could not believe that back in the day, I was sleeping each night, about 150-200 feet away from about 70 nuclear warheads.



DR. BARRY ERDMAN

Above: Now retired, Dr. Erdman stands in front of a weapons storage blast bunker at the Modified Advanced Airborne Underwater Weapons Complex/Compound. Erdman had guarded the M57 nuclear warheads that were stored there when he was stationed on the island.



DR. BARRY ERDMAN

Inside the Weapons Maintenance building within the Modified Advanced Airborne Underwater Weapons Complex/Compound in August 2021.

We explored the entire compound, actually walking into the bunkers that once housed the nuclear weapons, as well into the weapons maintenance building, both floors of the guard tower, and the entire Marine Compound Barracks. I even found the rack I once slept in. I paused for a while to take that in. I retraced my patrol course around the entire compound. The sensors on the fence and ground are long gone, along with the multiple layers of concertina wire and razor tape that were once present.

We ventured out over the next days exploring other Marine Guard facilities. All were accessible, but abandoned, and in various states of deterioration, often stripped of valuable metals as well. The "elephant" or "dinosaur" cage (antenna array) is long gone, though their pylons/pedestals remain, which were part of the NSGA complex.

The center of where the "dinosaur" cage once stood, incidentally, was the crossroads of the two major runways of the WW II Mitchell Field where B-17, B-24 Liberator, B-25 and P-38s once took off to targets at Japanese held islands in WW II. You can only see the outlines of these airstrips by satellite as the Marsden Mats, once the runway floor, have long been removed and salvaged, the landscape taken over by mother nature and time.

Fred and I then explored places that we Marines frequented when we had time off. We visited Horseshoe Bay, and I did the arduous hike up and down with rope assistance, which was spectacular. I also visited the abandoned LORAN [long range navigation] station near there.

As we drove the island, we visited various checkpoints that the sergeant of the guard would see daily. The most famous is Checkpoint Two or "Charlie Papa Two," which was a tall hill on the mid-portion to the north of the east/west runway. It had many antennae and small buildings on it, but has since been bulldozed flat, and is now just a hill with a slanted rocky down fall. Marines once rappelled down the face of those rocks.

We visited Finger Bay to see the old WW II foundations and the anti-submarine nets that were placed underwater at the entrance to this bay to prevent Japanese mini-subs from entering. The metal mesh net is actually in pretty good condition.

What I also learned about present-day

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Foreground: A view of base housing and hangars with three parked P-3C Orion aircraft. Great Sitkin Island, a semi-active volcano, is visible in the background.

Adak, in an ever-changing world, is that the military may be back on Adak in some shape or form, sooner than later. As the political climate changes, this presents recurring military opportunities, given its strategic location. As well, with the melting polar ice caps, the sea has risen. Thus, shipping has increased in the region, and Adak serves as a port of opportunity. If the U.S. Navy is involved, the Marines may very well return to Adak in defense and support of that in the future.

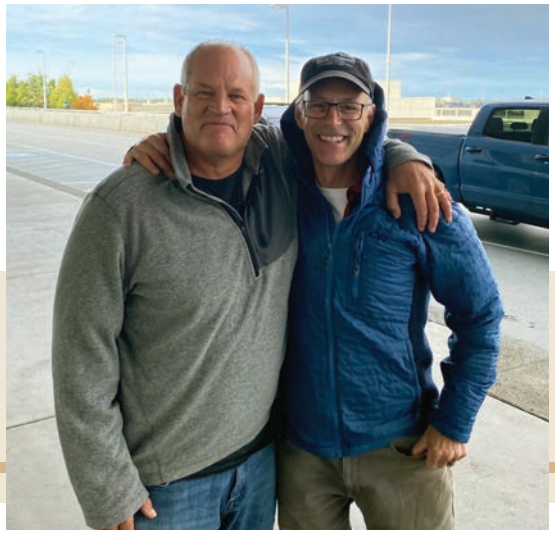
While exploring Adak on this trip, one great story had led to another. This trip indeed went from a journey to an expedition that evolved into a personal odyssey that I will never forget. It was somewhat cathartic as well for me. I have done much to give back to the Marine Corps through the years, thankful for what the Marine experience did for me as a person, that shaped my future.

Thus, being at the place where the foundation of it all for me was started, on Adak, I felt returning here, I could in a way, show that it was all worth it.

When I look back at my life, I am so appreciative. I am proud and feel very lucky as the American dream worked out for me. The Marines were a good part of that, and I have so much to be grateful for.

Flying out of Adak, as we rolled down the runway on take-off, I felt teary-eyed, but good inside. I felt a sense of reconciliation and was ready to move on to my next chapter in life. This trip was so worth it, beyond words.

Author's bio: Dr. Barry E. Erdman is a retired foot and ankle surgeon who enlisted in 1979 and served in the Marine Corps until 1982. He is a freelance writer and explorer and supports the Marine Corps from time to time whenever called upon.



Dr. Barry Erdman, left, with his childhood friend Fred Ripp, Alaska Airlines 737 pilot, at Anchorage Airport upon returning from Adak, August 2021. (Photo courtesy of Dr. Barry Erdman)

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