



Captain-Commander Vitus Bering.

# VITUS BERING AND HIS SEA

An intrepid Dane, a Captain-Commander in the Czar's navy, and the sea he discovered.

North of the scimitar-shaped Aleutian Island chain is the cold, turbulent Bering Sea. Long remote and little known to mariners, it has become one of the world's important oceans.

Physically, it starts at Bering Strait where Asia and North America are only 54 miles apart, and runs south for some 1,000 miles. East to west at its widest part it's about 1,500 miles. The greatest depth measured is some 2,200 fathoms. But all its water is not deep. The 100 fathom curve running from Mys (cape) Olyutorskiy on Kamchatka in an easy arc to Unalaska in the Aleutians marks a continental shelf north of which the water gradually shallows to 20 fathoms at the strait.

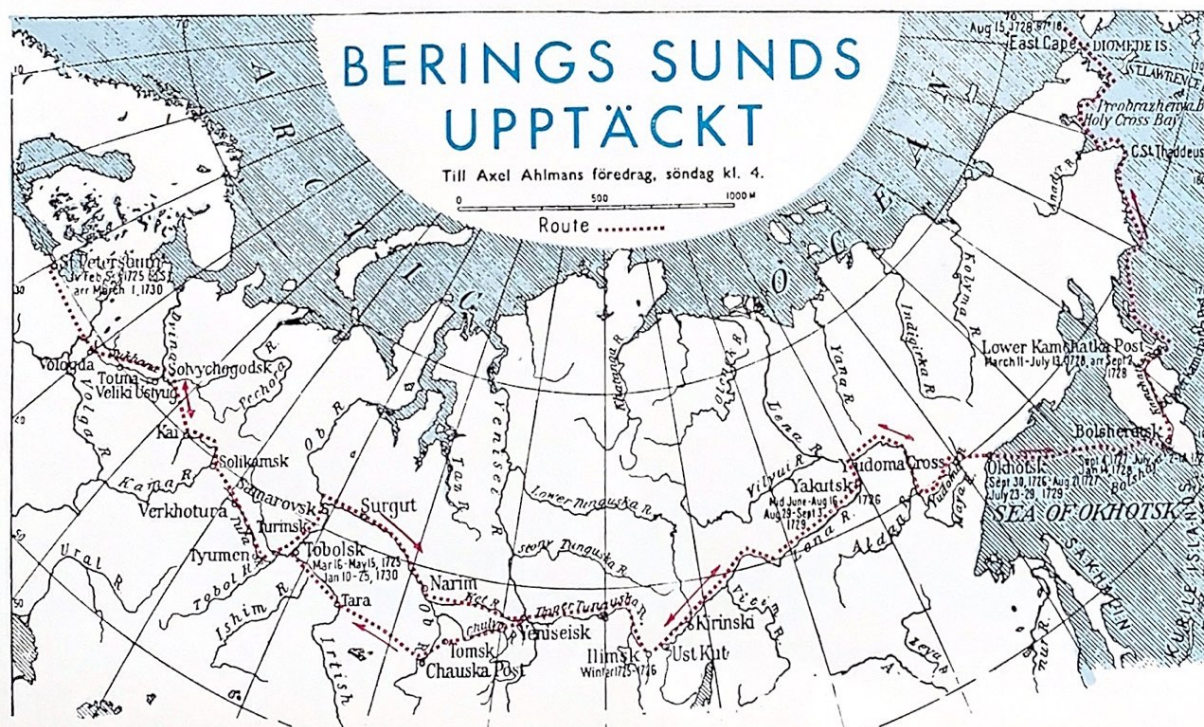
Weather in this awesome sea is generally bad. A cold Arctic current sweeps down through the strait, follows the coast of Siberia and then bends eastward along the Aleutians before swinging northward once more. When the relatively warmer air of the Pacific hits this cold stream, clouds and

fog result. Too, it has the typical strong winds of a sub-polar area and plenty of storms. They are not, however, as bad as the winds in the sub-antarctic region, home of the world's worst weather.

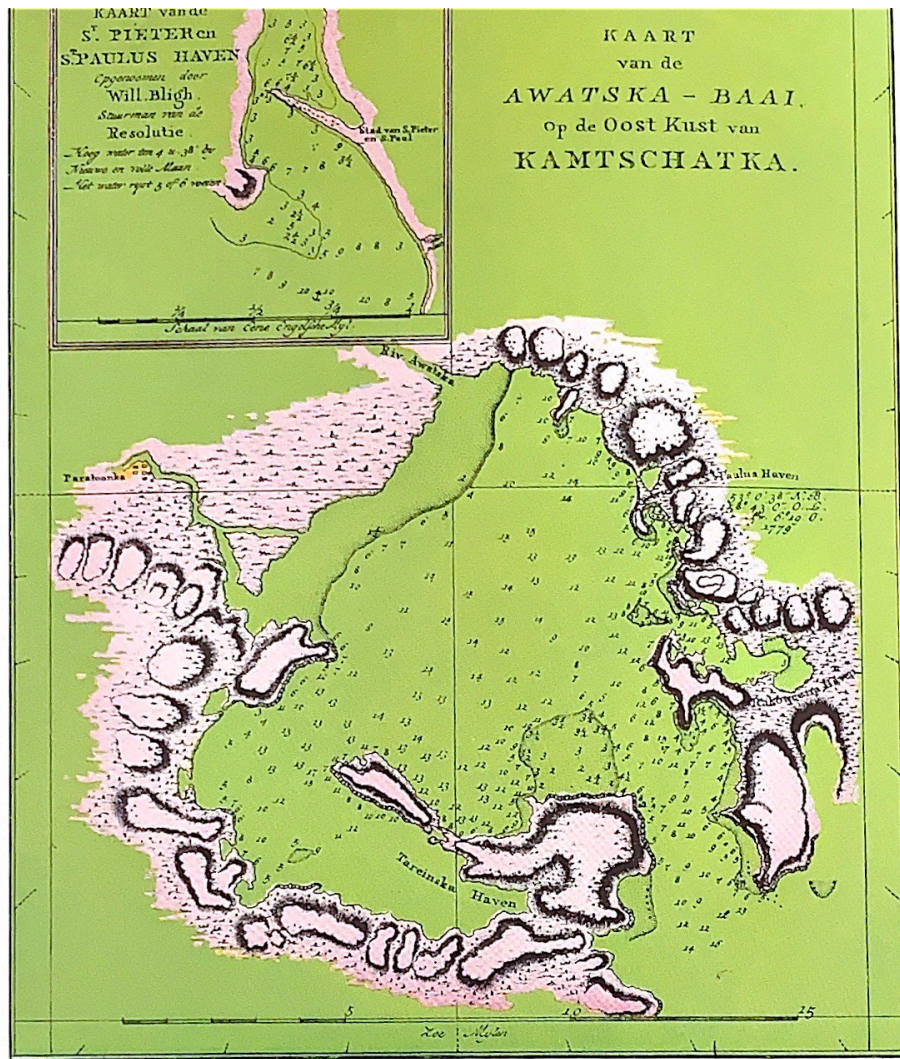
Not nearly enough is known about the Bering Sea. The United States Coast and Geodetic Survey to bridge the gap has sent its new survey ship *Surveyor* to the area. Described by Survey officials as the best equipped ship of its kind in the world, she is using her ultra modern gear to obtain accurate and detailed information about the sea as well as the Aleutians and parts of Alaska.

Why all the sudden interest? Beyond the obvious, a gateway to the Arctic Ocean for voyages like the *Nautilus*, *Skate's* and *Sargo's*, the big sea is a fantastic fishing ground; probably one of the world's most productive. Too, it's the home of the North Pacific seal herds. And when you talk about seals, you're talking about the noisy, incredible Pribilof Islands. Therein lies a rather interesting tale.

Map of Bering's first expedition. Note the dates of arrival both going and coming. He probably followed much the same route on his second expedition.







Old Dutch chart of Awatska (Avatchka) Bay giving details of Petropavlovsk harbor. It was drawn by Will Bligh, Stuurman (mate) of the Resolutie.

Seals are funny animals. Their system of propagation is even stranger. They follow the harem system, but instead of buying a harem, the bulls fight for one. It's a "winner take all" situation with the losers joining the bachelors' herd.

Back in the 19th century when Russia controlled the Bering Sea and Alaska—had planted colonies in northern California, Alaska, Oregon, Washington and British

Columbia, the Pribilof seals were indiscriminately hunted by Americans, Japanese, Russians, and Canadians. This was not the way to do it. Herds diminished at an alarming rate and running gun battles for supremacy between hunters were the rule. Finally, to protect this valuable asset, an agreement was signed between the aforementioned nations that restricted the kill to the bachelors. Known as the Pelagic Sea Act and enforced by the United States



The town and harbor of Petropavlovsk (St. Peter and St. Paul) Kamchatka as it may have looked shortly after Bering's party established a base there.



Fur seals at English Bay, St. Paul's Island one of the Pribilof group. These are probably bachelors destined to live out their lives without a harem.



Coast Guard, it has protected the animals by controlling seal hunting. The annual kill is regulated, supervised, and profits from the catch are shared. Walt Disney made a cinema about the Pribilof's seals (Seal Island). There's also a fanciful but exciting film, "The World in His Arms," that gives a first-rate account of sealing in the days before the "agreement."

Relatively few people know how the Bering Sea got its name or how it was discovered. Vitus Bering (1680-1741) an intrepid Dane who sailed for the Czar of Russia was responsible. Born in Jutland, he entered the Russian Navy during 1704 and distinguished himself in a war with Sweden before setting out on his big adventure.

Few argonauts in the history of exploration matched his or his companions' courage and persistence. Few have endured such obstacles and hardships simply to broaden man's frontiers.

The first expedition, sponsored by Peter the Great, left St. Petersburg during February, 1725 and returned in March, 1730. On the trip, Bering and his men built two ships, discovered the strait that bears his name, and proved that Asia and North America are separate land masses. Though he failed to sight the coast of North America, he did discover the St. Lawrence Island and the Diomedes working as far north as 67° 18', well into the Chukchi Sea.

Bering's second expedition, authorized by Czarina Anna, hoped to find and claim the western part of North America for Russia. His orders included the fulfilment of an impressive but impossible list of geographical and scientific objectives set by stay-at-home explorers in Moscow and St. Petersburg (Leningrad). The expedition left St. Petersburg in February 1733.

Once again he went via the overland route, across the vast Russian and Siberian hinterland. But this time, the party was far larger than on the first trip. In addition to teamsters, sailors, and shipwrights, it included astronomers, cartographers, surveyors, biologists, landscape painters,

wives and camp followers to the number of 1,000 or more!

Hundreds of horses were expended to move men, supplies and hangers-on across snow-swept steppes, through soggy marshes, across rivers and over hills where roads were unknown. Men were drowned; frozen to death; eaten alive by wolves as the expedition crawled its weary three-year way toward the Pacific.

At Okhotsk, Bering's shipwrights built the *St. Peter* and *St. Paul*. The bluff-bowed, brig-rigged sister ships were about 80 feet long, had a beam of 20 feet and a depth of nine. They were fastened with thongs from animal hides because there were no nails! No wonder it took two years to build them.

Once the ships were finished, outfitted with 14 small guns and provisioned with the miserable rations of the day, the expedition was ready to move. The little ships sailed down the sea of Okhotsk, weathered Mys Lopatka and finally made Avatchka Bay on the Pacific side of Kamchatka. There they built port facilities, naming the place Petropavlovsk in honor of saints Peter and Paul.

The two ships finally set sail for the unknown reaches of the Northern Pacific on June 4, 1741, eight years and four months after leaving St. Petersburg.

The flagship, *St. Peter*, carried 76 men and Vitus Bering, the captain-commander. *St. Paul* was skippered by his first lieutenant, Alexi Chirikof. She carried 75 men.

Both ships, missing the Aleutians, sailed eastward into the Pacific only to be separated by frustrating fogs and baffling storms. Bering and Chirikof never "spoke" each other again.

Chirikof's *St. Paul* was the first to sight North America, making a landfall probably at Sitka Sound, July 15, 1741. He sent an armed landing party ashore to reconnoiter. Failing to return after several days, a second boat's crew was sent to find them. They also disappeared. With no more boats left for solving the mystery, Chirikof reluctantly hoisted anchor and continued his exploration of the coast.



Old print (circa 1875) drawn by W. H. Elliott, of Makushin Volcano, on Unalaska Island in the Aleutians. Bering sailed along the scimitar-shaped Aleutians, could well have seen this volcano.





Little Diomedede (U.S.A.) foreground, Big Diomedede (U.S.S.R.) background. In distance right is the Siberian Mainland. Bering discovered

these bleak treeless islands. The weather was comparatively good and the sea quite calm the day this picture was made.

Soon though he headed for home, but not before 21 of the *St. Paul's* crew, including the French astronomer Croyere, were dead of scurvy or other ills.

Bering, in the *St. Peter*, steered eastward. On July 16, he sighted a towering peak, which he called Mt. St. Elias, and a chain of high snow-covered mountains. Moving almost due west from there, he finally sent men ashore on Kayak Island near Cape Suckling in southern Alaska.

Bering continued Westward along the coast until July 20. Almost out of fresh water he put a party ashore to fill casks. The German biologist, Georg Steller, who had waited years for this opportunity, was "permitted" to go ashore with them. What depths of bitter frustration the great scientist must have felt when the culmination of his hopes was a brief hour or so in this new, unexplored land!

After buffetings by almost continuous gales, the *St. Peter* was in dire straits. Leaking like a sieve, she was cranky, barely manageable. Adding to the woes, most of her crew were abed with scurvy. Yet in spite of the difficulties, Bering continued exploring the coast until September. With shorter days and even worse weather in the offing, he finally ordered the course set for Siberia. For 17 days they battled winds, fogs and storms. Hunger, cold and sickness compounded their misery. The mountainous Shumagin Islands along the Alaska peninsula are named for the first of his men to die of scurvy. They stopped there to bury him.

On November 4, they sighted land. Dying men were carried on deck to catch one last glimpse of their beloved Russia. But what they thought was Siberia turned out to be one of the Komandorskiye or Commander Islands several hundred miles northeast of their Kamchatka base. Here by vote of the officers, the expedition would stop and rest, bury the dead, forage for food. But the storm-battered *St. Peter* was driven ashore and wrecked, making all hands castaways on a cold, forbidding isle.

The captain-commander died there on December 7, 1741. In his honor the island was named Ostrov (island) Bering. Fortunately for the survivors foxes, other game and some greens provided food, the kind that helped them recover from scurvy. Feeling somewhat better, they were able to survive the fierce winter of 1741-1742.

With rare resourcefulness, the 46 survivors of the *St. Peter* ultimately collected the flotsam and jetsam from their ship. With it they built a 41-foot boat. In it they sailed for Siberia, reaching Kamchatka August 16, 1742.

The castaways were dirty, bearded and clothed in rags when they sailed into Petropavlovsk. They were greeted with the thunderous cheers of comrades who thought them long dead. The accolades were a tribute indeed to the many brave men and a captain-commander whose exploits never received full credit.

Although most sailors today find the Bering Sea a cold and forbidding part of the world, large Russian and Japanese trawler fleets are working its shallower areas. They are taking a fabulous haul of food and commercial fish for their respective countries. Yet strange as it may seem, the entire area, except for inshore salmon fishing, is almost completely ignored by Americans.

How big is this business? Predictions are that the Russian trawlers will soon be landing 250,000 tons of fish a year from the Bering Sea. It must be a profitable operation because they have some 50 steam and diesel vessels at work.

The Japanese are exploiting these waters intensively, too, with four fish-factory ships and a large number of catcher boats. Size of this fleet is evident from the fact that the factory ship *Kinyo Maru* is "mother ship" to 24 trawlers; the *Renshin Maru* to 27 and the *Soyo Maru* to 30!

As the population explosion continues and arable land areas shrink under pressure of industries, cities and soil depletion, the Bering Sea is sure to rank with the North Atlantic and the North Sea as one of the major fishing areas of the world. The present exploitation is comparatively small. Actually, its undersea "pastures" are capable of producing even a richer crop for a hungrier and hungrier world. Were Vitus Bering to come back today, he would be delighted with what his discoveries brought. His pride would not be restricted to "his sea" alone. For where he raised Mt. Elias again or went ashore somewhere along the long Alaskan coastline, he would know that his work had indeed born fantastic fruits.

*Photo courtesy of the Dow Diamond published by the Dow Chemical Company.*