
The Forgotten Battle of Attu

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On 20 August 2012, United States Senator Lisa Murkowski and Coast Guard Rear Admiral Thomas Ostebo dedicated a memorial commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the invasion of Attu.¹ This westernmost and largest island in the Aleutian chain is closer to Japan than mainland Alaska. Attu is a small windswept island that is less than three hundred miles from the International Date Line.² Today, it is home to a few Coast Guard personnel but in 1943 it was the site of a bloody battle that claimed over five hundred American and more than two thousand four hundred Japanese lives. It was the first invasion of the United States since the War of 1812 and the only invasion of North America in the Second World War; however, this battle is virtually unknown outside the State of Alaska and is often left out of the history books.

In the spring of 1942, the Japanese Army and Navy were at the pinnacle of power and control in the Pacific region. After destroying most of the American battleships in Pearl Harbor, and sinking the British battleships *The Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, the Japanese expanded and conquered Hong Kong, Guam, and Singapore. They had defeated the American forces at Corregidor and appeared unstoppable.³ However, when the Premier of Japan, General Hideki Tojo decided to attack the Island of Midway, he started on a path that would eventually lead to the destruction of the Empire. The Battle of Midway was a turning point in the Pacific War.⁴ The Aleutian Campaign is part of that Midway Campaign. In April 1942, Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto oversaw a plan he believed would finally destroy the American Navy in the Pacific.⁵ His plan was to send a force to the Aleutians and compel the American Navy to defend the American islands. He would ambush the Americans at Midway Island.⁶ The Japanese military remained undecided about the plan until the American raid on Tokyo and other Japanese cities on April 18, 1942. Some in the Japanese military believed that the Americans launched the twin-engine B-25 Mitchells used in the raid from the Aleutians. That

the leader of the attack, Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle grew up in Alaska added additional weight to this mistaken theory.⁷ The Japanese decided in the spring of 1942 that the main force would attack Midway and a smaller force would “capture or demolish points of strategical interest in the western Aleutians in order to check the enemy’s air and ship maneuvers in the area.”⁸ The small force



Figure 1 *Buildings burning after the first enemy attack on Dutch Harbor, 3 June 1942. (DA photograph). US Army Center of History, Aleutian Islands. CMH Pub. 72-6.*

consisted of two aircraft carriers, a dozen destroyers, five cruisers, and sixteen hundred soldiers. The naval force was to attack the American naval base at Dutch Harbor and the soldiers would seize Kiska, Attu, and Adak in the Aleutian Islands.⁹

The Japanese military had hoped that the attack on Dutch Harbor would achieve the complete surprise that the attack at Pearl Harbor had achieved six months earlier.¹⁰ They were disappointed. The Americans had partially deciphered the Japanese code three weeks prior to the attack on 3 June. Moreover, the Americans spotted the carriers as they approached Alaska. An American flying boat, or PBY, patrol plane had spotted the invasion force on 2 June.¹¹ The American forces in Alaska were severely lacking and “hopelessly unready.”¹² Major General Simon Buckner Jr. was the commander of the Alaskan defense in

1942. He claimed, "We're not even the second team up here—we're a sandlot club."¹³ There were several small army garrisons, scattered airfields, and an outdated naval fleet of World War One destroyers. Unfortunately, for Alaska, the bulk of the American fleet in the Pacific was needed to counter the large Japanese threat at Midway. On 21 May 1942, nine ships under the command of Rear Admiral Robert Theobald left Pearl Harbor and headed to Alaska.

On the morning of 3 June 1942, the Japanese launched the first attack against Dutch Harbor. Seventeen planes from the aircraft carrier *Ryujo* flew over the American base and destroyed some oil tanks and an army barracks. The attack killed twenty-five American soldiers and injured many others but did little real damage to the base.¹⁴ The attacking Japanese were uncontested in the air because the people at Dutch Harbor were unable to signal the Otter Bay airfield for assistance.¹⁵ The Japanese lost one plane to ground fire. The next morning the Japanese again attacked Dutch Harbor and destroyed a fuel depot, damaged the USS *Northwestern*, and the base hospital. However, this time the air force was alerted and eight P-40 fighter aircraft were sent to meet the Japanese threat.¹⁶ The dogfight that ensued resulted in the destruction of two American and six Japanese aircraft.¹⁷

On the same day as the second Dutch Harbor attack, the main Japanese attack force at Midway suffered its first defeat at the hands of the United States. This defeat had a major impact on the war in Alaska. Admiral Yamamoto ordered a general withdrawal and a halt to the Aleutian attack on 5 June.¹⁸ Japanese Admiral Boshiro Hosogaya disagreed and successfully argued to allow the landing on some of the Aleutian Islands. On 6 June and 7 June, five hundred Japanese soldiers successfully landed on Kiska. On 7 June 1,100 soldiers stormed ashore at Attu and captured 42 Aleuts, a schoolteacher, and his wife.¹⁹

Author Dashiell Hammett wrote an official history of the campaign in 1944. He wrote, "War had come to the Aleutians to a chain of islands where modern armies had never fought before."²⁰ He added, "We would have to learn as well as we went along, how to live and fight and win in this new land, the least-known part of our America."²¹ The military value of these remote islands may be small; however, the political implications were enormous. In the 28 September 1942 issue, *Life* magazine briefed the country on the location of Attu and the Aleutian Islands and reassured its readers that the United States would not tolerate the Japanese invasion of US territory. The authors wrote, "As long as they are

there, North America is in peril. For using their maritime knowledge and protective screen of weather, the Japs can move farther along the continental doorstep until they are powerful enough to break down the door.”²² The Japanese seized the propaganda opportunity and used their success in the Aleutians to cover the loss at Midway. The Japanese military claimed that the victory in the Aleutians blocked the sea routes that the United States would use to attack Japan.²³

The Americans reacted quickly to the Japanese invasion of the Aleutians. Within days of the invasion, air force units began bombing Attu and Kiska. However, the overall counteroffensive that would culminate with the Battle of Attu developed slowly. In the eleven months between the loss of Attu and the American landing on Attu, the Navy kept pressure on the Japanese by bombing the island and destroying resupply ships.²⁴ On 18 June 1942, the Americans sunk a transport in the Kiska harbor and two months after the Japanese landed on the island, American destroyers attacked the Kiska harbor.²⁵ Unfortunately, the attack was not very effective. Buckner claimed the “bombardment of invisible targets from five miles offshore . . . was worse than no bombardment at all.”²⁶

General Buckner wanted to move west along the Aleutian chain towards Kiska and the Japanese. His goal was to build bases on the islands closer to the Japanese to avoid long and dangerous bombing missions. By the end of the summer, the Joint Chiefs agreed and authorized the move into the Andreanof Island group, about 250 miles from Kiska.²⁷ After much disagreement between the Navy and the Army, the decision was made to land on Adak. On 30 August 1942, U.S. forces landed on that island and immediately started construction of a runway. By 12 September, planes were taking off from the new airstrip and bombing the Japanese on Kiska and Attu.²⁸

Life on Adak was not pleasant for the Americans. Captain Billy J. Wheeler kept a diary about his life in the 36th Bombardment Squadron in Alaska. He described the conditions at the new base on the island. He wrote “The constant fog and rain make life wet and miserable. The rain is accompanied by winds in excess of 60 mph. To be abroad means to be soaked to the skin regardless of the type of clothing one wears. The weather is so disagreeable that many of us prefer to remain in our tents rather than face the elements during a dash to the mess tent.”²⁹ In four months, the Seabees built up the island and made it livable. Hammett wrote that the troops on Adak were on guard 24 hours a day against

Japanese attack. "Night and day the crews stood by their loaded guns. They knew that they guarded not only their barren island but also the stepping stones to North America."³⁰

The air war in the Aleutians had become one-sided by the fall of 1942. American bombers pummeled Kiska and suffered few losses to the Japanese. The Japanese response was minimal. On 4 October 1942, the Japanese launched an airstrike with only three planes. Most of the raids were by a single plane and after a few days, that stopped.³¹ With the war going badly for the Japanese in the fall of 1942, they decided to abandon the Aleutians after the winter. The Japanese consolidated the forces on the island of Kiska and for a brief time left Attu undefended.³²

The American forces marched west down the chain. The island of Amchitka, only seventy-five miles from Kiska, was their next major target. In a fashion similar to Adak, the Americans landed on this island on 12 January 1943. The Americans also welcomed a new commander to the Aleutians. Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid replaced Theobald on 5 January 1943. Kinkaid was tasked with removing the Japanese from American territory and he wasted little time tackling that assignment.³³ Kinkaid planned to starve the Japanese by blockading the occupied islands and denying them supplies. Kinkaid's blockade was very successful and resulted in the sinking of several transport ships bound for the island. In February 1943, the Americans sunk the 3,100 ton *Akagane Maru* before the ship could deliver supplies to the Japanese. The sinking of the Japanese cargo ship convinced two other cargo ships to return to the safer waters of Japan.³⁴

As the Americans moved toward the Japanese-held Aleutian Islands, the Japanese commander Hideichiro Higuchi suggested to Japan that they abandon the Aleutians and withdraw. On 5 February, the Japanese command denied that request, directing Higuchi "to hold the western Aleutians at all costs."³⁵ The Japanese had a force of about eight hundred on Kiska and one thousand on Attu. On Attu, the Japanese were attempting to construct a 3,500-foot runway. A runway of that length would be usable by both fighters and bombers. However, the almost constant bombardment from the Americans severely hampered construction.³⁶

It was always assumed that the next Aleutian Island that was to be invaded was Kiska. It was the next island to the west of Amchitka and the stronghold of the Japanese-occupied islands. However, there were many active

fronts in the spring of 1943, including Guadalcanal and North Africa, and the Allied forces and supplies were stretched thin.³⁷ There were not enough ships and men to allow the Americans to successfully invade the island of Kiska. Admiral Kinkaid proposed skipping Kiska for the lightly defended Attu. Kinkaid believed that success on Attu would leave Kiska isolated in the Aleutians and the Japanese might abandon the island without a fight.

On 24 April 1943, 11,000 soldiers left California bound for Attu.³⁸ The attack plans called for the main force to land at Massacre Bay and then meet up with a smaller force coming from Holtz bay. The whole operation should have taken three days according to the military planners.³⁹

While the invasion force was traveling from California to Attu, Kinkaid ordered a massive bombing campaign on the two Japanese-held islands. The Americans dropped thousands of pounds of bombs on the Japanese and flew over one thousand sorties. Kinkaid chose to split up the bombing so the Japanese were not tipped off that Attu was the intended target. On 1 May, Kinkaid switched to bombing only Attu. The Army Air Force (AAF) and Navy saturated the island in preparation for the invasion.⁴⁰

The Japanese force on Attu, under the command of Colonel Yasuyo Yamaski numbered 2,650 men on the eve of the invasion. The Japanese had known for about a week that the Americans were going to land on Attu.⁴¹ Yamaski decided that the best way to defend the island was from the high ground.

The island of Attu is a windswept speck of land at the western end of the Aleutian chain of islands. The island is about thirty-seven miles long and fifteen miles wide, with mountain peaks that rise three thousand feet. Perpetually wrapped in fog and ringed by a moss-covered bog called muskeg, the island was not an ideal place to invade. The Japanese dressed in white and used the natural features of the island to their advantage.⁴²

The invasion of Attu began on Tuesday, 11 May 1943. About three in the morning, 244 men from the Scout battalion landed quietly on the north side of the island.⁴³ Their job was to examine the beach and determine if it was a suitable landing spot. The beach called Red Beach, although narrow, was a suitable location and landing operations began.⁴⁴ The First Battalion of the 17th Infantry landed on the beach then drove inland towards their first objective. They were to seize Muckenstrum Ridge, a hill overlooking Holtz bay. The attack force encountered very little resistance in the initial landing and by early afternoon 1,500 men had

landed on Attu.⁴⁵

The Southern force had planned to land in Massacre Bay at 7:40 a.m. but was delayed by fog. By 3:30 p.m., the fog had cleared enough that landing craft could be launched. It took an hour for the first group of boats to reach the shore. One group of boats was lost in the fog and landed on the wrong beach. One landing craft capsized and another ran aground. The fog was so thick that a destroyer using radar led the landing craft into shore.⁴⁶ Military historian General B.W Boyes wrote: “Once ashore, the troops moved over the wet tundra-covered low ground to the rocky hills, shrouded in dense clouds, above the 300-foot contour lines.”⁴⁷

By 5:00 p.m., the Americans had taken the beaches without firing a shot. The Americans pushed inland slowly. By 7:00 p.m., they had travelled about 2,500 yards from the beach and encountered the first enemy fire. Rifle and mortar fire pinned down the Americans and stopped the assault until the next morning.⁴⁸ Through the night, supplies and artillery continued to land at Massacre Bay. The muskeg and tundra bogged down the heavy vehicles. Much of the supplies had to be moved by hand because of the soggy ground.



Figure 2 *Troops hauling supplies forward to units fighting the Japanese in the Chichagof area, May 1943. (DA photograph). US Army Center of History, Aleutian Islands. CMH Pub. 72-6.*

For five days, the Southern forces faced constant enemy pressure. The Japanese dug into the hills surrounding Massacre Valley. Dense Aleutian fog frequently shrouded the Japanese artillery, allowing the unseen defenders to rain down accurate, heavy fire from well-fortified positions. The unseen defenders battered the Americans.⁴⁹

On Saturday, 15 May, five days after the American landing, the Japanese, fearful of being caught between the two American forces, withdrew to the east. They left Holtz Valley and set up in the Chickagof Harbor area. After a week of heavy fighting, the Americans had suffered 1,100 casualties – almost half due to exposure. There were 12,500 American troops facing a well-entrenched Japanese force of less than 2,000.⁵⁰ On Wednesday, 19 May, American forces attacked the dug-in Japanese in the Chickagof hills. For the next week, the opposing forces battled for every inch of ground often fighting with bayonets.⁵¹ The Americans were making progress. Through a combination of artillery and air support, the Japanese were slowly being forced into a smaller area around Chickagof Harbor.

On Monday, 24 May, the fighting shifted to an area on the north side of Chickagof Harbor called Fish Hook Ridge.⁵² Like the events of the previous two weeks, progress was slow and bloody. The Americans used bayonets and hand grenades to drive the Japanese back. By Friday, 28 May, the Americans had driven the Japanese off the Fish Hook and had them surrounded. The struggle appeared to be over.⁵³

Japanese Colonel Yamaski decided to make one last stand against the American forces. With less than 1,000 men, he opted for one final suicidal charge against the Americans. Japanese Lieutenant Nebu Tatsuguchi wrote one last entry into his diary:

At 2000 we assembled in front of headquarters. The last assault is to be carried out. All patients in the hospital are to commit suicide . . . Gave 400 shots of morphine to severely wounded, and killed them . . . Finished all the patients with grenades . . . Only '33 years of living and I am to die here. I have no regrets. Banzai to the Emperor. Goodbye Tasuko, my beloved wife.⁵⁴

At three in the morning, the Japanese launched the attack. Historian Galen Perras wrote in *Stepping Stones to Nowhere*: “Smashing blindly through the American defences, the initial frenzied attack swiftly overran a medical clearing centre. Many of the prostrate American-wounded were viciously bayoneted as they lay

helplessly in their sick beds.”⁵⁵ The Japanese attack almost achieved its goal of reaching the American artillery but a hastily assembled group of engineers stopped it.⁵⁶

Historians are quick to point out that the price for this small island in the Pacific had been high. Brian Garfield wrote, “In proportion to the numbers of troops engaged, it would rank as the second most costly American battle in the Pacific Theater – second only to Iwo Jima.”⁵⁷ Perras used the same statistic. He added that only 23 Japanese were taken prisoner after the battle out of a force of 2,650.⁵⁸ On the American side, 15,000 men had landed on the island, 549 were killed, and 1,148 were wounded. Approximately 2,100 Americans suffered some kind of weather related injury, usually frostbite or trench foot.⁵⁹

The official history of the battle written for the Army by Colonel B.W. Boyes wrapped up the battle in traditional patriotic style. He wrote,

More than two thousand of the enemy had been slain; a score had been taken prisoner. Faces of many Americans were missing from the ranks – some five hundred of them had paid as dearly as man can pay to free United States' soil from the grasp of the Japanese invader. The first American amphibious action had been a victorious one. The tide of the war had set definitely against the 'Empire of the Setting Sun'.⁶⁰

The Battle of Attu was the last battle on the Aleutian campaign. The Japanese secretly abandoned the island of Kiska before the Americans could launch an invasion. The Americans used the air bases in the Aleutians to attack the Japanese homeland. On 10 July 1943, the first B-24 and B-25 bombers flew from the islands and struck military bases on the islands of Paramushiru and Shimushu. These attacks were repeated several more times as Americans continued to fight the Japanese.⁶¹

The Americans fought two enemies in the battle of Attu. The first enemy was the Japanese invaders but the second enemy was the unpredictable weather that often disrupted military operations. There were several occasions in the build up to the battle that high winds or dense fog grounded the AAF planes. Moreover, the Americans were unprepared for the bitter cold that accompanied the fighting in Attu. A report in 1945 claimed that the harsh weather had created more hardship and deaths than the Japanese forces.⁶²

Garfield wrote that the Aleutian campaign was the first American offensive campaign of the war. It was also the first amphibious landing by U. S.

forces in the war and the only occupation of American soil in the war. Garfield assesses the impact of the campaign by claiming that the lessons learned in the Aleutians led to later successes in the war. He wrote, "If the Normandy Invasion was won on the blood-washed beaches of Dieppe, then at least some part of the war in the Central Pacific was won on the steep beaches and craggy mountains of Attu."⁶³

Unfortunately, historians often overlook the Battle of Attu and the Aleutians Campaign. It was a sideshow to the much larger and probably more important Battle of Midway. Attu is not often viewed as a turning point nor was it the largest battle in the Pacific. However, for the thousands of men that fought on the frozen battlefields and for the hundreds that did not return we owe it to them to remember the events in Alaska. These relatively small battles in the Pacific had an impact in the war and contributed to the ultimate defeat of the Japanese. The only invasion of the North American continent and one of the costliest battles in the war deserves to be remembered.

Epilogue

One of the men killed at Attu was the author's great uncle. He joined the Army on 7 September 1942 and shipped out in May 1943 with the rest of the invading force. Like most of the men in the battle, it was his first fight. There is a marker on the island commemorating Roy and the other fallen American heroes. Following the war, he was re-buried in Rochester, N.Y. The original death notice was published in the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* in Rochester, New York on September 23,

Roy Van Orden

The body of Pvt. Roy Van Orden, who died at Attu on May 29, 1943, will arrive here by train on Friday evening and will be taken to the Merrill Funeral Home, 31 Geddes Street, accompanied by a military escort of the Jewell Buckman Post of the American Legion.

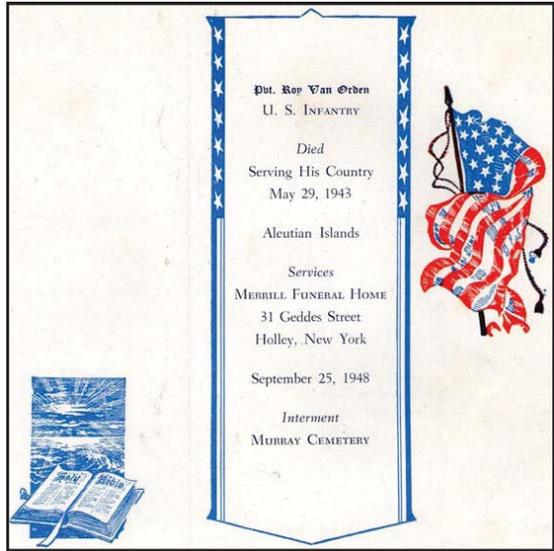
Funeral services will be held at the Merrill Funeral Home on Saturday, September 25, at 3:00 P. M., with the Rev. Paul H. Franke officiating. Interment will be made in Sandy Creek Cemetery at Murray. Bearers will be members of Jewell Buckman Post of the American Legion.

Pvt. Van Orden was inducted into the U. S. Army on September 7, 1942. He was sent out from the Pacific Coast on April 20, 1943, landed at Attu on May 11, and fought in the battle at the Engineer Hill area, where he was injured. He died in the hospital on May 29, 1943.

He is survived by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Bert Van Orden of the Ridge Road, Holley; six brothers, Arthur and James of Holley, Avery, Elmer, and Clarence of Rochester, and Claude of Albion; two sisters, Mrs. Grace Behrend of Hamlin and Mrs. James Butler of Avon; and several aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews.

1948. On the right is the original funeral notice of Roy Van Orden from the Van Orden family's personal archives.

The memory of the funeral is the first and strongest image of the war to the author's father, who was nine years old at the time of the burial. The author focused the article on the battle because he felt that *it* should be remembered, while the inclusion of his great uncle is personal.



Notes

1. Mary Kauffman, ed., "70th Anniversary of Battle of Attu Commemorated," *SitNews: Stories in the News*, June 24, 2013, accessed August 24, 2014, http://www.sitnews.us/0613News/062413/062413_attu.html.

2. Ardon Smith, "From Here You Can See Tomorrow: New! A Short History of the Battle of Attu," *ATTU, ALEUTIAN ISLANDS, AK HOMEPAGE*, February 18, 2014, accessed August 24, 2014, <http://www.hlswilliwaw.com/aleutians/attu-homepage.htm>.

3. Brian Garfield, *The Thousand-mile War: World War II in Alaska and the Aleutians* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), 5.

4. Dashiell Hammett, *The Capture of Attu: Tales of World War II in Alaska, as Told by the Men Who Fought There* (Edmonds, WA: Alaska Northwest Pub. Co., 1984), 6.

5. Garfield, *The Thousand-mile War*, 6.

6. Hammett, *The Capture of Attu*, 6.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Galen Perras, *Stepping Stones to Nowhere* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 68.

9. *Ibid.*, 69.

10. Garfield, 14.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 33.
15. Perras, *Stepping Stones to Nowhere*, 80.
16. Garfield, 50.
17. Perras, 80.
18. Ibid., 81.
19. Ibid., 82.
20. Hammett, 9.
21. Ibid.
22. "The Aleutians." *Life*, September 28, 1942, 36.
23. Perras, 88.
24. Garfield, 134.
25. Hammett, 9.
26. Garfield, 153.
27. Ibid., 160.
28. Hammett, 11.
29. Garfield, 182.
30. Hammett, 11.
31. Garfield, 192.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 216.
34. Garfield, 220.
35. Ibid., 221.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 256.
38. Perras 127.
39. Ibid.

40. Garfield, 262.

41. Ibid., 271.

42. John Pennell, "Remembering the Army's historic battle for Attu Island," accessed June 8, 2014, <http://www.usarak.army.mil/alaskapost/Archives2008/080606/Jun06Story2.asp>.

43. Ibid., 273.

44. B. W. Boyes, "Short History of the Battle of Attu," November 1, 1944, accessed June 8, 2014, <http://www.hlswilliwaw.com/aleutians/PDF/Battle%20for%20Attu.pdf>.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Garfield, 307.

49. Ibid., 313.

50. Ibid, 319.

51. Ibid, 328.

52. Ibid.

53. Perras, 133.

54. Ibid.

55. Garfield, 333.

56. Perras, 133.

57. Ibid.

48. Garfield, 307.

49. Ibid., 313.

50. Ibid, 319.

51. Ibid, 328.

52. Ibid.

53. Perras, 133.

54. Ibid.

55. Garfield, 333.

56. Parras, 133.

57. Ibid.

58. B. W. Boyes, "Short History of the Battle of Attu."

59. Hammett, 16.

60. Ibid., 6.

61. Garfield, 401.

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"War In Aleutians" *Life*. June 29, 1942, 33.