

# SHOWDOWN IN THE ALEUTIANS

*A real-life World War II story from the  
master of hard-boiled detective fiction  
By Dashiell Hammett*

*American soldiers in a gun emplacement cover their ears  
after firing shells from a 105mm howitzer at Japanese  
troops positioned in the mountains of Attu in Alaska's  
Aleutian Islands in 1943.*





## THE ALEUTIANS

*Dashiell Hammett was nearly 50 when he landed in the Aleutian Islands in the late summer of 1943. Already famous as a writer—The Maltese Falcon and The Thin Man, blockbusters both in print and on the big screen, had established him as the dean of the school of hard-boiled detective fiction—Hammett was financially well off, too, mostly. But now Hammett, a disabled World War I veteran (he'd contracted tuberculosis while serving in the Motor Ambulance Corps), had decided to do his part in the fight against Nazi Germany and fascism. In the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor he'd tried to enlist in the U.S. Army but was rejected as too old. As the war wore on and the rules were eased, though, he finally made it into the army, into Signal Corps training, and, eventually, into the remote Aleutian outposts he would come to love.*

*Sam, as he was called by his fellow enlisted men, would further distinguish himself as the founder, publisher, and editor of The Adakian, which many have called the best military service newspaper produced during World War II. He also wrote training manuals, gave lectures and radio broadcasts on the progress of the war, and delivered evening lectures on current events. But his first assignment was to produce a 24-page illustrated booklet, The Battle of the Aleutians, finished in October 1943, whose purpose was to boost morale among the 50,000 troops stationed there. This article is adapted from that booklet.*

*Ironically, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, alarmed by rumors that a known Communist Party sympathizer had somehow made his way into the U.S. military, tried to get the U.S. Army's General Staff to track Hammett down. But Hoover, for better or worse, never got his man.*

*Hammett left the military in August 1945, just before the war officially ended. He would be dogged by ill health until lung cancer killed him in 1961, at age 66.*

*Hammett, who once said that enlisting in the army in World War II was "the happiest day in my life," was buried with full military honors in Section 12 of Arlington National Cemetery.*

**O**n August 30, 1942, U.S. forces landed on Adak. The first landing boat hit the beach at daylight, 7 o'clock in the morning. It was quiet. The men had embarked prepared for almost any kind of trouble, but, 12 hours before they landed, news had come that there were no Japanese on the island. They had won their race. They had gotten there first.

And then trouble came, a williwaw, the sudden wild wind of the Aleutians. Nobody knows how hard the wind can blow along these islands where the Bering meets the Pacific. Later there was a gauge to measure the wind on Adak, but it only measured up to 110 miles an hour, and that was not always enough. The wind sometimes blew it over the top.

That first morning the wind stopped landing operations with only a portion of our force ashore and, by noon, had piled many

of the landing boats on the beach. The men ashore had no tents, no shelters of any kind. They dug holes in the ground and crawled into them for protection against wind and rain and cold.

When the wind had quieted enough to let the others come ashore, they too dug holes and lived like that while the cold, wet, and backbreaking work of unloading ships by means of small boats went on.

And they did what they had come to do. They built an airfield. They built an airfield in 12 days. Engineers, infantrymen, artillerymen alike, they drained and leveled a tidewater flat and a creek bed, and by September 12 planes were taking off. On September 14 Adak bombers scored hits on three large cargo vessels at Kiska, sank two mine-sweepers, and strafed three midget submarines and a four-motored flying boat. Hundreds of miles had been lopped off our roundtrip distance to Kiska and Attu and back—and to Paramushiru, the northern Japanese stronghold.

On September 20, an army task force occupied the island of Atka, 60 miles east of Adak. There, too, airfields, docks, and military facilities were constructed. Atka became another link in our chain of Aleutian bases.

The Japanese retaliated with token bombings of Adak on October 2 and 3. The men on the island called the enemy flier Good Time Charlie because he came over around 3 o'clock in the morning. Good Time Charlie did not worry them very much. They had built their airfield. Their job was now to maintain and protect it. They built docks and roads, and they moved from their holes to tents, and then into Quonsets and Pacific huts. They had more fuel now—and could cook food instead of living on C rations.

We had run our race for an island and won.

Our airfield on Adak was a little more than 200 miles from the Japanese on Kiska and nearly twice that distance from Attu. Planes left Adak to strike at the Japanese every day that the weather let them. But there was another island on which planes could be based only 70 miles from Kiska. This was Amchitka, one of the flattest of the Aleutians.

Scouting parties on Amchitka hid while Japanese reconnaissance planes circled overhead. In December our scouts reported that Japanese patrols had dug test holes on Amchitka, hunting for suitable airfield sites. Another race for an Aleutian island was on.

On January 12, 1943, U.S. forces landed on Amchitka. They came ashore as they had come ashore at Adak—wading through icy surf. They came ashore from jam-packed freighters and transports and barges that had sailed and been towed through long days and nights of fog and storm.

Again bad weather had no favorites. It kept the Japanese planes home at their bases and played havoc with our shipping. Not until 12 days later were our Amchitka forces attacked from the air. And they made good use of those 12 days.

It was the story of Adak over again. Men toiling without rest





*A supply truck manned by American sailors drives off the back of a landing craft tank docked on the Attu shoreline in 1943.*



in winter rain and wind, in the bitter cold surf of Constantine Harbor, through black Aleutian mud, over hard rock and heavy tundra. Unloading, carrying ashore, storing, protecting arms, ammunition, food, equipment, fuel even to the smallest kindling. No one who has not seen it can have any conception of

**And these men did what they had come to do. They built their airfield.**

the tremendous quantity of supplies and equipment that must be moved from ship to shore. And, once ashore, all this vast mountain of material had to be transported by hand. Vehicles were of little use in those all-important early days of the occupation.

And these men did what they had come to do. They built their airfield. From January 24 on, Japanese planes

scouted and bombed Amchitka whenever weather permitted. But by February 18 a new fighter strip was ready for Warhawks and Lightnings. The Japanese bombers came over no more.

The occupation of Amchitka, like the occupation of Adak five months before, let us still further increase the pressure on the Japanese at Attu and Kiska. Within two months our reconnaissance and bombing missions had forced the enemy to give up attempts to bring reinforcements and supplies to Attu and Kiska by surface vessels.

Aerial photographs taken on January 19 had revealed the beginnings of an enemy fighter strip south of Salmon Lagoon, on Kiska. This strip—and another strip begun at about the same time as Attu—were the targets for constant attacks throughout the spring. As a result of these constant attacks, and of our success in keeping supply ships from bringing adequate machinery to the islands, the Japanese failed to finish either airfield.

With the occupation of Amchitka, the stage was set for a new phase in the Aleutian campaign. We had been racing the Japanese for island bases. Now we were next door to the Japanese-held base of Kiska. Attu, the only other base the Japanese held in the Aleutians, was nearly 200 miles farther away. Either island would have to be taken by force. And Kiska was the more important of the two, as well as the more accessible.

It was decided to bypass Kiska and take Attu first. For this there were two reasons: (1) The Japanese were expecting us to attack Kiska, and (2) with Attu in our hands we would have the Japs on Kiska—not surrounded, for with the weather as violent as it is in the Aleutians no island can ever be kept surrounded—but pinched between our bases.

The Japanese had occupied Attu in June 1942. In mid-September a Jap infantry battalion moved from Attu to Kiska. Our air reconnaissance first reported this movement on September 22. It is probable that the Japanese either evacuated Attu completely or withdrew most of their forces at that time.

In late October a reoccupation force from Japan reached Attu. Beach defenses were immediately constructed in both arms of Holtz Bay, and the Japanese garrison was reinforced from time to time until March 1943. By then there were about 2,200 men in the garrison.

The most important mission of the Japanese garrison on Attu—aside from defense of the island—was the construction of an airfield at the East Arm of Holtz Bay. Thanks to Adak and Amchitka, our mastery of the air kept them from accomplishing that mission.

Attu is about 40 miles long, 20 wide, and its highest peak rises more than 3,000 feet above the sea.

On May 11, 1943, after being delayed four days by bad weather, U.S. forces landed on the island.

From the very beginning the Japanese were on the defensive and made the most of the terrain for that purpose.

The occupied portion of Attu was divided by the Japanese into two main defense sectors: the Holtz Bay sector, and the Chichagof sector, which included Massacre Bay and Sarana Bay.

Although they must have expected a landing at Massacre Bay, the Japanese had not organized beach defenses in that area. Instead they chose to defend the high ground at the northern end of Massacre Bay, 3,000 or 4,000 yards inland, and the valleys leading to Chichagof Harbor.

The beaches of Chichagof Harbor and Holtz Bay were strongly defended against frontal attacks, but no protection was given to the area immediately north of Holtz Bay, and some of our forces landed there unopposed. In general, the enemy used the same tactics he had used in the Southwest Pacific. Though he lacked foliage and tropical growth, he prepared excellent camouflaged positions, and dotted the terrain with fox holes, two-man caves, and light machine gun and mortar positions.

Enemy rifle fire was generally inaccurate, and the sniping, though annoying, was never a serious hindrance to our progress. But, in the early stages of the fight, small groups of Japanese with light machine guns and the so-called knee mortar often had our troops hugging the ground, unable to advance.

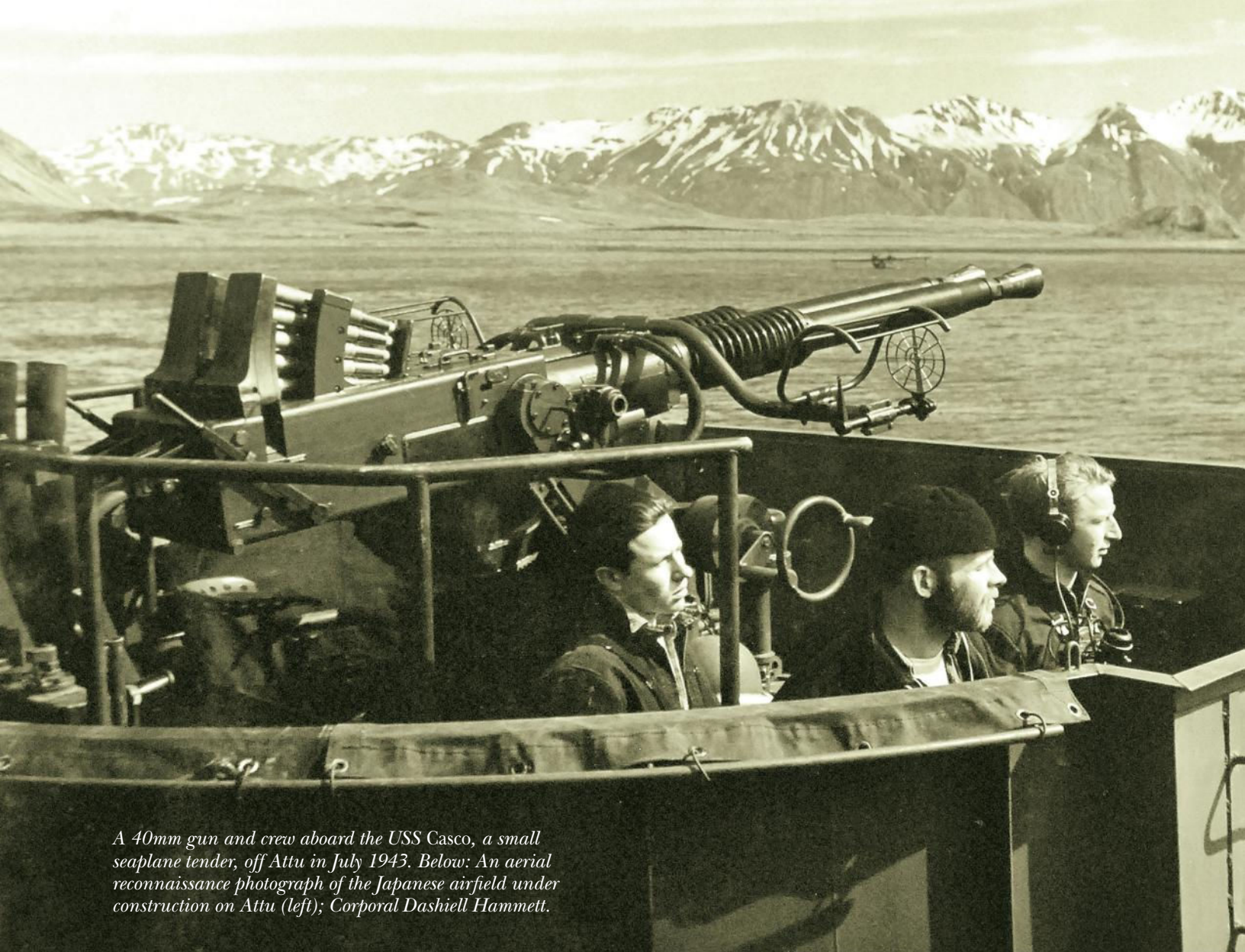
The constant use of “small group” tactics forced us to search thoroughly every square foot of area to our rear as well as on our flanks. Japanese would lie motionless for hours at a time. Their rifles and machine guns gave out no flash, no smoke, to betray their positions.

The enemy on repeated occasions counterattacked against superior numbers in daylight, though it has been said that the Japanese attack only at night.

The much-discussed fanatically reckless fighting spirit was shown by the small number of prisoners we took, by their killing their wounded rather than letting them fall into our hands, and by such desperate kill-or-be-killed assaults as that of May 29, in which every Japanese who could walk took part, some armed only with bayonets tied on the end of sticks.

A last attempt to aid the Attu garrison by a formation of 16 Japanese bombers was blocked by Eleventh Air Force fighters.





*A 40mm gun and crew aboard the USS Casco, a small seaplane tender, off Attu in July 1943. Below: An aerial reconnaissance photograph of the Japanese airfield under construction on Attu (left); Corporal Dashiell Hammett.*





Only four of the enemy planes escaped destruction. They fled in the fog.

The annihilation of the Japanese at Chichagof Harbor was completed on Memorial Day, May 30, 1943.

On July 10 U.S. planes took off from Attu—to bomb Paramushiru.

With Attu in our hands the Japanese occupation of Kiska was doomed. And the Japanese knew it as well as we did.

Kiska was first occupied on June 5, 1942, by a special landing party of 500 Japanese marines. At the same time some 20 Japanese ships, including four transports, moved into Kiska Harbor.

In September the Kiska garrison was reinforced by about 2,000 additional personnel, and, at about this time, was placed under the command of Rear Admiral Monzo Akiyama. Shortly afterward an infantry battalion was moved to Kiska from Attu. In December 1942 and January 1943 additional antiaircraft units, engineers, and infantry arrived at Kiska, and in the

spring of 1943 the tactical command was transferred from the Imperial Navy to Lieutenant General Motoya Higuchi, commanding general of the Northern Army.

Japanese fighter and reconnaissance plane replenishments, boxed and crated, came to the island on the decks of small plane transports carrying seven to nine planes each trip. By air com-

bat and by strafing planes on the ground, the Eleventh Air Force whittled the Japanese air strength down as fast as new planes could be brought in. At no time during the enemy occupation of Kiska did he have more than 14 effective planes on hand.

March and April 1943 saw increasingly severe bombing attacks on Kiska. On March 26 a light U.S. naval force engaged a heavier enemy fleet and foiled an effort to run supply ships into Attu or Kiska. This was probably the last known Japanese attempt to supply either island by large surface vessels. Enemy submarine activity in the waters around Kiska increased in late spring and early summer but was unsuccessful. A number of subs were sunk by our naval forces.

Bad weather and our concentration on Attu gave Kiska some rest in May. But after Attu fell we went to work on Kiska in earnest. Throughout June and July the intensity of our attack increased almost daily.

During the first six months of 1943 the Eleventh Air Force dropped more than 3,000,000 pounds of bombs on the enemy installations. After the fall of Attu this deadly power was concentrated on Kiska. Nearly 900,000 pounds of bombs were dropped on that island in July.

Demolition, general purpose, incendiary, and parachute

fragmentation bombs were released from high level, medium level, deck level, and dive approaches. Fuzes ranged from instantaneous to long delay. Liberators, Mitchells, Dauntless dive-bombers, Lightnings, and Warhawks swooped over Kiska in coordinated and determined attacks. Kiska Island was to be made untenable.

The first indication of a possible Japanese attempt at evacuation came on July 10, when a navy PBY spotted four small cargo vessels between Kiska and Japan. Mitchells and Liberators sank one, left one sinking, and damaged the other two.

In aerial photographs taken over Kiska from June 22 on, other evidence of what might be preparations for evacuation were seen. This evidence included the destruction of some barracks, the removal of some guns, and unusual activity among barges in Kiska Harbor. On July 28 the Kiska radio went off the air. Later aerial photos showed trucks parked in the same position day after day. Naval shelling of Japanese installations drew no answering fire, and Eleventh Air Force units had only small-arms fire to contend with.

Presumably the main body of Japanese troops had finished its evacuation of Kiska during the night of July 28, going by barge to waiting surface ships or submarines.

At daylight of August 15, 1943, U.S. and Canadian troops occupied Kiska. Even those enemy detachments responsible for the small-arms fire reported by planes over the island after July 28 had cleared out.

Major General Eugene M. Landrum commanded the ground force that occupied Adak. Later, he led the American troops to victory on Attu.

The Aleutian Islands are the tops of submerged mountain peaks—a 1,000-mile westward extension of the high volcanic ranges of the Alaska Peninsula. Some of these submerged peaks rise more than four miles from the ocean bed; there are few places where the ocean is deeper than here. Once upon a time, long ago, this now sunken range may have been a land-bridge from Asia to America over which America's prehistoric inhabitants slowly made their way east to this new land.

Now we have made of these islands a road over which we may swiftly make our way to Asia.

The Eleventh Air Force—with many strong bases on the Aleutians—is now the northern arm of a gigantic many-armed air force pincer closing on the Japanese Empire: the Seventh Air Force in the Hawaiian Islands, the Thirteenth Air Force in the Solomon Islands, the Fifth Air Force in New Guinea, the Tenth Air Force in India, the Fourteenth Air Force in China.

Elements of the Eleventh Air Force have already struck at the strong Japanese military and naval installations on Paramushiru and Shimushu. On July 10, 1943, and again on July 18, August 11 and (only a few days before this account was written) on September 11, B-24 and B-25 planes made bombing runs, dropping about 115,000 pounds of bombs on these Japanese targets.

The story of the Aleutians in this war is not yet finished. **MHQ**

**With Attu in our hands the Japanese occupation of Kiska was doomed.**





*Top: American soldiers landing at Holtz Bay find a downed Nakajima A6M2-N floatplane fighter—a victim of Army Air Corps marksmanship. Bottom: An advance reconnaissance patrol on Kiska Island cautiously approaches the mouth of a 200-foot tunnel dug by the Japanese.*

