CHAPTER 6

HELL ON ICE

ALEUTIAN CAMPAIGN, JUNE 1942–AUGUST 1943

Setting the Stage

Harking back to early 1942, Japanese forces controlled the Central Pacific and Southwest Pacific, occupied much of China's east coast and threatened northern Australia from bases in the South Solomon Islands and New Guinea. The destruction of U.S., British, and Dutch bases completed the first of two phases of Japan's overall strategic plan for control of the Pacific. The second phase was to "enlarge and secure" the strategic positions gained in the first phase and force a speedy end to the conflict by keeping the enemy always on the defensive.[1] This included invading the Aleutians, Midway, Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia. The way the islands are situated meant that they could provide mutual and overlapping support for each other using air or naval assets, thereby creating a protective shield for the Empire of the Rising Sun. The aim of the phase was to expand the Japanese perimeter in order to secure new gains, sever U.S.–Australian lines of communication, and provide a buffer against enemy attacks. The buffer would also mean that the Japanese would have early warning of enemy attacks. Japan saw the Aleutians as a strategic location capable of protecting Midway's flank from a northern attack.[2]

In the spring of 1942 the Japanese Imperial High Command, Imperial Army, and Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto developed a two-prong plan to occupy strategic points in the Western Aleutians as well as Midway Island on the western tip of the Hawaiian chain of islands. Yamamoto envisioned these two sites as anchors for a defensive perimeter in the north and central Pacific. By using the Aleutians and then Midway as bait, Yamamoto intended to lure the U.S. fleet, including the carriers he missed during the Pearl Harbor attack, from Pearl Harbor and annihilate it before new construction could replace the losses sustained on December 7, 1941.

Yamamoto's Midway invasion fleet included 176 warships and auxiliaries including four large and two small aircraft carriers. The Northern Area Fleet, commanded by Vice Admiral Boshiro Hosogaya, with a force of two small aircraft carriers (*Junyo* and *Ryujo*), five cruisers, 12 destroyers, six

submarines, and four troop transports, along with supporting auxiliary ships, left the Kurile Islands to attack the Aleutians. By assigning two carriers to the Northern Area Fleet, Yamamoto's available carrier aircraft strength was reduced during the fight for Midway on June 4–5. Initially, the Aleutian gambit was only to be a diversion and not a sustained mission lasting through the winter.

The plan was that the Northern Area Fleet would first launch an air attack against Dutch Harbor, Alaska, then follow it with an amphibious attack on the island of Adak, 480 miles to the west. After destroying the reported American base on Adak (there was, in fact, no base on Adak), his troops were to return to their ships and become a reserve for two additional landings: the first on Kiska, 240 miles west of Adak, the other on the Aleutians' westernmost island, Attu, 180 miles from Kiska.

On June 3, 1942, as Japanese and U.S. aircraft fought for survival and dominance in the clear blue skies west of Midway Island, far to the north other Japanese carrier aircraft sought to destroy American forces in fog-bound Dutch Harbor.

However, as at Midway, the Americans knew a Japanese task force was in the area so the attack was no surprise, partly because the U.S. cryptographers had broken the Japanese Purple Code and were reading at least some of the Japanese Navy signals. However, they didn't know exactly when the attack would be launched.

At 0545 on June 3, 17 Japanese bombers and fighters reached Dutch Harbor. Several fighters swept over Fort Mears and the naval installations at Dutch Harbor in a strafing run. Ten minutes later the first of four waves of bombers attacked the area. The attackers ran into a hailstorm of antiaircraft fire, which shot down two planes. Four Japanese seaplanes, launched from two cruisers, flew over Umnak. P-40 Warhawk fighters from the 11th Squadron attacked them. Lieutenant John B. Murphy with Lieutenant Jacob W. Dixon immediately shot one plane down into the Umnak Pass at the end of the runway and another was damaged.

The attack destroyed a Navy barracks, killing 25 men, and damaged a Navy patrol plane. The Japanese lost three planes shot down, another seaplane crashed near its cruiser, and an unknown number crashed into the sea.

Two PBY-5A Catalina amphibians, one from VP-41 piloted by Lieutenant Junior Grade Jean Cusick and the other from VP-42 piloted by Lieutenant Junior Grade Lucius Campbell, were in the skies during the morning of June 3. At 1000 Cusick was on the return leg of his regular patrol, 200 miles from Dutch Harbor, when "Zeros" from *Junyo* attacked. Bullets knocked out

Cusick's starboard engine, setting the wing on fire, destroyed the radio and wounded Cusick in his shoulder. The attack happened so quickly there was no time for Cusick's radioman to transmit a contact report. Helped by his copilot, Cusick safely landed the burning aircraft. Although the five-man crew survived the landing, Cusick died of his wounds and one crewman died from hypothermia in the icy water. The Japanese cruiser *Takao* picked up the three remaining crewmen.

Campbell had slightly better luck. He sighted five enemy vessels about 80 miles off Umnak Island and transmitted a warning to Dutch Harbor before diving into cloud cover. However, he was too late and fire from the "Zeros" hit his plane before it reached safety. Machine-gun and 20mm explosive cannon fire quickly reduced the PBY into a flying wreck. Bullets cut the rudder control cables, wounded one of Campbell's waist gunners, Aviation Machinist Mate Third Class B. T. Gillis, in the thigh, and stitched holes in the starboard gas tanks, setting the plane on fire. Despite flying a seriously crippled plane, Campbell successfully made it safely down, only to start sinking as water poured in through the shot-up fuselage. The radioman repaired his equipment, which had been damaged by gunfire, and sent out an SOS and another contact report. The Coast Guard cutter *Nemaha*, patrolling nearby as part of Admiral Theobald's early-warning line, picked up Campbell's SOS/contact report and headed in the direction of the signal. It was three days later, when *Nemaha* put into the Shumagin islands, that Campbell found out his two reports had been too garbled to read.[3]

June 4 brought rain and low visibility, hampering U.S. search efforts and delaying the follow-on Japanese attack. Only one wave was launched, consisting of a total of 15 Mitsubishi A5M Type 96 "Zeke" fighters (the carrier version of the Mitsubishi A6M "Zero") and 11 Aichi D3A "Val" dive-bombers from both carriers and six Nakajima B5N "Kate" torpedo planes, loaded with bombs, from *Ryujo*.

At 1800**,** ten of the fighters swept over the naval air station at Dutch Harbor in a strafing attack, followed by the 11 dive-bombers, whose bombs inflicted considerable damage upon fuel installations and upon *Northwestern*, a station ship that was being used as barracks. Ten minutes later three more bombers unsuccessfully attacked. Finally, at 1825, five more were overhead, killing four naval personnel as their bombs struck an antiaircraft emplacement.

Junyo's strike group did not know about a secret U.S. airstrip that was located on Umnak Island, and had selected a rally point at the west end of Unalaska Island. There, four dive-bombers and four fighters met eight P-40s of the 11th Squadron's forward echelon. The action occurred directly over

Umnak, and because of their lack of advance information about the island's installations the Japanese lost two dive-bombers and two fighters, which were shot down by Lieutenants Chancellor, Dale, White, and J. J. Cape. Unfortunately, Cape in turn was shot down by a "Zeke" fighter, while one other P-40 crashed on the island – its pilot, Lieutenant Winfield E. McIntyre, walked unaided into camp. Antiaircraft fire claimed another bomber, and one more bomber failed to reach home apparently because its radio receiver, which had been knocked out in the action at Umnak, failed. All other planes got back to their carriers.

During the afternoon two B-17 and five B-24 bombers attacked the carrier force, and three more B-26s struck the cruiser *Takao*. No hits were scored and two bombers failed to return.

By the end of June 4, U.S. forces on Unalaska Island had lost 750,000 barrels of diesel oil; 43 had died at Dutch Harbor (33 of them Army personnel, the rest civilians); and about 50 were wounded. The Army Air Force had lost two P-40s in action, one B-17 that had been shot down, and one B-26 that was lost. Additionally, one B-26 was damaged by antiaircraft fire, and one was wrecked in landing. Finally, one LB-30 Consolidated four-engine bomber was wrecked at Kodiak. A total of 78 aircrew were lost in operations over the two days. However, for the defenders the most critical loss was that of radar equipment, for which spare parts were not available except at the cost of radar sets scheduled for delivery to South Pacific bases.

Nine of the Navy's patrolling PBYs were also lost to the "Zekes". After 40 hours of almost continuous operations in wretched weather, pilots and crews were at the limit of their endurance and only 14 of the original 23 planes remained operational. Japanese combat losses for the two days were about ten aircraft.[4]

Following his defeat at Midway, Yamamoto decided to continue the invasion of the western Aleutians. However, the attack on Adak was cancelled as faulty intelligence indicated it was occupied by a large U.S. force.

Japanese Kiska and Attu Occupations

On June 6 at 2227 the Japanese No. 3 Special Landing Party and 500 Marines went ashore at Kiska, capturing a ten-man U.S. Naval Weather Detachment (and a puppy named Explosion, who later escaped).[*] [5] Two men, Aerographer's Mate Second Class W. M. Winfrey and Radioman Third Class M. L. Courtenay, were wounded in the attack on their radio shack. One man, Aerographer's Mate

First Class William C. House managed to get away from the base. The Japanese believed that he had starved or frozen and soon forgot about him.

Fifty days later he surrendered, making the following statement to his captors:

> Is it 50-odd days? I kept track of the days at first but in the end I forgot. I wandered here and there around the shore of the island, and at times I slept at the foot of the mountain, covering myself with dry weeds, and at times slept in the caves near the shore. During the nights, the wind and the snow blew away the dry grass which I used to cover myself and I thought that I would die of cold … though I existed by eating grass which grew along the shore. I couldn't bear it any longer, so I surrendered. Please look at these skinny legs.

House weighed 80 pounds and his thigh was no larger than a child's arm.[6]

At 0300 on June 7, the 301st Independent Infantry Battalion landed in Holtz Bay, Attu. The island's population consisted of 45 indigenous Aleuts, and two Americans: Charles Foster Jones, a 60-year-old amateur radio operator and weather observer, and his 62-year-old wife, Etta Jones, a teacher and trained nurse. They both worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and lived in the little village of Chichagof Harbor, which consisted of houses around the harbor where Jones had a radio.

The Joneses were not expecting the Japanese when some men debarked from a huge transport off Chichagof Harbor. Earlier, word had come that an American ship was due to evacuate all the people on Attu. A few soldiers or sailors would maintain the radio station and continue to send weather reports. The Joneses simply mistook the Japanese ship for this vessel.

A short time later Mrs. Jones heard a series of rifle shots echo through the valley. Almost immediately afterwards a woman rushed into her cabin and cried, "The Japs are here!" Mrs. Jones quickly looked out the window to see the Japanese pouring over the hills surrounding the valley, shooting as they came and yelling wildly. Some of the locals were wounded by the haphazard fire, but none seriously.

Even as bullets hit the cabin windows and walls, Mr. Jones was transmitting messages to Dutch Harbor. When the Japanese were almost in the house, he walked out and gave himself up. Right after Mr. Jones gave himself up an officer thrust himself into the cabin and confronted Mrs. Jones with a bayonet. He poked the bayonet against her body and asked in English, "How many are here?"

"Two," Etta replied. "How many have you?"

"Two thousand," was the answer.

Early the next morning Mr. Jones was taken to the Japanese commander for further questioning. That was the last time Mrs. Jones saw her husband alive. She never learnt how he was killed.

Mrs. Jones and the remaining Aleut population were at first held prisoner and later sent to Japan along with the Americans captured on Kiska.[7] After securing both islands without loss the Japanese began setting up defensive positions and building an airstrip on Kiska.

Although Midway was a great victory for the U.S., Admiral Nimitz had lost two of his four carriers. On June 11, he decided not to risk them against the Japanese carriers and land-based planes flying from Attu and Kiska. Therefore, initially the only assets the U.S. had available to fight back with were Army Air Force bombers, Navy Catalinas and Navy warships. These quickly went on the offensive, and on June 11 the 11th Air Force bombers struck for the first time. Five B-24s and five B-17s hit Kiska harbor installations and shipping. Low-altitude runs scored near misses on two cruisers and a destroyer at the cost of one B-24 shot down. Four Japanese fighters chased the other B-24s back to Umnak where U.S. fighters drove them off.

The next day shipping in Kiska Harbor was bombed by six B-17s and one B-24, which damaged a heavy cruiser and a destroyer. Despite the lack of significant results, operations continued unabated. So far most of the losses had been to enemy action. However, on June 19 weather claimed a bomber and two of its crew. The pilot Major Ira F. Wintermute related what happened.[8]

> On our first mission we started in a flight of three B-24 Liberators. The weather wasn't bad, but halfway to Kiska we ran into a solid front of fog. We couldn't see anything and felt hemmed in by some evil genie.
>
> I asked Lieutenant H. T. "Peewee" Freeman, navigator, what course to fly and he gave me a heading. My copilot, R. A. Ryden, kept saying, "We'll make it," and told the crew members to quit worrying. I asked the radio operator to contact something – anything – and said to the crew, "We're lost."
>
> There was a dead silence. The crew sat back on the flight deck and prayed silently. I did some praying myself, and kept hoping. We were pretty young; I was 27 and probably the oldest. We didn't have much fuel and flying-time left. Ryden and I talked about how to land in the ocean.

Knowing we couldn't make it back to Kiska, we dropped our bombs to lighten our load and make our fuel last longer. Three hours later, we broke through the fog but could see nothing but ocean. There was no way of knowing whether we were north or south of the island chain. Hour after hour, we flew in wide circles trying to catch a radio signal or sight of land. Nothing!

We had been flying 14 hours and were exhausted. It was time to ditch. "Peewee" gathered maps, Ryden removed the compass in case we needed to do some ocean navigating and others gathered drinking water. The eight of us gathered on the flight deck near the emergency-exit hatch and started to nose down. The plane plowed into the sea and up-ended on its nose. From then on every man was on his own!

Water poured over the top of the plane. It was pitch-dark under the water as I unbuckled my safety belt and started for the hatch. The next thing I knew, I was on top of the water. I swam to a wing and thought I saw all of the crew swimming. Our assistant engineer, Staff Sgt. R. P. Hicks released and inflated our two life rafts. In the last minute before the plane went down, we counted heads. Only six! Two were gone.

We were on those two rafts, tied together, for 18 hours without food or water. Soaking wet, we huddled together to escape the bite of the freezing wind that whipped across the waves. Most of us were sick either because of the motion or from swallowing salt water. No one slept – just sat there like dead men.

The next morning, we brought out paddles and started to push toward what we thought was land. Suddenly, someone yelled, "I hear a plane!" We screamed, "Why don't they see us?" or "Please God, see us!" We got out some flares and started shooting them like mad, cussing when some didn't go off. Finally the plane, a big Navy consolidated patrol boat headed our way. We thanked God for the PBY and cheered the Navy.

When my crew finally did find clear enough weather to get over Kiska to bomb, we found it was definitely a game for keeps. After unloading our eggs and starting back, we were generally attacked by "Zeke" fighters who would rather kill us than save their own necks. They had no regard at all for their own lives.

Air strikes alone weren't going to dislodge the Japanese. The bombers and Catalinas had to fly long distances from their bases and missions were often aborted due to heavy fog and unpredictable bad weather. The same weather

plagued U.S. Navy warships trying to shell Japanese bases. The weather, terrain, and long distances made the Aleutians one of the worst places in the world to fight a war.

Aleutian Islands: Geography, Terrain, and Weather

The Aleutians stretch 1,200 miles from mainland Alaska to Attu, the westernmost American island, and encompass approximately 120 islands. In a straight-line measurement, Dutch Harbor on Unalaska Island lies roughly 675 miles east of Kiska, and 850 east of Attu, but it’s rare to travel in a straight line due to weather and navigation hazards.

The islands are volcanic in origin, uniformly rocky and barren, with precipitous mountains and little vegetation. The mountains are conical in shape and covered with volcanic ash which resembles cinders. There are no trees on the islands, except a few stunted spruces at Dutch Harbor, and no brush. The lowlands are blanketed with muskeg (a grassy bog), which can be up to 3ft thick. This growth forms a spongy carpet which makes walking difficult and driving mechanical vehicles a nightmare. Below the muskeg is volcanic ash which has been finely ground and water soaked until it has the consistency of slime. In many places water is trapped in ponds under the muskeg. The bogs are deep enough to swallow up a man.

Throughout the Aleutians jagged shorelines and submerged rock formations render sea navigation hazardous. Conditions are least unfavorable in the eastern islands. Unalaska has two comparatively good anchorages, Dutch Harbor and Captain’s Bay, while Umnak has three, of which Nikolski Bay on the west coast is the most important. Farther west, protected anchorages are scarce: Atka has two fair harbors; Adak has three small bays on the west coast; and Amchitka offers one small bay on the east coast. Neither Kiska nor Attu possesses a harbor that is entirely suitable for larger vessels. Kiska has a broad, moderately deep indentation on the eastern shore, which is protected by Little Kiska Island, lying across its mouth. Attu has four less adequately guarded bays − Holtz, Chichagof, and Sarana on the northeast side, and Massacre Bay on the southeast.

Weather conditions become progressively worse as the western end of the island chain is approached. On Attu five or six days a week are likely to be rainy, and there are rarely more than ten clear days a year. The rest of the time, for the most part, even if rain is not falling, fog of varying density covers the islands. The weather is highly localized, however, and areas of high visibility

will often be found within 20 miles of fog concentration.

Dense cloud cover hovers over the Aleutians 90 percent of the time in summer and 50 percent in winter. Between 60 and 70 percent of the time the ceiling is below 1,000ft, with only two to four clear days per month during June to August. In the winter months rain, sleet, and snow, often in combination, make the islands one of the most uncomfortable regions of the world.

Throughout the islands annual rainfall averages 40 to 50in, spread over most of the year. Precipitation is rarely heavy, but reaches a peak in fall and early winter. On average it rains 260 days a year.

A special hazard to sea and air navigation are the "williwaws" (gusts of wind) that sweep down from the mountainous area with great force, sometimes travelling in excess of 100mph. The columns of spray and mist resulting from the williwaws frequently resemble huge waterfalls. Winds generally are gusty because the steep mountain slopes deflect the air currents. In the Aleutians, curiously enough, winds and fogs may persist together for many days at a time.

The warm currents of the Pacific Ocean meet the icy waters of the Bering Sea at the Aleutian chain, causing many of the unique weather conditions in the region. Average temperatures for the summer can range from 40 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit (4.5 to 15.5 degrees Centigrade), with 20 to 40 degree Fahrenheit (-6.5 to 4.5 degrees Centigrade) temperatures in the winter. The wind chill factor, however, can be a major casualty producer at any time of year.

While the Aleutian weather was a constant impediment to the military operations of the United States and Japan alike, the Japanese enjoyed one advantage – weather in the northern hemisphere moves from west to east with the result that the Japanese always knew in advance what conditions were likely to prevail in the islands.[9] However, this advantage did them little good in their defense of the islands.

The U.S. Counteroffensive

Adak

While Army Air Force bombers and Navy Catalinas engaged in an unrelenting air campaign, plans were made to construct bases on Adak, which was within 250 miles of Amchitka Island, almost 300 miles from Attu and 246 miles east of Kiska.

Adak D-Day was slated for August 30 and the landing site would be Kuluk Bay. The expeditionary force was composed of an odd assortment including transports, a few old freighters, a fishing scow or two, several converted barges, a side-wheel paddle river boat, and a little tug hauling a four-masted schooner loaded with gas. This ramshackle collection would transport the 4,500-strong assault force from the 4th Infantry Division.[10]

However, before the landings could take place a reconnaissance mission was needed to locate suitable sites for an airstrip. On August 28 the U.S. submarines USS *Triton* and USS *Tuna* surfaced four miles due east of Kuluk Bay and a 37-man U.S. Army intelligence-gathering unit, led by Colonel Lawrence Varsi Castner, disembarked. The unit was known as “The Alaska Scouts,” or more affectionately as “Castner’s Cutthroats,” and it was a unit unlike any in the U.S. Army since Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders in the Spanish American War. Led by Castner, an Army intelligence officer, the band was created and organized to give the Army a unit that was fully functional with only minimal outfitting. Castner chose men with the skills to flourish in the tough conditions of the Alaskan wilderness, including native Aleuts and Eskimos, sourdough prospectors, hunters, trappers, and fishermen. Their backgrounds in survival and hunting made them ideal scouts. Hard and dangerous men, their names were often in keeping with their unit’s nickname – names such as “Bad Whiskey Red,” “Aleut Pete,” and “Waterbucket Ben.”

Thirty-six hours before the scheduled landings on August 30, Navy Aerographer’s Mate Paul E. “The Black Irishman” Carrigan and Aviation Third Class Radioman Red Cochrane paddled a rubber raft ashore at Kuluk Bay. A couple hundred pounds of equipment, a BAR, and a Thompson submachine gun were dropped from a PBY and the men were given orders to send weather and surf observations every three hours.

Carrigan recalled what happened when his commanding officer, Lieutenant John F. Tatom, suggested they take weapons:

> “You’d best be armed, just in case,” Tatom answered.
>
> “But there aren’t any Nips on Adak are there?”
>
> “We don’t believe there are at this moment but we have evidence they have visited the island several times. Colonels Castner and Verbeek with three dozen of their Alaska Scouts went ashore tonight from two submarines. They are combing the island to make certain.”
>
> I’d seen Colonel Lawrence v. Castner, Lieutenant Colonel William J. Verbeck, and a few of their deadly efficient looking native Alaska commandos at the Dutch Harbor weather office several times during

> the past spring and summer. They had a reputation of slitting throats first, hence their nickname: Castner's Cutthroats. The thought of them sneaking around silently in the night and stumbling upon me sent a chill up my spine. I wanted to ensure there would be no case of mistaken identity in the coming operation.
>
> "Does Colonel Castner know that the radioman and I will to be on the island?"
>
> "Not at present," Tatom admitted, "but I'll have the PBY pilot try and locate Castner and let him know."
>
> My skepticism must have showed because Tatom was quick to add, "You'll be there alone only one night if everything goes as planned. There's nothing to worry about."[11]

During the night of August 29–30, Carrigan and Cochrane huddled in a cold, soggy tent, their only food unheated field rations. Carrigan picks up the story of what happened on D-Day:

> The wind continued to mount in fury and howl forlornly. On one observation I recorded a southeasterly wind speed of 52 knots. It was a miserable night without sleep but fortunately our tent didn't blow down.
>
> Instead of breaking, dawn of August 30, 1942 was more a graying of black. We stepped outside into horizontally slashing rain. Kuluk Bay's waters were whipped into a white froth. At six second intervals, swells that I estimated to be seven feet high were crashing with a roar onto the landing beach. I took an observation and we transmitted. Afterward, we relaxed, certain that the occupation of Adak would be postponed because of surf and weather conditions.

This was not to be the case, though. The official U.S. Army and Army Air Force publications[12] report the landing as unopposed by Japanese forces, which is true. However, that did not mean that the landings were not costly in terms of men and material. Carrigan was there and recalled the experience:

> Because of the high surf and wind conditions this was predictably and rapidly turning into a disaster. Even if the monstrous surf line had been parallel to shore the situation would have been dangerously difficult for landing craft coxswains to maintain control throughout the three steps of beaching, unloading, and backing off. With these breakers crashing onto the beach at a forty-five degree angle it was virtually impossible

for coxswains to complete all three phases without mishap.

Landing craft were broaching one after another. Some were swamping in the high surf and drifting ashore only to be rammed by others that did not have time to stop or back off. One barge that had disgorged its load of men and backed off safely was hit by a fully loaded landing craft on the way in. This empty craft sank. Red and I saw several others sink as well. One landing craft grounded fifty yards farther offshore than the others when it ran upon a submerged object. When I looked in that direction later this craft was no longer there. That afternoon a soldier told Red that this landing craft also sank. Its boatload of soldiers was forced to jump from the doomed craft into water far over their heads. Some of these men were rescued by landing craft but many others went under with their hundred pound combat packs and drowned.*

Wrecked landing craft washed ashore broadside in the crashing surf. Landing barges carrying supplies and equipment started coming in and this added to the confusion as many got into trouble and either wrecked or sank. Red and I helped two soldiers ashore. Both were crawling weakly on hands and knees in the battering surf. Beyond, I could see several soldiers lying face down on the beach. I could not tell if they were in a state of exhaustion or had drowned. Other soldiers were being given artificial respiration. Through the mass of humanity jammed on the narrow shore it appeared that these scenes were repeated at intervals along the entire beach.

I have no idea what the total casualty figure was on the unopposed landing at Kuluk Bay, Adak on August 30, 1942 but it must have been considerable. In materiel alone the cost was high. At the time, I heard that twenty-three of the first twenty-five landing craft broached and either wrecked or sank. Although I didn’t count the smashed, swamped hulks littering the shore I had no reason to doubt this figure. This avoidable tragedy was never made public.

That is hardly surprising because even on Adak the official stance seemed to be that it never happened. Whether a candid report exists in some dusty file would be conjecture. Volcanic peaks were not the only things shrouded in Aleutian fogs and mists.

What was the point in having me send accurate weather reports if they were to be totally ignored? Why wasn’t the landing delayed until the surf subsided? What was the great hurry? It had all been so senseless and costly. The more I thought about these nagging questions the sadder

I felt and the madder I got at Tatom.[13]

No casualty figures were released for losses suffered by those units forced to come ashore on that rocky beach in high surf.

The objective of securing Adak was to build an airfield. However, due to the mountainous terrain no acceptable site was available to build a landing strip. Instead, Castner's Cutthroats dammed a lagoon, drained it, and used the sandy bottom floor as a temporary landing strip. Later, Army engineers improved the area and, in a herculean effort, completed the airfield by September 12. Two days later the first B-24s hit Kiska from their new base.[14]

The next step was Amchitka, located less than 300 miles from Attu and roughly 74 miles southeast of Kiska.

Amchitka

Autumn had passed before naval and ground forces could be gathered for the landing. Final approval wasn't granted by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff until December 18. The operation was set for January 5, 1943, but, having learned from previous operations not to depend on the weather cooperating, this time the final date would be determined by weather conditions. On December 18, a Navy PBY landed Lieutenant Colonel Alvin E. Hebert and a small party of Army engineers on Amchitka. After a two-day survey, the engineers reported that a steel-mat fighter strip could be constructed in two to three weeks. Sites also existed for a main airfield with some dispersion on which a runway 200ft by 5,000ft could be built in three to four months.

For this operation the transport group consisted of the Coast Guard-manned USS *Arthur Middleton* (commanded by Captain Paul K. Perry, USCG), the Army transport S.S. *Delarof*, the merchant ship S.S. *Lakona*, and the cargo vessel *Vega* (Commander Arthur C. Smith). Protection was provided by the destroyers *Dewey* (Lieutenant Commander Joseph P. Canty), *Gillespie* (Commander Chester L. Clement), and *Kalk* (Commander Charles T. Singleton, Jr.). Rear Admiral John W. Reeves, Jr., commanded the Alaskan Sector Escort Group of one gunboat, one minesweeper, and three fast minesweepers, while Rear Admiral McMorris commanded the Strike Group with the cruisers *Indianapolis*, *Raleigh*, and *Detroit*, and four destroyers. Aboard *Arthur Middleton* were 102 officers and 2,060 enlisted men from the 813th Engineer Aviation Battalion and a detachment of the 896th Company under Brigadier General Lloyd E. Jones.

January 12 dawned cold and bleak as the task force approached the deep, U-shaped Constantine Harbor on Amchitka's southeast coast. In a now well-

established pattern of amphibious operations, 36ft Higgins boats and 50ft tank lighters were lowered from transports, and loaded with troops and equipment before heading toward a shallow, rocky beach in a biting 30F degrees. In the vanguard was the boat group commander Lieutenant Commander R. E. Smith, USCG, who had been formerly stationed in the area, and who was among the first to set foot on the island.

The weather stayed calm all morning. However, even in the relatively good conditions coxswains had trouble backing off the rocky beach without damaging their boats. Then in the early afternoon a williwaw struck. High winds and heavy seas smashed landing craft onto the rocks. To save the boats men put on rubber suits and waded out to their armpits in the harbor, unloaded barges and passed supplies hand over hand to keep them above water and the scum of oil from the ships.

They worked steadily as the wind increased to gale velocity before nightfall. Despite every precaution, most of the landing barges had been wrecked during the storm. At 2307 of that first day, *Arthur Middleton* went aground on her port quarter, although her boats continued unloading operations in the harbor.

USS *Worden*, one of the Strike Force destroyers, wasn't so fortunate. A strong current swept her onto a pinnacle, tearing a hole in her hull beneath the engine room and causing a complete loss of power. Her sister destroyer *Dewey* passed a towline and attempted to tow her free, but the cable parted, and the heavy seas began moving the powerless *Worden* inexorably toward the rocky shore. The destroyer broached and began breaking up in the surf. Commander William G. Pogue, *Worden*'s commanding officer, ordered the ship to be abandoned. However, as he was directing that effort, a heavy wave broke over the ship and he was swept overboard into the wintry seas.

When the distress call came from *Worden*, a Coast Guard landing boat, under Lieutenant Commander Smith, rushed to the scene with instructions to investigate the wreck and render every possible assistance. The Coast Guardsmen from *Arthur Middleton* pulled their boats near to the vessel and passed lines aboard to enable the men to slide down into the rescue craft. All this was accomplished amid mountainous seas that threatened to swamp the landing boats in each successive wave. On their way back to *Arthur Middleton*, a Coast Guard boat picked up two more survivors, who were struggling against death in the freezing water. Pogue was among the fortunate ones, and he was hauled, unconscious, out of the sea. The Coast Guard and Navy crews saved six officers and 169 men. Fourteen others drowned. *Worden* was a total loss.*

The next day a blizzard started that lasted two weeks and racked the island

with snow, sleet, and biting winds. When it finally subsided, a Japanese scout plane from Kiska located the American beachhead on Amchitka. Having located the Americans, “Rufes” (“Zero” fighters mounted with floats) bombed and strafed the burgeoning base as engineers desperately continued work on an airfield. Despite the raids, by February 18, the new fighter strip was ready, and with P-40 Warhawks and P-38 Lightnings now in the air overhead there was little danger from enemy bombers. It had been an amazing feat of skill and endurance for both the fleet of landing craft and the 2,100 troops who had planted another base on a flat, muddy, uninhabited island.[15]

Now that the necessary bases were complete it was time to tackle the Japanese on Attu and Kiska. The easy part was over.

Attu and Kiska Operations Prelude

As American forces advanced westward, and particularly taking into account the air base on Adak, the Imperial Headquarters was forced to consider the possibility this was a prelude to an invasion of northern Japan. This changed Japan’s initial plans from a short-term engagement to an order to hold the islands at all costs. To implement this new strategy, reinforcements consisting of infantry, engineers, and antiaircraft units, were sent to the Aleutians. Determined to stop Japanese convoys en route to the Aleutians, an American naval task force, led by the heavy cruiser *Salt Lake City*, arrived off the Soviet Union’s Komandorski Islands west of Attu. On March 26, the ships’ radar picked up a column of eight Japanese warships and two transports carrying supplies for the Aleutians. Both sides opened fire simultaneously, but although each scored hits, the battle ended inconclusively when both forces withdrew. After the battle no further attempt to reinforce or resupply the Aleutians was made using surface vessels. From then until the American invasion in May only submarines succeeded in delivering a trickle of materiel to Attu and Kiska.[16]

Kiska, which had the only operational airfield and a better harbor, was more important militarily than Attu. U.S. intelligence estimated there were 9,000 Japanese on the island. To take it the U.S. would need at least a 25,000-man reinforced infantry division and the necessary shipping to support it. However, because of operations in the Pacific and Europe the necessary forces weren’t available, so it was decided that Attu would be invaded instead. Initially, U.S. intelligence estimated Japanese strength on Attu to be between 500 and 1,500 – mostly antiaircraft personnel and labor troops who were probably equipped as infantry. In fact, the actual number was 2,100, the majority of whom were seasoned combat troops.

Attu – Operation *Landgrab*

Attu is a rugged mountainous island, about 20 by 35 miles, with sharp crags and snow-summited peaks, reaching more than 3,000ft into the stormy sky. Its valleys are covered with moss-grown tundra through which the advancing troops sank knee-deep into the muddy marsh beneath. The coast is deeply indented but safe landing is rendered difficult by the severe winds and storms that prevail. Cold, damp, foggy weather, combined with ice, rain, and snow, add to the desolate character of the island. It is unlike any environment the U.S. Army had fought in before.

The 7th Infantry Division, stationed near Fort Ord, California, was the unit detailed to recapture Attu. Trained as a motorized force and scheduled for duty in the deserts of North Africa, the 7th was reported to be in a high state of readiness, and because of its location near the coast, it could readily undergo the amphibious training required for its new mission. Along with 7th Division troops, the 1st Combat Intelligence Platoon (Provisional) Alaskan Scouts were also assigned to the operation.

On April 23 the assault force was embarked on six transports and supported by a naval task force of three battleships, three cruisers, three light cruisers, 19 destroyers, five submarines, and assorted tenders, oilers, and minesweepers. The task force also included the escort carrier USS *Nassau* with Composite Squadron VC-21, with 30 officer pilots, one enlisted pilot, 1 Air Combat Intelligence officer, and 27 enlisted men. VC 21 was the main air support for the Army troops. VC-21 had 26 F4F-4 Wildcat fighters in two squadrons – VF-3 and VF-22. The U.S. Marine Corps "Ready Teddy" VMO-155, a three-plane Grumman F4F-3P Wildcat detachment, was also on board to provide photo reconnaissance capability for the Navy's air wing. The total complement of planes was 26 F4F-4s, three F4F-3Ps, and one Curtis SOC-3A scout observation biplane. *Nassau* was the first escort carrier to sail in Alaskan waters, the first to operate aircraft in that area, and the first escort carrier to participate in an amphibious landing.

Several VF-3 pilots, such as 26-year-olds Lieutenant Junior Grade John P. "Johnny" Altemus and Francis R. "Cash" Register, were combat veterans fresh from the bloody air war over Guadalcanal. Both men had six confirmed aerial kills. After fighting in tropical skies Alaska's rough seas, thick fog and strong winds came as a huge shock to the pilots, and made for abysmal flying conditions, especially during ground-support missions.[17]

D-Day was scheduled for May 8 with H-Hour set for 0740. However, it was no surprise that due to the weather conditions the landings were delayed until May 11.*

The tactical plan for *Landgrab* was to force the Japanese Army into the Chichagof area and divide it into two segments. The U.S. troops were, therefore, split into two forces. The larger Southern Force, consisting of the Regimental Landing Group 17 (less Battalion Combat Team 17-1) with Battalion Combat Team 32-2 attached was to land on Yellow Beach and Blue Beach in Massacre Bay and attack and destroy the enemy in the Holtz Bay and Chichagof Harbor area over a ridge to the east. One platoon of the 7th Reconnaissance Troop was to land at Alexai Point (Rainbow Beach) on the southwestern part of Massacre Bay. The Northern Force, consisting of the remainder of Combat Team 17-1, was to land in the west arm of Holtz Bay (Red Beach). Subsidiary landings were to be made by parties of Alaskan Scouts and reconnaissance troops – including the one at Alexai Point (Rainbow Beach), east of Massacre Bay. The Alaskan Scouts, sailing independently of the main convoy, were to be landed by the submarines *Narwhal* and *Nautilus* on the north coast (Scarlet Beach).

It was estimated that the reoccupation of Attu would take just three days. Food and ammunition loads were calculated for that period of time. This would allow enough time for supply dumps to be established on the beachhead.

The Japanese defense was based on daring, deception, and the excellent use of terrain to tempt a landing on the south side of the island. They established their defenses in two sectors: Holtz Bay and Chichagof Harbor. At Holtz Bay, four successive defensive positions were well prepared with a fifth final position at the valley head. Each arm of Holtz Bay was defended by a four-gun antiaircraft battery. Holtz-Massacre Pass (later to be named Jarmin Pass) leading into Massacre Valley was covered by a mountain artillery battery. Within Massacre Valley a weak yielding defensive center would allow a U.S. force to build up and lure them into a fire trap at Jarmin Pass.

Chichagof Harbor had substantial beach defenses including a four-gun antiaircraft battery, but the key defensive effort for the harbor was based on well-prepared defensive positions in Massacre Valley on Cold and Black Mountains and the fire trap at Jarmin Pass. Sarana Valley defenses were established on Gilbert Ridge, Point A, Sarana Nose and Buffalo Ridge.

Major final defensive positions were emplaced on Prendergast and Fish Hook Ridges. These were built on some of the most rugged terrain to be found on Attu and the camouflage of all positions was outstanding.

Unlike on the Gavutu and Florida Islands (see Chapter 2: First Strike), the Japanese tactics were to draw the U.S. forces in from the beach, away from their supplies, and engage them from the high ground surrounding the valley with the aim of annihilating them or forcing their withdrawal. The Japanese

assumed the U.S. forces would land at Massacre Bay, hence the successive defense of Holtz Bay throughout the valley and in the Sarana Valley, which is constricted by Lake Nicholas. Japanese planners knew vehicles, supplies, and artillery would not get off the beaches in large numbers because of the tundra and mountainous terrain.

Weapons, ammunition, and equipment were available to the Japanese in ample quantities and supply caches were established to prevent reliance on tenuous supply lines across the mountains and tundra. Most importantly, the Japanese troops were properly dressed and equipped mountain troops, trained in north Manchukuo. Having trained in such an environment and being acclimatized to those conditions, the mountain troops could lay motionless for hours in camouflage ready to ambush U.S. soldiers as they passed.[18]

May 11 – D-Day

First ashore on May 11 were the Alaskan Scout teams from the 7th Scout Company. Captain William H. Willoughby led 244 men off submarines *Narwhal* and *Nautilus* toward Scarlet Beach at 0300. First Sergeant Fenton Hamlin, a member of the team, tells the story:

> The company got aboard the submarines … at Dutch Harbor on April 28 and started rehearsing our debarkation. The crews of the two submarines had worked with Marine Corps raider battalions and they completely revised our methods, cutting the time required right in two. Their system consisted of inflating the rubber boats and shoving them onto the after-deck. Then, with the men sitting in them, the submarine was partially submerged, leaving the rubber boats floating free.
>
> It was bitter cold at 0100 on May 11. We were about four thousand yards off Attu as the black water gurgled around the submarines, and the rubber boats floated free. The men began to paddle and the little boats moved silently through the foggy night toward Scarlet Beach (Austin Cove).
>
> It was a long way in, and the men were tired when they hit the beach. There was no resistance. The two sections made contact and moved inland, as a signal light blinked out to the submarines that the landing was complete.[19]

It took the men two hours to reach the shore through 5,000 yards of thick fog, and the temperature dropped sharply from 27 degrees Farenheit to 20 degrees as the wind rose. Once ashore the force faced steep, approximately 300ft cliffs

that had to be scaled to get off the beach.

The Japanese had expected no one to land in a place such as Scarlet Beach. One of Willoughby's men commented, "It was easy to get completely turned around in the thick, moving mist that made everything vague." The Scouts did eventually make a wrong turn in the fog, which cost them valuable time getting over the mountains to their objective.

At noon, the second wave consisting of 165 men of the 7th Division's Reconnaissance Troop (less one platoon) landed at Scarlet Beach and moved to join the scout company. Upon linkup, the two units, which constituted a provisional battalion, were to occupy the head of the valley where a pass gave access to one of the valleys leading back from Holtz Bay.

As the provisional battalion left Scarlet Beach, fighters from the carrier USS *Nassau* mistakenly strafed and sank all the rubber boats used by the battalion to come ashore. Now they had no choice but to complete the 4,000ft climb to their objective. Beyond it was the worst terrain on the island. Captain Willoughby's men lacked communication with the other U.S. forces and possessed only one and a half days' rations. It was a formidable task.

The job of the 25-man scout team under Captain Thompson on board the Navy transport USS *J. Franklin Bell* was to reconnoiter Red Beach as a landing spot for the Northern Force troops. The beach was only three miles from the main Japanese camp at Holtz Bay. At 0830 the team left aboard LCVPs. About 1,000 yards from shore, they climbed over the side into whale boats and rowed ashore under the cover of heavy fog.

Al Brattain was at Red Beach.

> We were sent in first to reconnoiter a suitable spot to land the main force. The fog was thick, visibility under 100 yards. Given a heading by the destroyer, we rowed to the beach. I was in the bow of the first boat to touch land. About 100 foot inland was a low bank, maybe two feet high. I reached it as fast as I could just in case there was a Japanese soldier waiting to dispute my right to be there.

At Yellow and Blue beaches, another group of Castner's Cutthroats would go in ahead of the Southern Force and the Scout battalion. The beaches were small and surrounded by steep, jagged cliffs, and the Army wasn't sure if a landing was even possible.

The unopposed landing of the 2d and 3d Battalion Combat Teams of the 17th Regiment on the beaches, which were approximately six miles south of Chichagof Harbor, was delayed until 1620 because of dense fog and high seas.

The minelayer USS *Pruitt* used its radar to guide approximately 100 landing craft toward Yellow and Blue beaches. The fog was as thick as soup, with the cloud ceiling at 1,500ft; visibility was down to 500 to 600 yards. At 100 yards from shore, all 100 landing craft came together in a concentrated mass of confusion. In the resulting chaos, the second wave landed first followed by the simultaneous landing of the first and third waves of the Southern Force. During the confusion, 11 crowded landing craft capsized, losing men and equipment overboard.

Company F, 32d Infantry landed with the first wave at Yellow Beach rather than at Cascoe Cove as planned. The company had to advance southwest on foot to their allocated area of operations. They soon found the tundra-covered ground mushy under foot, causing their pace to be slow and fatiguing. A pause for rest had to be taken every 300 to 400 yards.

The mission was clear. Lieutenant Paulson had the 1st Platoon of F Company, 17th Infantry reinforced with a section of light machine guns and a 60mm mortar. He later recalled his orders.

> Land in Massacre Bay; move to the right. Protect the right flank of the battalion, block the pass through the mountains from Sarana Bay; move up Sarana Valley, and join the battalion in the vicinity of Clevesy Pass…
>
> A little after 1600 on the afternoon of the 11th, it was, when we took off to the right and headed up into the mountains. The ground was new to us; the tundra and the holes and the snow gave us a bad time all the way. Some of the slopes were so straight up that we used ropes to haul our guns over them. We traveled all night the first night and got over onto the Sarana side early the next morning. God, we were tired!

Getting the artillery ashore and set up proved to be tough, as Staff Sergeant Stanley E. West, Staff Sergeant Allen W. Robbins, and Corporal Howard B. Campbell of Battery C, 48th Field Artillery Battalion told later:

> The advance party with Lieutenant James West were already moving up Massacre Valley into the fog, when the barges with the big 105mm rifles and the heavy cats crunched against the sand of the beach. The motors roared and the cats backed the big guns out of the barges onto Attu.

> In a few minutes they had turned around and were struggling over the steep bank up from the beach. Three of the guns had landed, and one was still coming in from the ship. The battery was busy getting up its own fire-direction center, as the big tractors ["cats"] lumbered onto the spongy, yielding tundra dragging the guns slowly behind. About seventy-five yards from the beach the treads of the first cat chewed through the tundra and began to slip. In just seconds it was wallowing helplessly in the black oozy mud.
>
> The other two cats soon shared the same fate. When the tundra broke, the big treads turned round and round and only dug the machine deeper into the mud. What the hell, seventy-five yards was far enough initially!

Stumbling through the muskeg the 2d and 3d Battalions worked their way up both sides of Massacre Bay. At 1900 the Japanese opened fire from well-camouflaged positions, pinning down the troops. Attempts by the 3d Battalion, on the left (southwest), to reach Jarmin Pass, the regimental objective at the head of the valley, failed, resulting in heavy losses.

In another sector, Scout Corporals Al Levorson and Theron Anderson were guiding a 50-man patrol from the 17th Infantry tasked with taking out an enemy machine gun position on the jagged slopes of Sarana Ridge above Rainbow Beach. Having been informed by his scouts, who had crept forward, that the Japanese also had mortars, the patrol leader tried to radio his commander to report the situation. The radio was dead, so he sent Anderson and Levorson back to the command post to relay the information. The pair crept, crawled, and skidded through snow, over slick mossy rocks and down slippery ravines, until the Command Post was in sight. Then the enemy opened fire. Soldiers at the Command Post returned fire. The Scouts, hugging dirt, were pinned down for several hours until darkness finally allowed them to reach friendly lines.[20]

By 2000 the troops at Red Beach had advanced 1,500 yards, noting some firing, which was presumed to come from their own forces. By 2130, 1,100 troops were ashore at this beach, 2,000 at Yellow and Blue, and 400 at Scarlet. At midnight the first casualty report reached the task force commander. Forty-four officers and men had been killed during the first day.

When dawn of D-Day+1 arrived, it was discovered, however, that Battalion Combat Team 17-2 in Massacre Valley was not 1000 yards from its objective as had been assumed (the pass leading to Sarana Bay), but 1500 yards from it. Meanwhile, Battalion Combat Team 17-3 had mistaken blind Zwinge Valley for Holtz Bay pass and was 2,000 yards south of its objective rather than the

600 yards reported on D-Day evening.

On the north side of the island Battalion Combat Team 17-1 had dug in for the night on what it believed was Hill X. However, they discovered the next day that they were actually on a hill 900 yards short of their objective and during the night the Japanese had in fact occupied Hill X.

Meanwhile, Captain Willoughby and his Scouts had climbed all day in the fog and had reached an altitude of 2,500ft as darkness fell. Their maps were blank beyond this point, so rather than risk venturing farther into the mass of peaks, ridges, and cliffs ahead they bivouacked in deep snow for the night.

It was becoming increasingly clear that the U.S. landing forces would face a long, drawn out, bitter struggle to recapture Attu. No vehicles could move over the muskeg without bogging down, so supplies, food, and ammunition were carried by hand. In the thick fog, without adequate maps, units got lost in the mountains. On short rations to begin with, the men soon ran out of food. Boots fell apart, and wet feet combined with cold temperatures led to trench foot, which was not helped by the fact that it sometimes took over 24 hours to reach medical help.

Indeed, at the end of D-Day the situation was far worse than expected. Heavy terrain, faulty maps, and stiff Japanese resistance all contributed to the Americans failing to reach their initial objectives. Forty-eight hours later the situation had not greatly improved, and by the third day men were desperate for food and warmth. First Sergeant Fenton Hamlin of the 7th Scout Company tells us what it was like:

> We had repulsed an enemy counterattack the morning of the 14th, and the fight had settled down to bitter, deadly machine-gun duels and grenade and sniper fights. We were bottled up in the canyon and only very slowly making progress to get out. We needed supporting weapons. The ammunition for the 81mm mortars had been exhausted and other ammunition was getting low. Overhead the motor of the supply plane with food, ammunition, and sleeping bags, roared blindly through the fog making futile efforts to locate us. The fog pressed in like wet cotton around the signal flares we had fired as the plane went over us. Finally the motors droned away again over the mountain. The men looked at each other, silently, then rolled back to face the Japs.
>
> It was the third day in the canyon. The cold was intense and some of the men were vomiting green bile from their empty stomachs. We could catch glimpses of the Japs ahead through the fog, as their bullets twanged off the rocks around us. The situation was tense, and nerves

were drawn as tight as fiddle strings. No one was talking. A vicious burst of machine-gun bullets crackled over the heads of Sergeant Thomas and his gunner, Morochek. Thomas looked at Morochek and very matter-of-factly broke the silence. “You know,” he said, “I think those guys are trying to kill us.” He stated, so calmly what was so terrifyingly obvious to everyone, that they laughed. It broke the tension. Some of the cold, hungry men even moved forward to better positions.

The supply plane was droning overhead again. It was exasperating. The men in the canyon were freezing and most of them were vomiting bile now with every drink of water they took. There, overhead, like a promise from heaven, was a load of food and ammunition and sleeping bags. But it was foggy. It was always foggy. The fog was cold and wet and thick and blinding. The frustrated men even thought of firing tracers up at the plane, but realized that the pilot would think they were Japs if they did.

We needed supporting fire badly but the only time that the shore-fire party had been able to contact a ship, a submarine scare had driven the ship out to sea.

It was the fourth day without food. Lieutenant Stott and Sergeant Petruska were in a foxhole together when Lieutenant Stott found two old dirty pieces of candy that had been in his pocket for weeks. Petruska’s eyes got as big as saucers and he began to drool over the beaten-up, lint-covered candy sprinkled with tobacco grains. Lieutenant Stott claimed that Petruska would have murdered him if he hadn’t offered him a piece of candy. Petruska said, “Gee, that was one of the best things that ever happened to me.” Later that day the plane was heard again, feeling its way through the fog above. It dropped some rations just with the chance hope that they might come close, and one small bundle fell where we could get it.

During that night, the 15th, the enemy pulled back, and about 2300 we got a message from the 3d Battalion of the 32d Infantry, informing us of their attacks from the north. We pushed off down the canyon. The Japs had left in a hurry, leaving guns, ammunition, and dead bodies strewn everywhere.

We limped out of the canyon on frozen feet, and our flank patrol killed three snipers, the last vestige of resistance in the canyon. We contacted the 32d Infantry at 1600 near the beach in the west arm.

It had been a long, hard ordeal. The evacuation of the wounded was begun that night, and continued into the next day. We had lost an officer

> and ten men killed in the bitter six days since we paddled the rubber boats to the beach. The freezing cold and fog had been a harder enemy to fight than the Japs. Ninety per cent of the Scout Company and three-fourths of the 7th Reconnaissance Troop suffered from severe exposure. [21]

As the Army fought hunger, cold, and the Japanese, *Nassau*'s pilots flew ground-support missions. Each time a flight returned to the ship, they were literally "sweated" aboard by all who were watching. Some pilots reported they could not see the ship until they came down to the level of the top of the ship's mast. On only three days were no flight operations conducted, and that was because the fog had completely closed in all targets on the island. However, as in all combat, not everyone came home.

On May 11, two F4Fs and one F4F-3P were lost, but their pilots made it back to *Nassau* safely. On May 14, two F4F pilots, Lieutenant Commander Lloyd K. Greenamyer and Lieutenant Commander Lieutenant Douglas Henderson crashed into mountains around Massacre Valley during a strafing run. On the same mission two other pilots, Ensigns Kelly and E. D. Jackson had to ditch their planes.

Navy Aerographer's Mate Paul Carrigan watched the attack.

> Visibility was good under an overcast 500 foot ceiling. Four Wildcats were sent in to drop small bombs and strafe enemy positions along Gilbert Ridge. Someone came into the office after taking a weather observation and reported Wildcats shooting things up on the far side of the valley.
>
> I don't know how many passes had been made by the time I stepped outside. Perhaps one fighter had already crashed. Three were in sight. One was streaking in from seaward. A second was completing a banking turn to follow the first. A third was flying seaward after emerging from the valley.
>
> I watched about two go-rounds. For the eye to flit from plane to plane was distracting like viewing a tennis match. I picked up and focused on a fighter midway through its run. After a sharp left bank and 180 degree turn at the head of the valley this fighter was so low it disappeared behind the hogback bisecting the valley.
>
> I'd shifted my gaze to the bay and picked up another incoming fighter. A split-second later, directly in my line of sight, there was an

> exploding ball of fire. Black smoke mushroomed like a fat exclamation point. I had not seen the first fighter emerge from behind the hogback but it had evidently crashed about a quarter mile short of the bay.
>
> An additional shock came several days later with an official announcement: all four fighters had been lost on the mission. Three were either struck by williwaws or flew into cloud obscured mountains at the head of the valley. A fourth crash-landed at sea short of Nassau but the pilot was rescued.
>
> It would have taken great flying skill, judgment, and concentration not to crash. In a fast fighter it required split second timing to know when to execute the banking turn. If the planes had been struck by williwaws the pilots wouldn't have had a chance. [22]

Two days later, two more F4Fs were lost. Lieutenant Junior Grade "Cash" Register crashed near Holtz Bay while Sergeant Breen made it back, but had to ditch his plane at sea.

For a full week the Japanese prevented the Northern and Southern forces from joining in Jarmin Pass. Then the Japanese began withdrawing slowly toward Chichagof Harbor and its surrounding ridges. Two more weeks of bitter fighting occurred before the 7th Division and its reinforcements succeeded in driving the enemy from the snow-covered cliffs of Fishhook Ridge and Clevesy Pass, which opened the way to Chichagof on May 28.

Driven from high ground, the noose tightened, and with his back to the sea, the Japanese commander, Colonel Yasuyo Yamazaki, had about 1,200 men left by the night of May 28–29. Approximately 400 of these were hospital cases incapable of further combat. His troops were exhausted and almost out of food and ammunition. He knew that neither help nor evacuation was possible. Yamasaki's brilliantly conceived and executed delaying action had exacted a terrible toll in U.S. casualties, but now it was almost over. Yamasaki chose to mount an all-out attack in one desperate gamble. His daring plan was to break through the weakest point in the American line in Chichagof Valley. As the U.S. troops commanded the heights on both sides, Yamasaki selected nighttime for his suicidal charge.[23]

His objective was the concentration of l05mm howitzers that had been painstakingly dragged up to the head of Massacre Valley over a part creek, part mud trail laid out by the Army Corps of Engineers. If Yamasaki could reach these guns he could turn them on the Americans and then raid and destroy the vast supply dumps in Massacre Valley. With food, guns and ammunition he planned to retreat into the southern mountains to continue the fight with

whatever forces he had left. Yamasaki ordered that all Japanese wounded who could not walk or fight to be killed by injections of morphine or by grenades.[24]

In the early hours of May 29, the Japanese made a screaming *banzai* attack out of Chichagof Harbor, up Siddens Valley toward American positions in Clevesy Pass and against Engineer Hill, killing and being killed. Troops of the 50th Combat Engineers who were bivouacked on Engineer Hill succeeded in organizing a thin defensive line and breaking the attack. Joseph Sasser later wrote:

> It was in the AM that we heard shouting that the Japs were coming and some had already gotten behind us. Two of our comrades were bayoneted in their sleeping bags. Finally, after much difficulty, all of our troops were concentrated along the road bed. Having this protection probably saved the lives of many but not all. A medical officer, John Bassett from San Diego, was killed next to me. I didn't realize that he'd been shot for I never heard a sound. He'd been hit squarely in the forehead.
>
> I don't remember at what time the gun fire stopped. The ravines were full of dead Japs, stacked on top of one another. There was evidence some had taken their own lives with hand grenades.[25]

First Sergeant Jessie H. Clout, Jr. was in Company D, 50th Engineers when the attack came:

> We had worked all night and up until noon of the 28th carrying supplies up to the front, then we slept four hours and worked almost all night again. We were so tired when we finally did get into our sacks that I didn't think anything could wake us up, but the 37mm shell that smacked through the tent did it.
>
> The shell was the first indication we had that the Japs had broken through. We had just gotten up before they hit us and things really began to pop. It was foggy and dark, which made it almost impossible to tell American from Jap during the early part of the fight. Lieutenant John H. Green saw a man walking out ahead of him, and he hollered for the guv to get the hell down in a hole; the fellow replied, "Me do, me do," but he didn't get down fast enough because Lieutenant Green shot him. They were right in with us.
>
> We put two BARs in, one on each flank of our line, and they got in

some good licks with tracer ammunition which marked our own line for our men, and also pointed out targets. The line we had established held, and very few Japs got through it.

When daylight came we discovered a whole bunch of Japs pinned in a ditch in front of the road along which we had been fighting. While the boys kept firing to keep the Japs down, several others of us crawled up the bank and threw grenades into them. Helmets, rifles, and Japs flew out of the ditch. We were astonished at the mess of them. They had been lying three deep in the ditch trying to hide.[26]

The aid station, which was located about 200 yards behind the 3d Battalion's Command Post, had also been hit by that last, desperate attack by the Japanese.

I recalled that I had been unusually lucky all my life; that the breaks always came at the right time; that – well – it was about time it changed, and here it was. Also, strangely enough, I was grateful for my insurance.

That was Captain Charles Yellin's thought as the Japanese swarmed around outside the aid station on the morning of May 29.

On the evening of May 28 the Japanese dumped several large shells in the area around the Aid station. They were after a nest of 37s that had been set up on the hill to the right, and they were missing. After the excitement of the shelling had subsided, Lieutenant Herbert Friedberg, assisting Captain Yellin in the station, began talking. He had a premonition, a feeling that something was going to happen to him…

Casualties were lying along one side of the tent. They could not be moved over Engineer Hill until morning and were spending the night in the station. Before long other casualties began to arrive. The sounds of fighting up the valley echoed into the tent. By 0300 there were 15 casualties lined up on the floor of the clearing station. Captain Yellin and Lieutenant Friedberg worked among the men with no thought of sleep…

Suddenly the Japs struck. Noise and confusion and death crashed over the tent like an avalanche. The turmoil that followed garbled the sequence of brutal happenings into a maddening jumble of flashes and explosions, screams, and flying steel. "Banzai! We die, you die!" the Japs screamed, as they ripped and slaughtered and smashed everything

> in their path. The back of the tent was riddled with machine-gun bullets. A bayonet slashed into the canvas, tearing a great rip through which four grenades were thrown onto the men lying inside. Another Japanese attacker thrust the muzzle of an automatic rifle into the hole and sprayed bullets through the tent. Then they discovered the kitchen and stormed it.
>
> The first orgy was over. The men alive inside the tent were helpless. They had few weapons and outside they could hear many Jap voices jabbering deliriously and much running back and forth around the riddled tent… Every man in the tent had been hit by a bullet or a fragment. Lieutenant Friedberg was hit in the head with a grenade fragment. His premonition had been right. He was dead… Chaplain Turner had come into the tent as the Japs struck. He crawled among the men, his presence and good spirits comforting them.[27]

In the early afternoon the Americans had organized resistance around their positions, and grim patrols moved over the hills and across the valleys forcing the scattered Japanese into pockets and destroying them.

> The Japs were all around outside. One wounded Jap, lying just beyond the tent, was struggling to reach his rifle, which had dropped into the tent as he fell. One of the wounded men who could move reached another Jap gun with a bayonet on it and stabbed him. On a rise in the ground a few yards behind the station a Jap had set up a machine gun and all through the long, seemingly endless morning he fired short bursts over the tattered clearing station at troops moving in the valley below. He was picked up by American mortar men, and soon the heavy shells began bursting around the gun, within a few yards of the tent, hurling fragments of steel that ripped additional holes in the canvas, no square foot of which did not already have a bullet hole in it.
>
> The next night one of the last groups of Japs still not wiped out passed over the deserted station again and completed the job of destruction, utterly ripping to pieces every piece of equipment in the place before they were cornered and killed. It was a miserable anticlimax to the night before, a fiasco.[28]

On the morning of May 30, Japan announced the loss of Attu. However, the word didn’t reach the Japanese on Attu. For many days afterwards American forces continued mopping up operations and continued taking casualties.

Sergeant Carmen J. Calabrese, L Company, 17th Infantry took part in the mopping up of Chichagof Village:

> It’s a very rough soiree that we got ourselves into on the evening of May 30. The Japs are all over since we have never completely straightened things out from the breakthrough on the morning of the 29th. It all starts when our 1st Platoon gets way out ahead on the left flank and leaves the rest of us on a little ridge overlooking the Jap village in Chichagof Harbor.
>
> We spot some good ground over to our right rear and head for it. During the move, of course, we lose some of our control and the men are more or less on their own. They are just straggling up on the high ground as the Japs open up. Lieutenant Beegle, Albert Bianchi, Sergeant Thomas, and myself are up on this high ground already so we start firing back. Then we get an order to move to our left rear toward some higher ground, and the first thing I know Thomas, over on my left, is dead, shot through the mouth. On the right I see Lieutenant Beegle go down from a wound in his shoulder, and then Bianchi topples over a little cliff from a bullet in his shoulder, which is his second wound.[29]

Instead of lasting the projected three days it took until May 31 before Attu was declared secure. Attu cost U.S. forces 549 dead and 1,148 wounded. An unusually high number of men were lost because of the weather and disease. Because of the severe cold weather 1,200 soldiers suffered extreme frostbite and trench foot. These were the first cold-weather casualties of the war. Diseases, primarily those brought on by exposure, such as pneumonia, accounted for 614 casualties. Accidents, mental breakdowns, and self-inflicted injuries took another 318 from the front lines.[30] To the total killed we can add three F4F pilots.

Of the 2,234 Japanese defending the island only 29 survived as prisoners. The rest either died in battle or committed suicide.

Many of the U.S. dead were buried in a cemetery on the shores of Massacre Bay. On July 4, a simple ceremony was held in camp for those unable to cross the pass to the cemetery. Before the 17th Division left the island, the 32d Battalion was assembled. First Lieutenant Robert J. Mitchell recalled:

> Major Charles G. Fredericks read the Roll Call of the men who had fallen. Lieutenant Colonel Glen A. Nelson spoke. A sergeant sang *My Buddy.* And Padre Habetz repeated a prayer.

After the volley, the last note of Taps echoed over the mountains. Then it was over.

Captain Robert C. Foulston said, “Forward …” but the “march” stuck in his throat. With chins clamped hard and wet eyes blinking, the silent fighting men marched off the field.

It had been paid for. Attu was ours.[31]

Kiska – Operation *Cottage*

It was assumed that taking Kiska would prove to be an even more formidable task than securing Attu. An estimated 10,000 well-entrenched Japanese occupied the island. To counter this force the U.S. fielded 34,426 troops, including 5,500 Canadians, more than double the original strength planned for the operation earlier in the year. Although the U.S. force was bolstered by the additional Canadians, this joint venture was complicated by the fact that many of them spoke only French.

These troops consisted of the 17th Infantry, 53d Infantry, 87th Mountain Infantry, 184th Infantry, First Special Service Force, 13th Canadian Infantry Brigade Group, and headquarters troops. The First Special Service Force, a combined U.S.–Canadian unit,* consisted of about 1,800 men who were especially trained in commando tactics, rubber boat handling, and parachuting.

The ships involved were three battleships, one heavy cruiser, one light cruiser, 19 destroyers, five attack transports, one attack cargo vessel, ten transports, three cargo vessels, one fast transport, 14 LSTs, nine LCI(L)s, 19 LCT(5)s, two light minelayers, three fast minesweepers, two tugs, one harbor tug, and one surveying ship.

Kiska is approximately 25 miles long by eight miles at the widest part and 1.8 miles at the narrowest part. It is practically two islands in one as it is made up of two great land masses separated by a deep narrow gorge known as Middle Pass. Its shoreline is characterized by precipitous rocky cliffs, hidden reefs, rocks, rip tides, and treacherous undertows. The surf to windward is usually up to 7ft high, with as high as 35ft being recorded.

Early in the morning of August 15 the invasion fleet anchored 1,500 yards off the middle of Kiska’s north shore. The Special Service Forces had started moving ashore at 0230, followed by the first wave at 0600.

“It was a weird scene that greeted the assault troops as they came out on the decks of the transports and filed to their designated landing craft,” Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Ward wrote later:

> Overhead the sky was partially overcast, and during the few moments

> when it did clear, Kiska could be seen in the eerie moonlight. The men moved as phantoms must move; silent and breathless. You could see where their faces should be, yet their faces could not be seen. Daring the night, all assault forces had applied face make-up as recommended by leading make-up men in Hollywood. The object was to break the familiar shape and shadows of the face by skillful use of brown and green grease paint. It was very effective.[32]

The first landing craft approached the beach only to learn what aerial photographs had failed to disclose. Huge rocks just below the surface of the water prevented the craft from approaching the beach with any speed. Instead, the boats crept in. They were forced to limit landings to one boat at a time. Troops moved ashore slowly, most of them by jumping into the icy water and wading to the beach. The rubber boats brought in by the Special Service Forces were used to build temporary docks which aided, to some extent, in speeding up operations. A bulldozer made its way onto shore and unloaded, was used to push rocks aside and clear a landing beach that could handle two small craft.

Major James L. Low recalled the feeling as the first waves landed:

> The quiet that prevailed over the entire area was awesome. Every person was tense with expectation. Each man, as he toiled up the slopes of the ridges, watched those above him and wondered at what moment the first shot would ring out and which man would be the first to fall. The suspense was terrible and was rapidly producing mass jitters.
>
> The first report from the Special Service Forces was relayed to us at approximately 0915. This now famous report was the first indication as to enemy movements. It stated “Enemy outpost over-run, all personnel have left. Hot coffee still on the stove.” The message was passed on and everyone felt relieved. Some positive action would soon follow. Surely the main garrison knew of the landing by now and would make a move that would permit our troops to gain contact with them.[33]

When they landed the Americans found Japanese jeeps and trucks, half buried under the earth by explosions, shattered windows, four burned-out ships in the harbor, and practically every object, including the roofs of huts, punctured with bullet holes and shrapnel. However, initially, there were no Japanese forces.[34] They also found the puppy Explosion who had escaped the Japanese weeks before.

The landings forces did find quartermaster warehouses bulging with

clothing, food, fruit, vegetables, fish, ammunition, and some big guns. They found a sign from the Japanese that said, in effect, "out to lunch." Ominously, on the wall of the main Japanese command hut was scrawled, "We shall come again and kill out separately Yanki jokers."

As evening closed in Colonel Sutherland, Commanding Officer of the Southern Sector, ordered that extreme precautions be taken by all units to prevent any enemy infiltration and that patrols be kept active. Without knowing the enemy's position the invading force was completely blind. Sutherland later wrote:

> Perhaps they [the Japanese] had withdrawn to the southern part of the island for a last ditch stand. Perhaps they had evacuated but that thought could not be entertained – yet. Sporadic firing of small arms and machine guns could be heard all through the night. Occasionally the sharp blast of a hand grenade gave credence to the thought that we were at last in contact with the enemy. Such reports that men had been bayoneted while asleep and that they, the enemy, could be seen moving in the fog led us to believe that tomorrow would bring great battles.
>
> When morning broke, our casualties for the night were brought down from the hills to the hospital set up near the beach. Some told harrowing tales of close combat while others told of being shot at in the dark without even seeing the enemy. The dead were put to one side, away from the view of the troops.
>
> Something was wrong here, however. Not one Japanese body had been found. In fact, nothing could be found to indicate that the enemy had even been near our lines. Only American blood had been spilled. Were we a match for this cunning or had we killed our own men? That was a tough question to ask ourselves.[35]

Something was wrong, the Japanese had gone. The entire 5,183-man Japanese force had slipped through the air and surface blockade on July 28, almost three weeks earlier. Between then and D-Day, Kiska had been under attack and close surveillance by American naval units and the 11th Air Force, but the erroneous reports of flak and Japanese activity which observers brought back had not been questioned by intelligence offers or anyone else.

The only guns fired were those of friend against friend in error. Twenty-four soldiers died in the shooting, four others were killed by mines and booby-traps, 50 were wounded by these means, and scores were wounded in various accidents. Casualties totaled 313. Included in this figure were over 125 cases of

trench foot in spite of the bitter lessons learned on Attu.

The Navy lost the destroyer USS *Abner Read* (DD-526) when she struck a mine on August 18. The blast tore a huge hole in her stern and ruptured her smoke tanks. Men sleeping in aft compartments suffered from smoke inhalation. In the darkness a few men fell through holes in the deck into the fuel oil tanks below. Soon the stern broke away and sank. Once in the water, the men recovered from the effects of the smoke and could breathe. Nonetheless, 70 men were killed or missing and another 47 were wounded.[36]

On August 24, Kiska was declared secure, ending the 14-month Aleutian Campaign. The Japanese threat to the northwestern U.S. flank was eliminated. From Aleutian bases 11th Air Force bombers conducted harassing attacks on Japan's Kurile Islands. To counter this threat Imperial Japanese Headquarters maintained a large defensive force totaling about one-sixth of Japan's air strength.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned by the Army in preparing and equipping troops to survive the rigors of combat in wretched weather and difficult mountain terrain would prove useful during the upcoming Italian campaign.

Many amphibious warfare techniques developed during the Attu landings were refined for Kiska and were further improved and applied to advantage in later amphibious operations in the Pacific. Other lessons learned included:

a. Beaches must be thoroughly cleared before being established as beaches suitable for landing craft;
b. A landing should not be made on a falling tide when bottom and gradient conditions are unknown;
c. Unless extreme precautions are taken, a blockade cannot completely encircle an island and prevent a determined enemy from reinforcing, supplying, or evacuating; and
d. Army and Navy communications and techniques have to be standardized or placed under a joint command.[37]

Estimated U.S. casualties were 1,481 killed, 3,416 wounded, 640 missing, and eight captured, while Japanese were 4,350 killed and 28 captured.

From the standpoint of casualties, Attu was the second most costly in terms of U.S. forces killed and wounded compared to Japanese killed (71 Americans

versus 100 Japanese). Only Iwo Jima, two years later, was more costly.

No casualty list includes the hundreds of men lost from Army Air Force aircrews, soldiers who drowned during unopposed landings, or sailors lost in shipboard accidents or battles with Aleutian weather or to the Imperial Japanese Navy.

It was a campaign fought and forgotten in fogs and williwaw-driven storms.

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* The men were: Petty Officer In Charge, Aerographer's Mate First Class William C. "Doc" House; Pharmacist's Mate First Class Rolland L. Coffield; Radioman Second Class Harold E. Echols; Radioman Second Class Robert Christensen; Radioman Third Class M. L. Courtenay; Aerographer's Mate Second Class James L. Turner; Aerographer's Mate Second Class Walter M. "Whimpy" Winfrey; Seaman First Class Gilbert Palmer; Seaman First Class W. I. Gaffey; Seaman First Class John C. McCandless. Some references include an unnamed lieutenant, but no officers were part of the detachment. All people taken prisoner survived the war.

* Amphibious landing troops could not wear a standard life jacket or inflatable rubber vest because of the sheer bulk of their combat packs. Instead, they wore a small life belt. The ones in use during World War II provided some buoyancy in chest-high water, but could not keep a man and 100 pounds of equipment afloat for very long especially if he was injured or weakened rapidly because of his struggles.

* For their bold rescue work, five Coast Guardsmen were awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal. The recipients were Ensign J. R. Wollenberg, Coxswains Russell M. Speck, Robert H. Gross, and George W. Prichard, and Signalman John S. Vandeleur.

* Before sailing much of the individual equipment was issued. Each soldier received Blucher boots with two pairs of insoles, an Alaskan field jacket, an overcoat, wool underwear and socks, a rucksack, a sleeping bag with the cover (not waterproof), snow glasses and a two-piece rain suit very similar to that issued today. The 7th Division staff turned back the Kersey-lined Alaskan trousers. The Blucher boots were not waterproof and wore out quickly in the harsh environment of the Aleutians. Most of the frostbite and trench foot suffered could be attributed to this inadequate footgear.

* The volunteers for the 1,800-man force consisted primarily of enlisted men who had responded to advertising at Army posts, which stated that preference would be given to men previously employed as lumberjacks, forest rangers, hunters, game wardens, and the like. Much feared for their fighting prowess, the moniker "The Black Devils" was adopted after the discovery of the personal diary of a German officer referring to "die schwarzen Teufeln" ("The Black Devils"). With blackened faces, small units would often overwhelm German defenders without firing a shot, and then disappear into the night.

  Force members received rigorous and intensive training in stealth tactics, hand-to-hand combat, the use of explosives for demolition, parachuting, amphibious warfare, rock-climbing, mountain warfare, and as ski troops.

  The formation patch was a red spearhead with the words "USA" written horizontally and "CANADA" written vertically. The branch of service insignia was the crossed arrows formerly worn by the U.S. Army Indian Scouts. The unit wore red, white, and blue piping on their garrison cap and on the breast oval behind their parachutist wings. Members of the unit also wore a red, white, and blue fourragère, lanyard, or shoulder cord made out of parachute shroud lines. Source: The First Special Force web site: net/history.html