Recalling the 'forgotten war': The battle for the Al

Bill Bowen

Guest Writer

—DUTCH HARBOR, Aleutian Islands.

On the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II, Americans — especially Arkansans — should be made aware of the forgotten war, fought in what Alaskans call "forgotten America," the Aleutian Islands.

It is a chain of 270 islands, the western end of which crosses the international date line. The forgotten war began at Dutch Harbor, where the antiaircraft defenses were in the hands of Arkansas soldiers. They were members of the 206th Coast Artillery batteries of the Arkansas National Guard. Mobilized in January 1941 — ten months before Pearl Harbor — they came from college campuses and towns throughout Arkansas: Arkansas Tech at Russellville, Monticello A and M, Arkansas State at Jonesboro and from batteries in Marianna, Little Rock, Camden, Helena and Hot Springs.

For me, the trip to this remote part of the world was a pilgrimage that I vowed I would make 43 years ago. One of my older brothers, Cpl. John Falls Bowen, was a member of the 206th Coast Artillery. After surviving the fierce attack on Dutch Harbor, John was killed two months later while attempting to secure supplies piled on a dock on a small island in the harbor. A storm was raging, and high seas swept him off the dock and he drowned.

The pilings of the dock remain. And as I saw them and photographed them sticking up out of the sea in that bleak and mournful place, I remembered a line from John's diary — a sort of an epitaph he wrote for one of his fellow soldiers. It was: "A mighty cold grave for a very good man."

After training, my brother John and the other Arkansans arrived in Dutch Harbor in August 1941. On the mainland of the then-territory of Alaska there were other Arkansas guardsmen, the 153d National Guard infantry division.

Aleutian weather, according to the Coast and Geodetic Survey, is the world's worst. Winds gusting to 120 miles an hour are not uncommon. I was there July 31 and August 1 in a period of relative calm, but the day before I arrived winds of 50 miles an hour accompanied by fog and rain shut out air traffic from Anchorage.

The isolation is remarkable. Only six of the volcanic islands are occupied — the most remote settlements in America. Attu has a Coast Guard station, Adak a Navy base, and Dutch Harbor, coupled with Unalaska, is the population center with 1,922 souls. Dutch Harbor's water is supplied by the icy Bering Sea. On the island, the average temperature is 38 degrees; annual average precipitation (there is measurable precipitation 200 days a year) is 57.7 inches.

What a place to fight a war. In most combat theaters in World War II, combatants had only to fight each other; in the Aleutians they battled the weather, the wilderness and boredom.

But boredom turned to war June 3, 1942, when a Japanese task force appeared 170 miles southwest. Leading the attack were the carriers Ryujo and Junyo, two heavy cruisers, three destroyers, five submarines and troop transports carrying 2,500 soldiers to occupy the western islands.

The Japanese task force was seeking revenge for the April 18 Doolittle Raid on Tokyo and to draw attention away from the attack just beginning at the Battle of Midway. Japanese Naval Order No. 18 ordered the invasion and occupation of "key points in the western Aleutians" and destruction of "all enemy forces that may oppose the invasion."

Two days of bombing and strafing resulted. Attu and Kiska were occupied. Far south, the Battle of Midway sealed Japan's fate in what proved to be the turning point of the Pacific war. The American losses at Dutch Harber were 78 dead plus 14 planes. The Japanese lost 15 men and just under a dozen planes.

But one Zero fighter that was shot down and recovered intact proved to be a disastrous loss for Japanese aviation. It was salvaged for secret test flying, giving American pilots and engineers the knowledge needed to combat the Zero's speed and maneuverability.

Since 1980, Congress has appropriated millions to clean up the World War II debris in the Aleutians. Concurrently, the National Park Service is documenting historical sites before they are obscured by the cleanup process. What remains today of the forgotten war? A Japanese shrine erected in Kiska in 1942 and rusted Quonset huts, pill boxes, eroded trenches and abandoned gun placement.

The main motel (there are two) in Dutch Harbor is the Unisea, owned by Universal Seafoods, Ltd., a Japanese company. A number of ships, two of which were massive, were in the harbor the day I was there. They were processing herring for Universal Seafoods for shipment primarily to Japan.

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Alaska will co-operate in this effort. Its Historical Commission disburses $300,000 annually to support select historical studies of interest to that state, and I know the 206th Coast Artillery association, with membership throughout the state, is interested. So is the successor National Guard unit to

eutians

he World War II 206th battalion.

Would such a historical account e worthwhile? In a way, the Dutch Harbor experience was part f the single most important naval attle in World War II, Midway, ne of the six or eight most impor- ant naval battles in the history of he world. Had the two-carrier flo- illa diverted to Dutch Harbor been ommitted to the Battle of Mid- vay, the results might have been lisastrous for the United States.

The assault on Dutch Harbor vas the first attack on the North American continent since 1812 vhen the British burned the Capi- ol. The recovery of Kiska and Attu in 1943 marked the beginning f the island-hopping campaign he United States employed to rive the Japanese from the Pa- ific.

Since no one else has chosen to o so, I would hope that Arkansas n some official way would take ote of this forgotten brigade and rrite its history. My brother and he 2,000 other Arkansans who ought so valiantly against the nemy and against nature deserve o less.

(William H. Bowen is chairman of he board of First Commercial Bank. He was a Navy aviator in World War I.)

International

JAPANESE WARSHIPS & PLANES
More than a battle was won.

BATTLE OF THE PACIFIC

The Face of Victory

The U.S. had not merely won a great battle in the Pacific and averted a great disaster: The U.S. had proved its skill and might in a new form of warfare at sea. For, in the Battle of Midway, U.S. forces met and drove back the first full battle fleet, organized on the grand scale for modern war, which any nation has yet put to sea.

In the Japanese Fleet of battleships, cruisers, destroyers and submarines, the capital ship was the aircraft carrier. That fleet, built around sea-borne air power, had to retreat before U.S. air power in a still mightier form: the land-based airplane, now come into its own as a dominant weapon of naval warfare.

Japan's losses in battleships and cruisers were great, but not decisive. Japan suffered a smashing blow to her carrier force. Yet it was not even that blow that made the U.S. Navy so jubilant this week: Japan still has more aircraft carriers than the U.S. can put into action. The U.S.—not Japan—is stronger, now and potentially, in long-ranged, heavy-loaded, land-based Army bombers of the kind which sent the Japs reeling back from Midway; and it was in this fact, rather than in the actual, comparative losses at Midway, that the U.S. saw the face of victory.

Of Things to Come. For weeks the Army & Navy had known that something Japanese was up. Seldom had the foreshadow of a great naval action been so clearly seen. U.S. and Allied reconnaissance planes constantly tabbed Japanese movements. U.S. submarines, in the role of naval cavalry, scouting while they raided, kept a steady check on the Japanese.

In Melbourne, Honolulu and Washington, pins moved and blue lights winked on Intelligence maps when the Japs shifted battleships, carriers and cruisers from the Bay of Bengal to the East Indies, then to home waters. Part of the Japanese main fleet moved southward toward a rendezvous at Formosa. Aircraft and light naval units suddenly withdrew from Australia's outlying islands; submarines were left to do the bulk of Jap work, take the brunt of Jap losses there.

By last fortnight the Japanese had amassed a great armada. According to the U.S. Navy's later communiqués, this fleet must have included at least five carriers, three to five battleships, many cruisers, destroyers and submarines, with troop transports to occupy points which the advance forces had battered.

The U.S. Navy's Admiral Ernest Joseph King and the Army's General George Catlett Marshall knew that such a force would have assembled only for a major blow. The question was: Where? They had to apply what Admiral King last week called his doctrine of "calculated risk," placing the bulk of what they had where the Jap seemed most likely to strike, where the U.S. stood to win or lose the most. They calculated the risks and chose Midway. They put their own forces on the move. Then they waited. On June 3, at 9 a.m., P.W.T., the waiting ended—and the first Jap blow was not at Midway.

The Enemy Is Attacking. It was 6 a.m. at Dutch Harbor when the first Japanese planes appeared, the first Japanese bombs dropped. For their first blow, the Japs had chosen a spot in the Aleutians, the fog-bound islands which curve between Alaska and Japan. At Dutch Harbor, before Dec. 7, the Navy was perfecting a submarine and flying-boat base. Last week the Army & Navy had some defensive forces at Dutch Harbor, but not their main strength.

At first the Japanese struck lightly. Four bombers and some 15 fighters from a lurking carrier fired a few warehouses. Later scouting planes appeared, but dropped no bombs. Apparently all the Jap planes returned to their carrier, indicating little if any air defense at Dutch Harbor. Then the perennial rains and fogs of the Aleutians shrouded Dutch Harbor. The tense U.S. supposed that the Japs had hit & run, but at week's end, Admiral King announced: "Action in the Aleutians is still continuing."

It appeared that the Jap attack on Dutch Harbor was more than a reconnaissance, more than an attempt to draw U.S. forces from some other point. It was an end in itself, an effort to seize a foothold for a later drive on the inner Aleutians, the Alaskan mainland and their invaluable bases for long-range U.S. air assaults on Japan—or for Japanese assault on the northwestern U.S.

General Marshall and Admiral King had expected a foray against Dutch Harbor. They had not miscalculated the risks.

"It Is Too Early." The morning after the first attack on Dutch Harbor, another (and much stronger) force of Japanese planes assaulted Midway Island in the mid-Pacific, 1,300 miles northwest of Pearl Harbor. Midway was worth a Japanese gamble; only Pearl Harbor was more vital to U.S. operations in the Pacific. And, in Japanese hands, Midway could be a steppingstone to Pearl Harbor, Alaska and the U.S. mainland.

The Japanese got a mighty shock. Midway was ready. This much the Japanese might have expected: Midway's defending Marines had repulsed five lighter attacks. What the Japanese patently did not expect was the strength of the forces on and around Midway. Marine Corps fighters instantly took the air. On Midway's field were Army bombers, warmed up and ready to track fleeing Japs to their carriers. Anti-aircraft fire blanketed Midway's sky.

Jap planes and pilots littered the sea. U.S. fighters and bombers, pursuing the rest, found the Japanese main force. U.S. Navy carriers with their fighters, scout bombers and torpedo planes closed in for the kill. More Army bombers rose from Midway. They were not all. Tiny (1½-sq. mi.) Midway's limited airfield space was no limit on the total air strength which the Army could throw into the battle.

Long-range Army bombers could fly from Hawaii and Johnston Island, refuel and load bombs on Midway, then join the struggle. Or they could fly laden from Hawaii, expend their gasoline and bombs wherever they found Jap warships, then

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Between the battle area and U.S. headquarters in Pearl Harbor there was no radio communication (the Japs might pick up messages). The Navy's Admiral Chester William Nimitz and the Army's Lieut. General Delos Carleton Emmons had to wait for reports from returning planes. The first reports were hard to believe. Cautious Admiral Nimitz held his fire. His first communiqué was a masterpiece of restraint. Then, on the second day, he announced:

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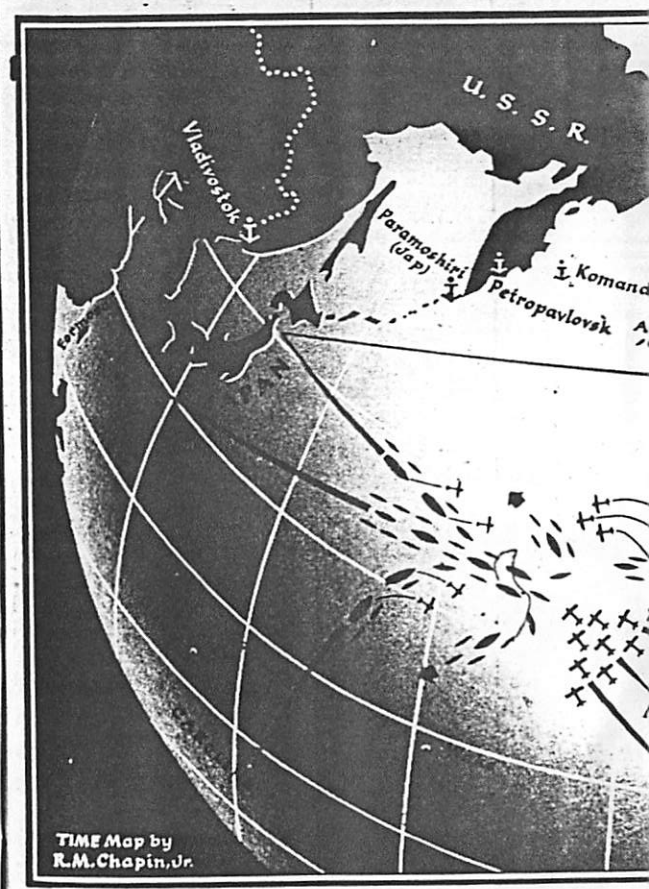

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land on Midway if that were possible. If not, they could come down at sea. This was war. This was the kill.

Carrier pilots could take the same, long chance. Whether or not they chose to, they probably had to take it: in battle, carriers give no radio fixes to returning planes and may be driven from an appointed rendezvous by enemy attack. A U.S. communiqué told of U.S. flyers adrift in rubber boats, of some under Jap machine-gun fire, of others parachuting down in the same hail. For both U.S. and Japanese submarines, the crowded water west of Midway made ideal hunting grounds.

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"A momentous victory is in the making. . . . Pearl Harbor has now been partially avenged. Vengeance will not be complete until Japanese sea power is reduced to impotence. We have made substantial progress in that direction. Perhaps we will be forgiven if we claim that we are about midway* to that objective. The battle is not over. . . ." But Admiral Nimitz could claim, "with full confidence," that in the battle's first phase:

▶ Four (and possibly five) Jap carriers had been hit. Two were certainly sunk, with all their aircraft (about 100 planes, probably with others crated below decks). A third may have been sunk, in any event was badly damaged. So was a fourth. Most of their planes were also destroyed.

▶ Three battleships were hit. At least one was badly damaged.

▶ Two cruisers were badly damaged, two more were hit. Later, additional hits were reported on two cruisers—whether two of those previously damaged, the Navy did not immediately know.

▶ Three troop transports were damaged.

▶ One destroyer was sunk.

Many of the wounded Jap ships may never reach their bases, or nearer havens in Japan's mandated islands. So saying, Admiral Nimitz spoke from bitter experience; the Navy knows what it is to lose valuable, limping ships.

Admiral Nimitz announced that one U.S. destroyer had been sunk. He also said: "One of our carriers was hit and some planes were lost. Our personnel casualties were light." Navy men knew what these careful words meant: until the information is of no possible value to the Japs, the Navy will not detail its losses.

* Pun.

At Last, A Team. Successful exponents though they were of sea and air power, the Japanese had brought a major surface fleet into an area dominated by air power from the sea, plus air power from the land. On a hugely swollen scale, the Battle of Midway was a repetition of the earlier rehearsal in the Coral Sea, where Douglas MacArthur's bombers from Australia took the play from the Navy. But, this time, there was a happy difference. Between Admiral Nimitz and General Emmons in Honolulu, there was complete coordination before and during the battle. Luckily for the U.S., the Navy's sea and air forces, the Army's land-based air units made a perfect team.

What portion of the Japanese ships the U.S. accounted for could only be guessed. The U.S. apparently had sunk or hit most of the Japanese capital ships involved—particularly the most important aircraft carriers. But the Japanese had escaped with most of their lesser craft.

Among the great naval battles of the world this one was of a new kind. So far as the communiqués indicated, the greater portion of the two fleets never got within a day's sailing distance of each other. Most of the action was fought by aircraft.

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