HEADQUARTERS 206th CA(AA) REGIMENT
AATC Fort Bliss, Texas

31 March 1944

To the Officers and Men of 206th CA (AA).

This is the last day this Regiment will function as a Regiment during this emergency. As of tomorrow this Headquarters and the Regimental Headquarters Battery stand disbanded for the duration of the war. The Battalions will begin operations as Separate Organizations under the new Tables of Organizations. This is the result of the new policy of the War Department not to activate new Groups and to break down the old Regimental Organizations into Separate Battalions.

For more than twenty-one years this Regiment has functioned, during which time it has made an enviable record. More than 10,000 men, and approximately 500 officers have seen service with this Regiment since its organization in November 1923. It has been my good fortune and great pleasure to Command the Regiment from its organization to this date. In all the twenty-one years I have Commanded the Regiment my heart has been with it. Because of individual business responsibilities in civil life, at times, I have found Commanding the Regiment was an added responsibility, but the love I have had for it has always inspired me to forge ahead and "Never Give Up". I am happy that it has been my privilege to Command the Regiment for three years in this war and that I saw it fight the two battles with the Japs at Dutch Harbor. I have never before and never expect to see greater valor, better teamwork and greater soldierly bearing than was displayed on the battle field at Dutch Harbor. The Regiment did not fail me when the crucial time came. I saw what you did. I saw demonstrated in each of you on the battle field your love for your country, your love for the Regiment, your interest in each other, and me, and the results of our weeks, months and years of training for the defense of our Country and our Flag. There has never been a finer bunch of officers and men associated together in a Military Organization. Team work, "esprit de corps", all pulling together to the same end - to have an efficient and able organization of the Army, and to be able to defend our country with credit and honor on the battle fields.

From now on the Separate Battalions and Organizations will carry on. Many of you will no doubt find your way into various other organizations of the Army before the end of the war. I am being transferred to Camp Stewart, Georgia. Wherever we go, whatever we may do, upon all occasions and at all times, the spirit so long manifested in the 206th must guide us on as it has done the past twenty-one years. God bless each of you. Thank you for your loyalty. Thank you for your fine cooperation. Thanks for the fine soldiers you are. Thanks for having been your Commander for twenty-one years. <u>NEVER GIVE UP!</u>

ELGAN C ROBERTSON
Colonel, 206th CA (AA)
Commanding.

It was a small campaign by World War II standards, fought under the most miserable conditions in a virtually unknown corner of our own backyard—the Aleutian Islands.

MASSACRE Bay, Amchitka, Umnak, Dutch Harbor. Names dimly remembered by most Americans. They are part of a forgotten front of World War II. Yet the fifteen-month campaign on that front saw one of the bloodiest and most costly battles of the war in relation to the number of men involved, the last and longest classic gun duel between capital ships, and one of the most successful large-scale clandestine operations in the history of warfare. It was a campaign in which airmen faced two opponents—the enemy and the weather—with losses more than four to one in favor of the latter. And it was the only campaign of World War II fought on North American soil—the Aleutian Islands. The Aleutians extend, like the curved tusk of a prehistoric mastodon, some 1,200 miles westward from the Alaska peninsula to within 650 miles of Asia.

The 124 islands, islets, and rocks that comprise the Aleutian chain are treeless and largely volcanic in origin, with mountain peaks reaching up to 9,000 feet. Along this chain the relatively warm Japan Current meets cold air masses that sweep from Siberia across the Bering Sea, producing the world's worst flying weather with almost constant precipitation and fog. Many of the islands have only eight to ten clear days a year and all are battered frequently by the infamous williwaws—winds of hurricane velocity that have been clocked at more than 100 miles an hour. Add to that surface temperatures that sometimes drop to zero, ankle-deep mud on warmer days, and icy sea water in which survival is measured in minutes, and you have one of the most difficult, frustrating areas in which to conduct military operations.

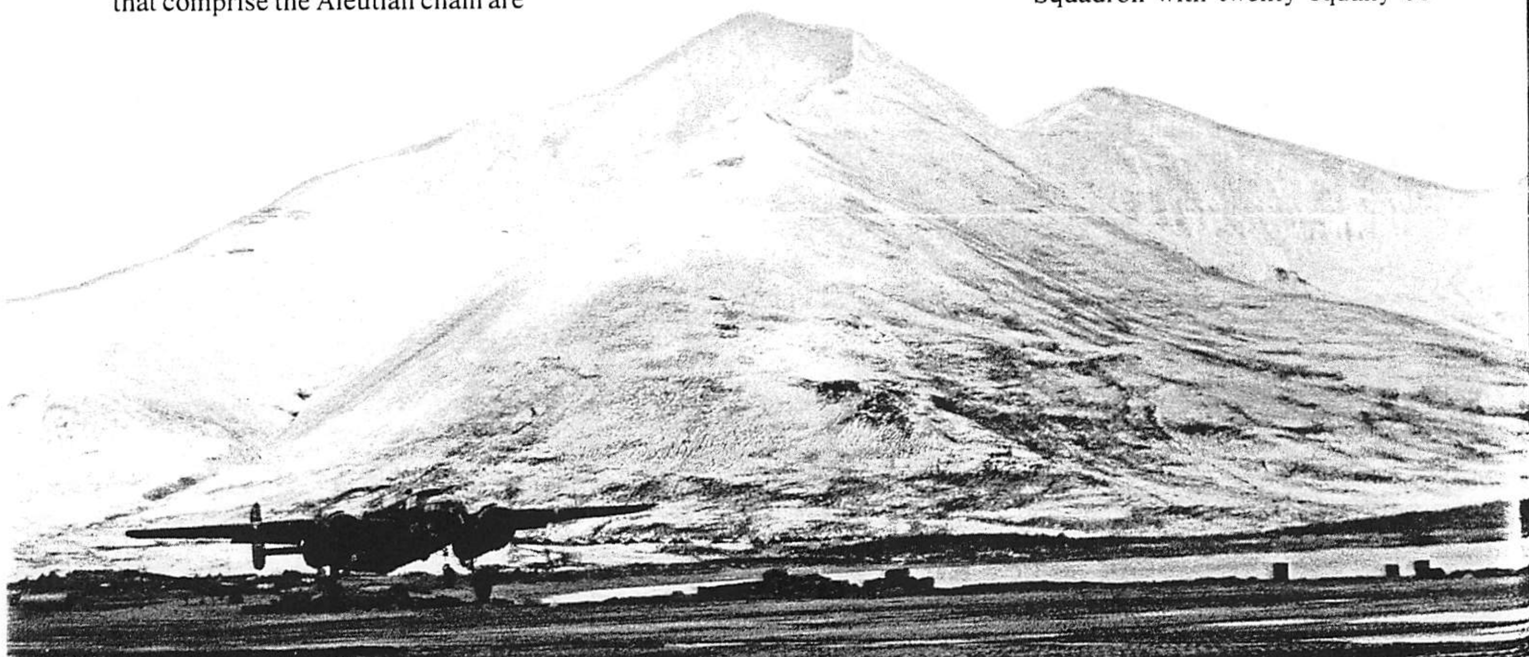
On June 3, 1942, planes from a Japanese carrier force, hidden by dense fog, bombed one of the few American bases then standing in the Aleutians, launching an invasion of the island chain and one of the toughest campaigns of the war.

The Belated Buildup

When the Japanese struck, the Alaska Defense Command was, at best, partially prepared. Although Air Corps pioneers like Billy Mitchell and Hap Arnold had advocated basing units in Alaska, the decision to do so was not made until war had broken out in Europe. The command might not have been even partially prepared had it not been for an energetic, unorthodox, air-minded Infantry colonel, Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., who rose to three-star rank before the campaign ended.

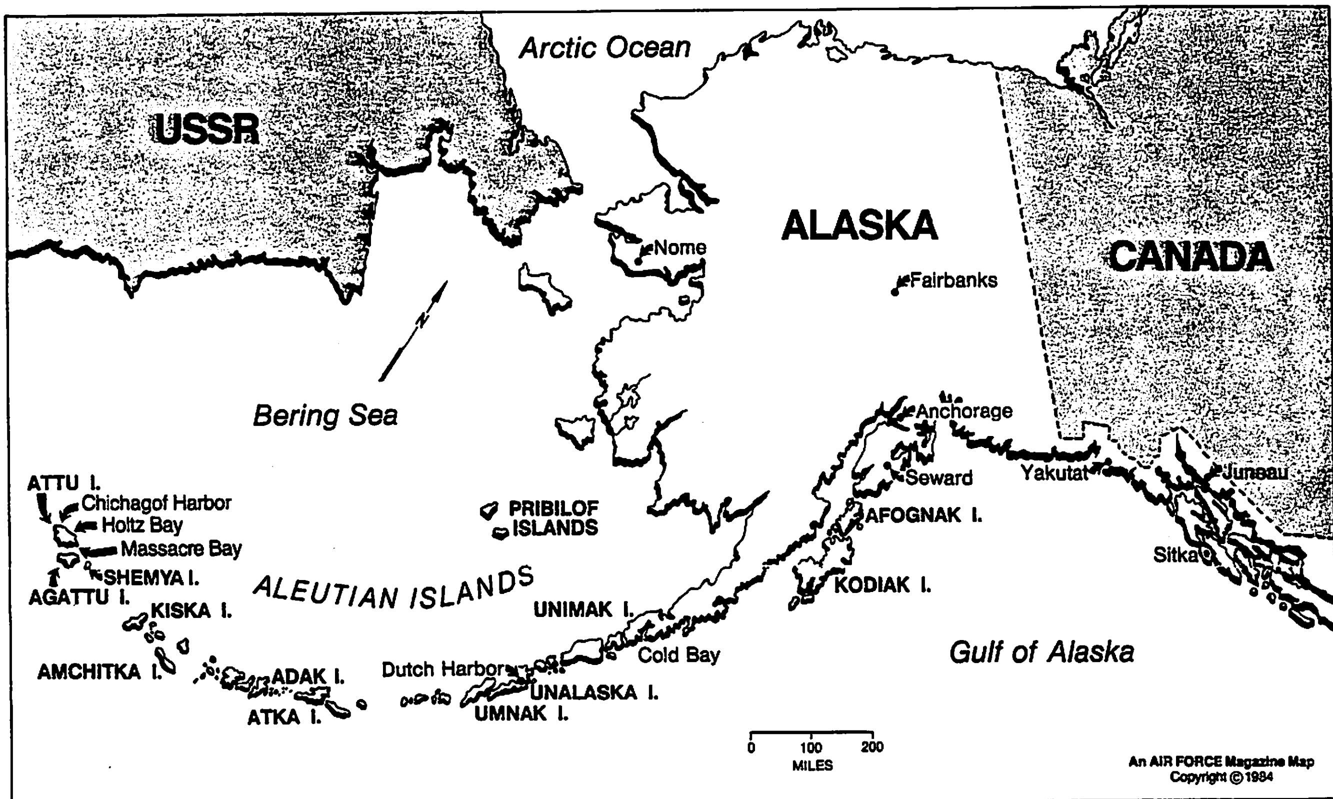
When Buckner arrived on the scene in July 1940, there were no military airfields in Alaska or the Aleutians, no roads connecting sites for future bases, no adequate communication system, and only one short railroad. Buckner was convinced that any attack on North America would come through the Aleutians, which also could provide bases for an invasion of Japan should we go to war with that country. He believed that defense of Alaska had to be based on airpower and told Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall he "would rather have one squadron of heavy bombers than a whole division of infantry."

By March 1941, Buckner had enough fields completed to bring in the 36th and 73d Bombardment Squadrons with a total of fifteen obsolete B-18s, and the 18th Pursuit Squadron with twenty equally ob-



THE FORGOTTEN FRONT

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE



solete P-36s. This composite group formed a nucleus for the Eleventh Air Force, which was activated in February 1942, and was the entire air strength in Alaska on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. After that, reinforcements began to arrive in driblets, most of the crews green, with little instrument flying training and no cold-weather experience. Alaska and the Aleutians were to remain a low-priority theater. Buckner and his air commander, Maj. Gen. William O. Butler, seldom had more than 200 combat aircraft operational.

General Buckner believed it essential to extend the reach of his air element by constructing airfields on some of the Aleutian Islands. Before the Joint Army and Navy Board approved building bases to the west, Buckner diverted funds to secretly construct airfields at Cold Bay, near the tip of the Alaska peninsula, and on Umnak Island, some 250 miles further west. The strip at Umnak, like others to follow, was steel mat laid on the spongy tundra that covers most of the islands.

On May 20, 1942, the first combat planes flew into the partially completed strip. It was so soft that it tossed landing fighters thirty feet into the air. The steel mat rippled ahead of bombers landing or taking off. Nevertheless, by June 3, Umnak had a squadron of P-40s, six Martin B-26s, two B-18s, and a B-17 used for reconnaissance. Two days later the 55th Fighter Squadron (pursuit units had been redesignated as "fighter" by this time) arrived with its P-38s, the first to be sent to a combat theater. They shared tents, mud, fog, and C-rations with the earlier arrivals.

While airfields were being built, the Navy had completed a base at Dutch Harbor, between Cold Bay and Umnak. The fighters were there to protect it, but there was no reliable warning system. Only two primitive radars were in operation.

LEFT: From recaptured Attu, at the end of the Aleutian chain, AAF B-24s and B-25s could reach Japan's Kurile Islands. Attu's mountains were a formidable obstacle to the US forces who retook the island in one of the bloodiest battles of the war.

Dutch Harbor

The Japanese attack on June 3 had two immediate objectives: to destroy the US Navy base at Dutch Harbor and to occupy Attu and Kiska Islands at the western end of the Aleutian chain. After the Doolittle raid on Tokyo in April, the Japanese decided to protect the home islands better by extending their defense perimeter to the north, east, and south. It was never their intention to use the Aleutians as a base for attacking Alaska or the West Coast, but simply to deny the Americans use of the westernmost islands.

Strategically, the attack was planned as a diversion for the Battle of Midway, scheduled for the following day, June 4. Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto hoped to divide what was left of Adm. Chester Nimitz's Pacific Fleet after the losses it had taken in the Coral Sea, destroy the remaining aircraft carriers, seize Midway and the western Aleutians, and perhaps negotiate a peace.

Fortunately, Nimitz did not take the bait. In May, the Navy had broken the Japanese code and Nimitz knew in general, if not in detail, Yamamoto's plan of battle. Nimitz believed correctly that Midway would be a carrier fight. He sent five cruisers and four destroyers under Rear Adm. Robert A. Theobald, who was in overall command of Aleutian operations, to reinforce the eight World War I destroyers based in Alaskan waters. Nimitz's four carriers soundly defeated the

The flight line at Adak was typical of conditions at Aleutian bases during most of the campaign. P-39 Airacobras and P-40 Warhawks are among the fighters on the hardstand of this hastily built airstrip.

Japanese at Midway in one of the decisive battles of World War II.

Unwisely, Yamamoto split his own fleet, sending two carriers, two heavy cruisers, and two destroyers to attack Dutch Harbor, supported by a force of four cruisers, nine destroyers, and three transports lying to the west, ready to occupy Attu and Kiska. The Japanese intelligence was not on a par with that of the US. Yamamoto believed there was a large force at Dutch Harbor and that the nearest combat planes were at Kodiak Island, 550 miles east. The Japanese expected to surprise the Americans completely.

With strategic warning that an attack was imminent, aircrews at Umnak and Cold Bay were on alert from dawn to dusk—at that time of year, from 0400 to 2300 hours. On June 2, a Navy Catalina PBY patrol bomber spotted the Japanese task force through a break in the fog, but could not maintain contact. The following morning at 0545, Capt. Tadao Kato launched his aircraft from a position about 180 miles south of Dutch Harbor. US fighter planes at Cold Bay were scrambled, but did not reach the scene until after bombs-away. They were in time to shoot down one Japanese plane and damage another, and one was knocked down by flak. The unreliable radio system failed to alert fighters at Umnak. In that first day's attack, twenty Americans were killed and a barracks destroyed.

Late the following afternoon, the Japanese dive bombers and fighters struck again from their carriers, which still were concealed by fog. This time the P-40s at Umnak shot down four of eight attacking planes before the task force began its withdrawal to support the landings at Attu and Kiska that took place on June 6 and 7. In all, the US lost forty-three men killed and fifty wounded, two P-40s, one B-17, and several planes that were lost or wrecked in bad weather. The campaign began much as it was to continue—in fog, uncertainty, and confusion.

One Gray Island After Another

For a week after Dutch Harbor, the whereabouts of the Japanese naval force remained a mystery. A Navy weather detachment at Kiska stopped transmitting on June 7, but fog blanketed the island. Air Force bombers, Navy PBY amphibians, and ships of all descriptions searched in vain along the chain and into the Bering Sea. On June 10, an Air Force bomber went down through a hole in the clouds over Kiska Harbor and was fired on. Five B-17s and five B-24s left Cold Bay immediately, refueled at Umnak, and set out for Kiska, more than 600 miles to the west. Thus began a campaign of interdicting sea lines of communication, attrition, and harassment of the Japanese garrisons, interspersed with infrequent air-to-air combat, that was to last for nearly fifteen months. It would be almost a year before enough US troops were available for an assault on the islands.

Kiska lay farther from Umnak than Berlin from Eighth Air Force bases in the United Kingdom. B-17s and B-24s could reach the island only with extra tanks and a reduced bomb load. P-38s to defend the bombers against float-equipped Japanese fighters needed two auxiliary tanks and luck just to make it. The obvious answer was airfields closer to Kiska, which would also allow the bombers and fighters—P-38s, P-39s, and P-40s—to take advantage of breaks in the rapidly changing Aleutian weather.

At the end of August 1942, Army engineers landed unopposed at Adak, about 350 miles west of Umnak and 250 miles from Kiska. Ten days later, a lagoon had been filled in, a runway laid over it, and the first combat planes touched down. Kiska Harbor now was within comfortable range of medium and heavy bombers and fighters. On September 14, twelve B-24s and twenty-five fighters bombed and strafed Japanese installations with the best results so far. Four Zero float planes were shot down, but two P-38s collided in the dogfight and were lost. No more missions against Kiska were flown out of Umnak now that the runway at Adak was operational.

The Japanese knew they could not stop these attacks or protect convoys carrying reinforcements and supplies without land-based fighters. The highest priority on both Kiska and Attu became construction of a runway—by hand, since they had no heavy equipment. For the next twelve months, Japanese troops struggled to complete landing strips on the islands, only to have the work of a few days during bad weather wiped out by bombers and strafing fighters. The diary of a dead Japanese soldier on Attu com-

plained that "these strafing attacks by American fighter planes are enough to make a demon cry."

But from Adak, Attu still lay beyond the range of most Air Force fighters. The next move forward was to Amchitka, 285 miles from Attu and only eighty-five from Kiska. Army engineers landed on the island January 11, 1943, in the face of a raging storm with eighty-knot winds and twenty-foot surf. The engineers and Navy Seabees drained and filled a lake to make a runway, under attack from time to time by the few float planes left at Kiska. At the end of January, Lt. Col. Jack Chennault, son of Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault of Flying Tigers fame, brought a squadron of P-40s to Amchitka. The next day, two attacking float planes were shot down; Japanese strikes from Kiska ceased altogether by mid-February. The P-40s soon were joined by P-38s, medium bombers, and a squadron of B-24s.

American troops landed on Amchitka in January 1943. A month later, fighters were operating from the new airstrip, and by March medium and heavy bombers were striking Kiska. Here trucks haul sand for runway foundations. The Japanese never were able to complete runways at Kiska and Attu.

In good weather several strikes a day were launched against Kiska, which the Americans hoped to recapture before Attu. By mid-April the Japanese had no float-equipped fighters left, no runway for land-based fighters, and not much chance of reinforcements, so effective was the sea/air blockade.

At the end of October 1942, the Navy had moved several of its surface ships to the Solomon Islands. After that, the blockade was enforced largely by submarines, Air Force bombers, and Navy Catalina PBYs. The lumbering 100-knot Catalinas were indispensable in the Aleutians. They carried twenty hours' of fuel, flew when nothing else could get airborne, and were used for patrol, bombing, rescue, and even to lighter supplies to the beachhead during the Battle of Attu. By March, the Air Force alone was credited with sinking or crippling at least forty Japanese ships. No supply convoy reached the Japanese garrisons after December 1942. The flak, however, remained heavy at both Kiska and Attu, with large concentrations of guns and automatic weapons around the small targets that were characteristic of the Aleutians.

Hazards and Heroics

The Alaska theater (which is to say the Aleutians) was the only combat theater of World War II that produced no aces, though Lt. (later Col.) John B. Murphy, credited with three victories in the islands, later became an ace in Europe. This was due to an absence of targets, not to lack of skill and courage on the part of US pilots. It took plenty of both to fly in that weather factory.

The beastly weather was exacerbated by complete lack of navigation aids west of Umnak until late in the campaign, frequent Arctic static that make low-frequency radios useless, constant icing, charts that often were inaccurate, the paucity of emergency landing strips, and no formal rescue service. The lethality of Aleutian weather combined with these factors is illustrated by a mission of January 18, 1943. Seven heavy bombers, five mediums, and six fighters—a relatively large force by Aleutian standards—attacked Attu from their base at Adak. Weather closed in and six of the eighteen disappeared without a trace.

There were no comfortable barracks and often no hot meal waiting at the end of a long battle with flak and weather. Aircrews shared with the ground echelon some of the most miserable living conditions of World War II. For weeks after a new field opened, everyone lived and ate in tents that often had several inches of muddy water on the floor and that were frequently blown down by the violent Aleutian winds. The men were completely isolated from the outside world with little in the way of recreation. Always there was the cold, gray, wet weather—particularly hard on maintenance crews whose work was done mostly in the open. About the time Quonset huts, showers, and maintenance hangars went up, it was time to move west to a new field.

Not everyone had the mental and physical stamina to withstand that life week after week, month after

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month. A sense of humor helped. Crews from the 36th Bomb Squadron brought a tree from the mainland to Umnak and christened it "Umnak National Forest." The tree was for the exclusive use of "Skootch," a dog belonging to the CO, Col. William O. Eareckson, who was one of the most colorful and fearless characters of the Arctic war.

Brian Garfield, in his book *The Thousand Mile War* (Doubleday, 1969), quotes this bit of verse about an Aleutian veteran at the Pearly Gates, written in the summer of 1943 by WO Boswell Boomhower.

> "What have you done," St. Peter asked,
> "To gain admission here?"
> "I've been in the Aleutians
> For nigh unto a year."
> Then the gates swung open sharply
> As St. Peter tolled the bell.
> "Come in," said he, "and take a harp.
> You've had your share of hell."

Actor Charlton Heston saw a brighter side to Aleutian service, at least in retrospect. Immediately after his marriage he was sent to the Aleutians where he served two years as a B-25 radio operator/gunner. "At least," he said, "it got me safely through the first two perilous years of matrimony, when the incidence of divorce is the highest."

The Battle of Attu

In January 1943, the cautious Rear Admiral Theobald, who had commanded US forces in the Aleutians since before Dutch Harbor, was replaced by a hard-driving, decisive veteran of the Coral Sea, Midway, and Guadalcanal, Rear Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid. His orders were to clear the Japanese out of the Aleutians. The enemy was believed to have from 600 to 1,000 troops on Attu and about 8,000 at Kiska. Both garrisons were suffering from lack of supplies caused by the blockade.

Kinkaid submitted to the Joint Chiefs of Staff a plan for invading Kiska. There was not enough shipping available for an operation of that size, but the recapture of Attu was approved. Over the protests of Kinkaid and General Buckner, the Army's 7th Motorized Division, training in California for assignment to North Africa, was selected for the landing. D-Day was set for May 7, 1943, by which time the division had to be reequipped for cold-weather combat and troopships with their escorts assembled.

While that was going on, Admiral Kinkaid set up a surface naval blockade of Attu and Kiska with six ships. Japanese Admiral Hosogaya attempted to run the blockade in late March with four new heavy cruisers, four destroyers, and three large transports. He was met on March 26 in the vicinity of the Komandorski Islands, about 500 miles west of Attu, by Rear Adm. Charles H. McMorris's task force of two old cruisers and four destroyers. For three and a half hours raged this last battle between capital ships with no aircraft involved, until the Japanese withdrew, short of ammunition, believing US bombers were on the way (they were bombing up at Adak and couldn't reach the battle in time), and not knowing that one US cruiser, *Salt Lake City*, lay dead in the water behind a smoke screen. Thus did Admiral Hosogaya snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, and end up on the beach for it. No Japanese convoy reached Attu after that.

As D-Day approached, the US assembled a force of three battleships, six cruisers, nineteen destroyers, one escort carrier, and enough transports to move the entire 7th Motorized Division. They were—or would have been, if the weather had cooperated—supported by 222 Air Force planes, twenty-five Navy planes aboard the carrier, and one Royal Canadian Air Force squadron, opposed by an estimated fifteen float planes. This overwhelming air superiority was largely nullified by adverse weather that closed out the possibility of support operations.

The invasion force was kept at sea by stormy weather for six days until May 11, when troops went ashore unopposed at Holtz Bay, Massacre Bay, and on the west side of the mountainous island. They rapidly discovered that the Japanese garrison numbered about 2,600 fanatical fighters rather than a small force of retreads; that wheeled and tracked vehicles and heavy artillery were of no use on the soft, snow-covered tundra; that US troops were not properly equipped for ten-degree weather; and that initial combat experience comes at a high price.

On May 22, several Mitsubishi bombers based at Paramushiro, one of the northernmost of Japan's Kurile Islands and now part of the Soviet empire, bombed naval vessels in Holtz Bay, but with little damage. The next day, another bombing attack resulted in the only air combat at Attu. Five bombers were shot down, three of them by Lt. Frederick Moore.

By May 28, Japanese combat strength had been reduced to about 800, concentrated in a small area near Chichagof Harbor. Before a last desperate counterattack, the Japanese killed all their wounded who did not commit suicide. The counterattack failed. Some 500 survivors committed suicide with hand grenades. Only twenty-eight Japanese were taken prisoner.

Five hundred and fifty Americans were killed on Attu and 1,148 were wounded. Nearly 2,000 were victims of exposure, in many cases resulting in the amputation of frostbitten limbs. This first Army amphibious island assault was a bitter, costly experience that planners and commanders did not soon forget.

Kiska: The Great Vanishing Act

Army engineers soon had runways operational at Attu and at Shemya, thirty miles to the east and the only flat island of the Aleutian chain. These fields brought the B-25s as well as B-24s within range of Japan's Kurile Islands. The first attack on Japanese territory since the Doolittle raid of April 1942 took place on July 10, 1943. Eight B-25s were believed to have hit Paramushiro, with uncertain results. A week later, six B-24s bombed an airfield and ships in the harbor at Paramushiro, but, more important, came home with photographs to supplement skimpy intelligence on Japanese installations in the northern Kuriles.

The invasion of Kiska was set for August 15. Eleventh Air Force was built up from 292 aircraft to 359. An invasion force of 34,000 properly equipped American troops and 5,000 Canadians was assembled for the operation. The US Navy provided a force of nearly 100 capital

This rubble resulted from US bombing of Kiska. Wreckage was all the Japanese left on the island. After US forces recaptured Attu and as the joint American-Canadian invasion of Kiska was being planned, the Japanese pulled out.

and supporting ships and transports.

As D-Day drew near, Air Force pilots, who hammered the island every flyable day, brought back reports of reduced activity on Kiska, tapering off to no visible activity and no flak by the end of July. Had the Japanese left, and if so, how could they have evaded the screen of Navy ships and patrol bombers? Admiral Kinkaid and General Buckner thought the Japanese might have holed up in caves and tunnels. Buckner wanted to put a reconnaissance party ashore, but Kinkaid decided on a full-scale invasion. It would, he said, be good training in any event.

The landings went ahead on schedule, only to find the island deserted. On the afternoon of July 28, the Japanese had slipped into Kiska Harbor under cover of fog and, in two hours, embarked more than 5,000 troops aboard two cruisers and six destroyers. Three days later, they were back at Paramushiro, ending one of the greatest secret rescue operations of the war.

The invasion of Kiska was not without casualties, however. In the fog, more than twenty men were killed and fifty wounded by their inexperienced and somewhat trigger-happy comrades. Booby traps took the lives of several more.

Little luster was added to the reputations of senior commanders who had sent several thousand men against an island that had been bombed heavily for two weeks after the enemy departed. Uncharacteristic caution on the part of Admiral Kinkaid and General Buckner, no doubt, was fruit of the Attu experience. And as always in the Aleutians, the fog of nature thickened the fog of war.

* * *

After the evacuation of Kiska there was no more fighting in the Aleutians except for one small attack on Attu by nine Japanese bombers in October 1943. Sporadic US strikes against installations in the Kuriles continued until August 13, 1945, two days before V-J Day. In all, about 1,500 sorties were flown against these Japanese islands.

The Eleventh Air Force flew nearly 4,000 combat sorties in the Aleutians, dropped 3,500 tons of bombs (many of them through an overcast on dead-reckoning runs), and destroyed about seventy Japanese aircraft in the air and on the ground. Forty Air Force planes were lost in combat, most of them to flak, and 174 to other causes, generally weather-related.

After the shooting stopped, there remained a possibility that the Aleutians would become a base for invasion of the Japanese home islands. Runways at Adak, Shemya, and Amchitka were built up to B-29 standards but were never used by the Superforts.

All US forces in the Aleutians were reduced drastically after the Kiska affair, but, for both strategic and political reasons, continued military occupation of the chain was essential. For one thing, Soviet intentions during and after the war were not known.

What can be said of the Aleutian campaign? The Eleventh Air Force tied down anywhere from 40,000 to 70,000 Japanese troops in the Kuriles and Hokkaido and more than 400 aircraft that were needed badly in the Central and South Pacific. On the other hand, 10,000 Japanese troops and a handful of planes diverted from other and strategically more important fronts some 100,000 US troops, a relatively strong naval force, and an average of 200 combat aircraft. The US could better afford the diversion than could the Japanese.

As a result of the campaign, the United States built permanent bases for the defense of our northwest frontier, and the military services gained a great deal of experience in cold-weather operations. In any event, it would have been unthinkable not to respond to enemy occupation of American territory.

Perhaps Naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison was right when he wrote that "both sides would have done well to leave the Aleutians to the Aleuts." Logic may be on Admiral Morison's side, but neither combatant saw it that way at the time.

It can be said that no Americans of World War II served on a front that continuously tested both mental and physical fiber as did the cold, gray, wind-lashed, unforgiving Aleutians. That forgotten front should be remembered, and so should the men who fought, suffered, and sometimes died at those dismal northern outposts. ■