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FORGOTTEN BATTLES OF ATTU & KISKA

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The 8-inch/55-mm guns of Turret 3 on the *USS SALT LAKE CITY* (CA-25). Notice the heat scale on the tubes from extensive firing during the action at Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Islands in March of 1943. If you look closely, you can see snow flakes falling. Photo courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command.

The Forgotten Battles of Attu & Kiska

*1943's Bloody Fights to
Retake Japanese-Occupied
American Soil.*

By Mike Moran

From June 6-7, 1942 — just months after the attack on Pearl Harbor — a naval task force of the Japanese 5th Fleet seized the remote American islands of Attu and Kiska, 1,700 miles southwest of Anchorage, Alaska, in the Aleutian Islands. Led by two Imperial aircraft carriers and escorted by heavy and light cruisers, destroyers, submarines, seaplane tenders and support vessels, the Japanese operation quickly overwhelmed the Alaskan Sea Frontier forces, which consisted of two antiquated destroyers, three Coast Guard cutters, a gunboat and several converted fishing boats.

Japan immediately began to consolidate its position on Attu, establishing fortifications, constructing an airfield, and camouflaging barracks and supply positions. Japanese forces also began supplying troops to hold their strategic positions on both islands. They would be the only U.S. soil Japan would claim during the war in the Pacific.

The invasions were part of the combined campaign known in Japan as the Midway-Aleutian Plan. The Aleutian prong of the strategy was intended to divide the American Navy among two fronts. The primary objective of the campaign



The *USS PENNSYLVANIA* (BB-38) fires its 14-inch main battery guns at Japanese installations in the Holtz Bay area of Attu on May 11, 1943. Photo courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command.

was Midway, which Japan intended to capture while destroying the remaining American Pacific Fleet.

What Japan's intentions were for the Aleutian campaign after the capture of Midway remains unclear. The Aleutians were poorly defended outposts that presented a clear route for an invasion of Alaska, Canada and America. The islands also served as key observation posts in the strategic defense of the Japanese homeland and gave Japan control of the sea-lanes across the Northern Pacific. Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto's simultaneous operation at Midway was intended to secure control of the Central Pacific.

The Forgotten Battle

The Aleutians' combat is today overshadowed by the far larger conflict that took place at Midway, in no small part due to the fact that the Battle of Midway represented one of the most stunning American victories in the history of naval warfare. The decimation of the Japanese fleet both ended Japan's

ambitious Central Pacific push and rendered their success in the Northern Pacific strategically irrelevant.

On the American homefront, Midway also garnered most of the newspapers' attention, providing a much-needed boost to morale. Still, on the interior pages and in smaller typeset, The Associated Press reported the Japanese consolidation of their positions on the two U.S. islands. Stories carried announcements from Japanese Imperial headquarters that the island of Attu was henceforth to be known as Atsuta and Kiska as Narukami.

Taking Attu Back

In June 1942, U.S. forces in the Pacific were in no position to launch an immediate counteroffensive. On the heels of the devastating attack on Pearl Harbor and the string of Japanese successes across the Pacific theater, the U.S. took months to leverage its industrial capacity to establish, reorganize and modernize its forces.



The *USS HEYWOOD* (APA-6) hoists out LVTs, off Attu on the first day of the invasion on May 11, 1943. Note binnacle mounted in front of the ship's open bridge, in the lower left center. Official U.S. Navy photograph, now in the collections of the National Archives.

Ultimately the decision to retake Attu was driven by the estimation that it would take less time and fewer resources — resources desperately needed in the Central Pacific — to confront the enemy forces than it would to blockade and eventually starve them out. Public sentiment about American soil being held by belligerent forces was also a factor.

Rear Adm. Francis W. Rockwell gathered joint Army-Navy planning staff in late January 1943 to develop plans for the assault. Adm. Kinkaid was placed in overall command with Rockwell leading the amphibious forces.

Maj. Gen. Albert W. Brown led the 7th Infantry Division, the ground troops charged with taking the island. Based in Fort Ord in Monterey, California, the “California Division” had been activated in 1940 and trained extensively for desert warfare in North Africa. These forces would be transported by four Navy attack transports and brought ashore by Higgins boats. The convoy would be supported by 15

destroyers, three World War I vintage battleships, and the carrier *USS NASSAU* (CVE-16).

Conditions on Attu

While the U.S. prepared their forces in early 1943, Japanese intelligence suspected that America had plans to assault Attu as early as June, when the weather would be most favorable. Col. Yasuyo Yamazaki arrived by submarine on April 19, 1943, to assume command of the garrison.

While Yamazaki benefitted from seasoned commissioned and non-commissioned officers, he found that many of his front-line troops were older men and raw recruits. He knew he would have to fight with the forces he had on hand, as he would be cut off from personnel replacements and resupply as U.S. naval forces arrived.

But Yamazaki also understood that his greatest advantage was the knowledge his men had gained while occupying Attu's inhospitable environment



Troops in landing boats alongside the *USS HEYWOOD* (APA-6) off Attu, Aleutian Islands, May 11th, 1943. U.S. Navy photograph, now in the collections of the National Archives.

for nearly a year. Attu was a barren 20- by 35-mile volcanic island featuring precipitous conical mountains reaching 3,000 feet above the shore and covered in ash and cinder. The lowlands were dominated by a spongy muskeg comprised of water-saturated mosses and dead vegetation as deep as 3 feet. The muskeg rendered wheeled and tracked vehicles inoperable and made walking difficult. Occasional bogs — with visually undetectable water trapped just under the surface — were frequently responsible for the loss of men who fell through.

Furthermore, the island received 40-50 inches of rainfall per year with fewer than 10 clear days annually. Sea and air navigation were constantly at risk of sudden gales resembling enormous waterfalls that swept down from the mountains. While fog was predominant even when rain was not falling, transient microclimates crossed the island unpredictably, producing patches of good visibility with dense fog only a few miles distant.

The Japanese forces were acclimated to these conditions, and held the high ground with facilities they had months to construct. The Japanese also benefitted from interior supply lines connected by trails and powered barges.

The American forces that loaded the westbound ships from California in late April 1943 had a 3-1 advantage over the Japanese forces, as well as air superiority and overwhelming naval and artillery support. But these advantages were hampered by poor intelligence and key failures in provisioning the troops. Departing temperate California in their

uninsulated leather boots and dry-climate field jackets, many troops assumed their immediate destination to be Hawaii.

U.S. intelligence had incorrectly estimated Japanese forces at just 500 with no coastal defense and few anti-aircraft guns. In reality, nearly 2,400 well-supplied Japanese troops awaited the Americans on Attu. Planning was also conducted with U.S. Geological Survey maps that only provided terrain information 1,000 yards inland from the shores. Army historians, writing later in “The Western Hemisphere: Guarding the United States and Its Outposts,” noted that “Seldom had operations been planned with less knowledge of what the troops would have to face.”

Making Landfall Under Unexpected Conditions

In preparation for the troop landings, the 11th Army Air Force had dropped 155 tons of bombs on Kiska and another 95 tons on Attu during the first 10 days of May 1943. The U.S. assault force arrived offshore on May 7, only to delay the assault by four days due to unexpectedly high winds and high surf. During the delay, the destroyer *USS MACDONOUGH* (DD-351) and the minelayer *USS SICARD* (DM-20) collided in a dense fog and were forced to withdraw to Amchitka, Alaska. The *MACDONOUGH* had been tasked with fire control for naval gunfire, and the *SICARD* was to have provided support for landing craft.

On May 11, Higgins boats were finally lowered, and the first wave of the assault forces were



Soldiers unload landing craft on the beach at Massacre Bay, Attu, on May 13, 1943. The LCVPs in the foreground are from the *USS ZEILIN* (APA-3) and *USS HEYWOOD* (APA-6). Official U.S. Navy photograph, now in the collections of the National Archives.

transferred to their landing craft at 8:40 a.m. However, sudden fog kept the troops circling offshore, cramped in the overcrowded boats, until mid-afternoon, when a break in the fog allowed the boats to finally land ashore.

To their surprise, the U.S. troops who swarmed the beaches encountered little initial resistance from the Japanese.

“We had been in boats all day long waiting to come to the island,” Pvt. Raymond Baun of the 3rd Battalion, 17th Infantry Division recalled in “The Capture of Attu: A World War II Battle as Told by the Men Who Fought There.” “Then we landed in fog as thick as mashed potatoes, expecting a wild dash across the beach with bullets flying, and there weren’t any.”

The Higgins boats returned to deliver the second wave by approximately 9 p.m., bringing U.S. forces ashore up to 2,000 men, all commanded by Col. Edward D. Earle. The Higgins boats continued to shuttle men and artillery ashore throughout the night, although visibility was so poor that one boat dropped its bow ramp 1,000 feet offshore and sank with all hands.

Rather than overcommit his comparatively smaller force in defense of the extensive shoreline,

Yamazaki had positioned only a small number of skirmishers on the beaches to harass U.S. troops and report on landing positions and numbers. Yamazaki primarily positioned his men at the narrow heads of valleys in concealed places that took advantage of low-hanging fog. By drawing his opponent up the narrowing valleys, Yamazaki could concentrate fire from concealed machine guns, rifles and grenade launchers on exposed U.S. troops moving steeply uphill. While U.S. forces would struggle to even identify the enemy at the edge of the fog ceiling, Japanese forces would have a clear view of advancing Americans and had sited their mortars on the few shallow depressions that offered the only cover.

Yamazaki’s use of the terrain also greatly reduced the numerical advantage of U.S. troops, who had to leave their supply and support infrastructure on the beaches because the muskeg prevented vehicles from moving any appreciable distance inland. This meant two men had to be dedicated to supply every soldier directly engaged beyond the reach of mechanized support, and four men were required to carry each wounded soldier’s stretcher over increasing distances back to the hospitals on the shore. As progress inland continued, it could



From an advanced command post on Attu Island, a detail of soldiers carry back a wounded comrade. Note the rough terrain. Japanese snipers generally kept just above the fog line. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

take up to two days to get a wounded soldier from the front line back to the rear. Wet conditions also damaged radio equipment, forcing more troops to be repurposed as communications runners.

What had been estimated to be a three-day assault ultimately dragged on for more than three weeks, with the weather and terrain proving to be as big a factor in mission success as any tactic employed by either force. By May 14, U.S. battleships had expended all high explosive rounds available, and artillery ashore was proving ineffective against well-concealed Japanese positions.

The Turning Point

U.S. forces ultimately turned the battle with a surprise flank attack that originated from a separate landing on the northeast portion of the island, where Yamazaki had considered a landing impossible and had therefore failed to establish outposts.

By May 17, the amphibious assault had yielded to mountain warfare as U.S. forces began to seize the high ground. But progress had come at a great cost. More than 11,000 U.S. troops were now ashore, but the 7th Infantry was reporting 1,100 casualties, with 500 of those due to exposure alone. Japanese forces had also suffered extensive casualties, defending positions with their lives and resolutely refusing surrender on an individual level.

The Final Banzai Charge

By May 29, three weeks after the American assault began, Yamazaki's forces had been reduced to 700.

With his men starving, almost out of ammunition and surrounded on four sides, Yamazaki organized his entire force for a suicidal nighttime charge on an American supply base. While Japanese forces had conducted mass charges in other battles, this was the first banzai attack by a full garrison.

The surprise attack overwhelmed an inexperienced U.S. unit deployed forward while they were in the midst of an early breakfast at 3 a.m. U.S. commissioned and non-commissioned officers from a rear-echelon engineer company formed a defensive line out of the retreating infantry and broke the wave of the attack. By dawn, the Japanese assault was reduced to isolated bands of resistance. All but 28 of the 700 Japanese soldiers died by American fire or their own hand in the early hours of May 29. Over the 19 days of battle, 549 soldiers of the 7th Division had been killed, 1,148 had been wounded, and 2,100 had suffered non-combat injuries and diseases. The Japanese had lost more than 2,351 men, including Yamazaki, who was found with only a sword in his hand.

Retaking Kiska

Following the unexpected challenges of the Battle of Attu, American forces approached Kiska more cautiously. They took over two months to plan the assault, resupply and call upon Canadian allies for assistance. All the while, they maintained a naval blockade around the island, bombed it intensively and fired upon it with shipboard explosives. On Aug. 15, 1943, 34,000 American and Canadian forces finally made landfall on Kiska, ready to face an even larger



Troops march past the white crosses of an Attu cemetery on the bleak Aleutian Island, where soldiers prepare to fire a volley shot in honor of their fallen comrades. In the background, the rolling fog presses downward, emphasizing the solemnity of the occasion. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

force than they had confronted on Attu.

But the beaches were empty, and this time, it wasn't because the Japanese fighters were waiting in the mountains for a clear shot. Thousands of soldiers anxiously combed the island for 8 days in the shifting fog, resulting in 28 friendly fire casualties. An additional 70 men were lost when the destroyer *USS ABNER READ* (DD-526) struck a mine in the harbor. But for all the treacherous searching, only the scorched remains of abandoned supplies and the occasional booby trap testified to the Japanese occupation of the island.

What had become of the more than 5,000 Japanese soldiers who had occupied the island for the past year? On the afternoon of July 28, the Allied vessels surrounding Kiska had seen a cluster of radar blips, which they had guessed to be a Japanese evacuation fleet. Ships left their blockade positions in pursuit of the enemy vessels, which were never found. In the meantime, the real Japanese fleet arrived at Kiska Harbor and all 5,183 men boarded the eight ships in under an hour. The fleet slipped away into the thick fog of the evening just as silently as it had appeared, leaving the returning Allied forces to blockade and bomb an empty island for nearly three weeks.

The Legacies of Attu and Kiska

Despite the relative lack of attention to the Aleutian front then and now, the stories of Attu and Kiska are important on both a historical and human level. The bloody hand-to-hand fighting on the stark landscape during the final day of the Battle of Attu was second only to Iwo Jima in the highest percentage of American casualties during the war. The Battle of Attu also reinforced the American victory at Midway and made it clear that Japan would from that point on be fighting a defensive war.

While the U.S. forces had made many mistakes in the planning and execution of both operations, vital lessons in intelligence gathering, troop provisioning and the new tactic of amphibious assault were taken to the highest levels of military leadership.

The invasion of the island of Kiska, although an embarrassment to U.S. military leadership, demonstrated the risks inherent in all military operations — even without an enemy to fight. For the front-line soldiers and Marines who had survived the gruesome fights on Attu, the grim takeaway they all had was that the only way to defeat the Japanese in battle would be to kill them all. **FRA**