



World War II in Alaska – The Forgotten War

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The only fighting on North American soil during the war took place in Alaska's Aleutian Islands. The events of the Aleutian Campaign include the bombing of Dutch Harbor by the Japanese in June 1942, the evacuation and internment of the Aleuts, the Japanese invasion of the islands of Attu and Kiska, the Battle of Attu, the Allied invasion of Kiska, and the bombing of Paramishiru.

The Aleutian campaign resulted in recovery of an intact Japanese Zero fighter plane, the first time the enemy's superior weapon was available for allied scrutiny.

The Alaska Highway, built as a military road, is still the only way to drive in and out of most of the state without putting your vehicle on a boat.

More than 300 military installations would be built in Alaska, at a cost of more than \$350 million, before the war was through. In Alaska, troops received overseas duty pay, and a welcome bonus; regular pay at the time for privates was \$1 a day.



Living conditions were bleak for many soldiers, particularly those in the Aleutians where tents routinely sailed away in the swirling winds, collapsed in the rain, and sank in the mud; where meagerly fueled stoves and inadequate clothing did little against the penetrating cold. Colonel Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr. was assigned to command the newly created Alaska Defense Force. He later commanded the U.S. 10th Army at Okinawa, where he was killed on the front lines.

The number of Japanese on Attu is now judged to have been at least 2,500. On one ridge, the Japanese were killed in their fox holes in a daring ascent led by a single soldier through enemy machine-gun fire.

Hand-to-hand fighting with grenades, bayonets and rifle butts characterized the enemy's resistance as the Americans pushed forward.

The morning of May 29 found the Japanese encircled by American troops. Believing that death was more honorable than capture, the Japanese Commander ordered that all injured soldiers be killed with injections of morphine. His remaining men, about 1,000 of them, charged up the valley in a suicidal counterattack. The advancing Japanese were stopped by gunfire. Finally, the remaining few Japanese soldiers blew themselves up with grenades.

About 2,350 Japanese soldiers died on Attu; only 29 were taken prisoner. The battle claimed 549 American lives, some of them killed by friendly fire.

Attu was one of the most costly assaults in the Pacific, according to an Army history, second only to the taking of Iwo Jima, which occurred in early 1945.

Now Kiska remained. Unbeknownst to U.S. Commanders, the Japanese fleet sailed into Kiska Harbor and rescued their troops. It was an amazingly efficient operation. Enemy radar had found an opening in the American blockade, and broke radio silence with a terse code, signaling the troops to assemble. The men were waiting on the beach when the ships arrived, and they quickly boarded 39 landing craft. Within 55 minutes, all 5,183 men were aboard six destroyers and two cruisers, and the ships were on their way home. The Japanese had given up the Aleutians.

