

Reading: Attu Battlefield and U.S. Army and Navy Airfields on Attu

In May 1942 Imperial General Headquarters in Tokyo ordered an attack on the Midway Islands, with the objective of occupying those islands and destroying the remnants of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. Japanese plans called for a simultaneous attack on the Aleutian Islands to divert American naval forces from Midway to protect the Imperial Navy from an attack from the north, and to obstruct communication links between the United States and the U.S.S.R. Having broken Japanese codes, the United States was alert to the forthcoming attacks and proceeded with defense preparations. At that time, its most westerly bases in the Aleutians were the Dutch Harbor Naval Station and the army's Fort Mears at Unalaska Island and a still-secret army airfield on neighboring Umnak Island. The navy also had a 10-man weather station on Kiska Island, Attu's eastern neighbor. Kiska had no native population, but Attu village boasted a strength of 45 Aleuts, a Caucasian school teacher, and the teacher's husband who radioed weather reports to Dutch Harbor.

Japan's plans for the Aleutians called for a carrier air attack on Dutch Harbor and Fort Mears and a hit-and-run assault on Adak Island (which Japan erroneously believed to be fortified) further out on the chain. By means of a separate naval task force, the Japanese also planned the occupation of Kiska and Attu at the end of the Aleutians. The air attacks on Unalaska occurred June 3 and 4, coinciding with the Battle of Midway. When the magnitude of their naval defeat became clear, the Japanese canceled the raid on Adak, but proceeded with the invasions of Kiska and Attu; both were occupied on June 7.

While Japanese naval troops secured Kiska, the Japanese army landed on Attu. The 1,140-man force consisted of infantry engineers, and a service unit, under the command of Maj. Matsutoshi Hosumi. The Aleuts and their teacher were taken prisoner and eventually removed to Japan. The teacher's husband lost his life in unclear circumstances. At first the Japanese planned to hold the islands only until the onslaught of winter, but soon decided to remain in the Aleutians so as to deny the enemy use of the islands. In mid-August the commander concluded that the Americans were preparing to invade Kiska and decided to move the Attu garrison to that island.

Attu remained unoccupied until the end of October, when fresh troops, including the 303rd Independent Infantry Battalion, arrived from Japan. In April 1943 Col. Yasuyo Yamasaki came by submarine and took command of Attu's growing defenses and partially completed airfield. Despite some increase in American air attacks from newly constructed forward bases (Adak, September 1942; Amchitka, February 1943) and stepped-up American naval activity, Japan succeeded in reinforcing its Aleutian outposts with troops, armament, and supplies until March 1943.

Battle of Komandorski Islands

Determined to interdict Japanese convoys en route to the Aleutians, an American naval task force, led by 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 and there ensued "an old-fashioned long-range ship-to-ship duel that lasted almost four hours."¹ Although each scored hits, the battle ended inconclusively when both forces withdrew. The Americans could savor one aftereffect, however: the Japanese transports hurried home and Japan made no further attempt to reinforce or resupply the Aleutians with surface vessels. From then until the American invasion in May only submarines succeeded in delivering a trickle of materiel to Attu and Kiska.

Recapture

By early 1943, American planning for the recapture of Kiska had begun in earnest. The army's 7th Infantry Division was chosen as the landing force and trained in amphibious warfare under U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Gen. H. M. "Howling Mad" Smith.² In March, however, sufficient naval power was not available to assault the more heavily defended Kiska. In addition, the Japanese were expecting an attack on Kiska. A successful assault on Attu would isolate the Japanese on Kiska between American bases on Attu and Adak and would make Kiska easier to capture. American planners therefore decided to undertake an operation against Attu.

The assault date was set for May 7, 1943, under the command of R. Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid, North Pacific Force, with R. Adm. Francis W. Rockwell in charge of the amphibious phase and Maj. Gen. Albert E. Brown, 7th Division, assuming command when the troops were established on shore. The battleships *Pennsylvania*, *Idaho*, and *Nevada* provided fire support.

Bad weather postponed the landings until May 11 when both the Northern and Southern Landing Forces headed for shore. The Northern landing took place as planned. At Austin Cove on Attu's north shore, a provisional battalion landed and began a torturous ascent to the passes west of Holtz Bay--a five-day ordeal resulting in many cases of frostbite. At Red Beach, on the northwest shoulder of Holtz Bay a battalion of the 17th Infantry Regiment and a party of Alaskan scouts landed unopposed. These forces were soon joined by a battalion of the 32nd Infantry Regiment and together the forces drove south toward the Japanese positions at the head of Holtz Bay.

At Massacre Bay fog delayed the landing of the Southern Force, consisting of two battalions of the 17th Infantry Regiment, until late afternoon. They too, were unopposed. The Japanese had placed their defenses on the ridges surrounding upper

Massacre Valley and were hidden by the fog. By evening, however, both the Northern and Southern forces had come under Japanese fire. By May 13, it was apparent that fierce Japanese resistance had stalemated the Southern Force's advance. The Northern Force was also making slow progress against a stubborn foe. The remainder of the 32nd Infantry Regiment landed that day at Massacre Bay. Later, Alaska's defense force, the 4th Infantry Regiment, also joined the fight. Admiral Kinkaid, convinced that General Brown was bogged down, relieved him and appointed Army Maj. Gen. Eugene M. Landrum to take command on Attu.

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 the night of May 29, the 1,000 surviving able-bodied 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. Engineer troops bivouacked on Engineer Hill succeeded in organizing a thin defensive line and breaking the attack. The next morning, May 30, Japan announced the loss of Attu. For many days thereafter, however, American forces continued mopping-up operations.

Casualties were heavy on both sides. Out of a force of about 2,500, only 29 Japanese survived. Of the 15,000 U. S. troops, 550 died and 1,500 were wounded. Another 1,200 Americans were casualties of Attu's climate. Inadequate footgear, in particular, contributed to frozen feet and trench foot.

Almost immediately, army engineers and naval Seabees began constructing airfields on Attu. Rejecting the Japanese runway at East Holtz Bay as unsatisfactory, army engineers completed a fighter field at West Holtz (Addison Valley) and another on Alexai Point. The latter was soon extended to serve bombers as well.

On July 10, 1943, the 11th Air Force made its first attack on Japan's Home Islands. Eight B-25 bombers flew from Attu to strike Paramushiro in the Kuriles. This was the first air attack on Japan since the famous Doolittle raid of April 18, 1942.

Other attacks followed. Most met with some success until September 11, 1943, when a force of 12 B-25 medium bombers and eight B-24 heavy bombers left Attu for Paramushiro. On this occasion, Japanese fire destroyed three bombers. Another seven were heavily damaged and forced to land in Siberia where the crews were interned.

Although further raids were postponed for several months, Attu's bombers were again over the Kuriles by spring 1944.

The navy constructed both land runways and a seaplane base for patrol bombers and flying boats west of Massacre Bay and at adjacent Casco Cove. For the duration of the war, naval aircraft made their lonely patrols over the North Pacific. As at Alexai Field, the navy's two land runways were first covered with steel (Marston) mats. By 1944, however, asphalt had been laid and the navy made the runways available to army planes as well as its own, and the 11th Air Force established maintenance facilities there.

As for the Attuan Aleuts, about half of them died while in Japan, mostly from tuberculosis. After Japan's surrender, the survivors, along with the teacher, Mrs. Charles Foster Jones, returned to the United States. Too few in number to begin anew on their island, the Attuans resettled on Atka Island in the Aleutians, together with the inhabitants of that place. The Attuans have not forgotten their homeland. Nor have veterans of the "Forgotten War"--Japanese or American--let Attu slip from their memories.

Questions for Reading

1. How long did the Japanese occupy Attu?
2. Why did the Japanese stop carrying supplies to Attu by transport ship?
3. How long did the American assault on the island take?
4. What effect did weather have on the battle?
5. What event marked the end of the battle?
6. How many casualties were there on each side? How many American soldiers succumbed to the weather?
7. Describe American activities on the island following the battle.

This reading was compiled from Erwin N. Thompson, "Attu Battlefield and U.S. Army and Navy Airfields on Attu" (Aleutian Islands) National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1984.

¹Paul S. Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy (1941-1945)* (Annapolis, 1978), p. 261.

²General Smith witnessed the 7th Infantry Division's amphibious assault on Attu and wrote, "I have always considered the landing...in the dense fog of Attu...an amphibious landing without parallel in our military history." Holland M. Smith and Percy Finch, *Coral and Brass* (Washington, 1979), p. 103.