

## PRE-WAR FEARS AND CLUES ABOUT JAPANESE INVASION

Before the Japanese came to Attu, a man used to talk about seeing tracks when he had to go walking. He would see tracks on the beach and sometimes he would see somebody and when he hollered to that person, it would disappear.

—Nick Golodoff

**B**EFORE THE WAR, some trappers from the village didn't return. They found them shot on Attu. The old-timers thought it was the Japanese who shot them. When the Attuan men would go hunting on Attu they used to see other people. Later they learned that the Japanese were mapping in the area.

Before the Japanese came to Attu, a man used to talk about seeing tracks when he had to go walking. He would see tracks on the beach and sometimes he would see somebody and when he hollered to that person, it would disappear. I figure now they were Japanese mapping the island before they invaded it. The same thing happened on Atka and Unalaska. They used to call them "Tuginagus" which means boogiemien.<sup>3</sup> When a man from Attu went and checked his traps, he returned and asked the people in the village who was out hunting earlier. He was told that no one left the village besides him. Therefore, no one knew and no one understood what was going on. Just before the war started, I also saw a man and ghost and his son. The elders they told me stories of what might have happened. We thought the man killed his son then himself but there were no rifles nearby so we guessed it was the Japanese while they were mapping the area from Attu to Unalaska. The reason I am saying this is because after the war people went trapping

<sup>3</sup>Bergsland (1980:43, 142) has chugdukaayaꝯ for "Devil" and tugiðaꝯ for "moon" in Atkan Unangam Tunuu.

*again but never found tracks or saw ghosts anymore. I think the Japanese were all over the Aleutians before the war because after the war the elders were talking about seeing people when everybody was in the village and seeing mysterious tracks, not just on one island but all the other islands. People also heard boat engines. After the war, no one talked about boogiemmen anymore.*

## Commentary

Japanese presence was observed or suspected in Attu and other Near Islands since the first decades of the twentieth century. Mike Hodikoff recalled that sometime around 1910, Japanese marauders had stolen fox skins from the Attuans, and that they killed Mike's father in the struggle that followed (Jones 1946:40). This may have been one of the incidents Nick refers to when he mentions the trappers who didn't return.

Beginning in the early 1930s, the U.S. military was watchful in the Aleutian Islands. The Navy sent a fleet of ships with amphibious aircraft to survey the Aleutians in the summer of 1934. As early as 1937, the Coast Guard officer on the *Haida* reported that on the way back from Attu the boat hands were "Constantly checking for 'Jap ships' in fishing grounds." In August of 1938, when the *Cyane* visited Attu, it also scouted along Holtz Bay, looking for evidence of Japanese occupancy (U.S. Coast Guard 1939).

When Etta Jones was assigned to teach in Attu, she and her husband Foster Jones knew there was danger of an attack from the Japanese. When boat operators Don and Ginger Pickard visited Attu in April 1942, Foster Jones told them that if the Japanese came he would destroy his radio and the island's supplies of gasoline and oil. He was also training ("drilling") the Attu men to protect their home (Stein n.d.:4-6). Etta Jones wrote in a letter that the American flag flew proudly above the village, and that the Attuans disliked and distrusted the Japanese (Kohlhoff 1995:40).

Nick Golodoff recalls that when he was a little boy, people talked about hearing mysterious footsteps and finding other traces of pre-war visitors to Attu. Some people thought they were boogiemens, but later there was speculation that they were Japanese. The Attuans knew of the Japanese interest in the Aleutians, and they had already had encounters with Japanese fishing vessels and fur poachers. Alan May wrote in his journal that a captain of the Coast Guard had told him that "Attu has been completely surveyed by the Japs under the pretext of collecting flowers and butterflies (without permission) and the natives cowed into not speaking about it" (May 1936:90). The chief of the village, Mike Hodikoff, told a visitor to Attu that



Photo 22. Mike Hodikoff on board the *Casco*. (Source: Aleutian-Pribilof Island Association)

personnel from the Japanese Navy had already been in the area to take measurements and soundings in the harbors (Stein n.d.:5). On land, he said, they had left behind stakes with Japanese characters (Nutchuk [Simeon Oliver] 1946:148). In May 1942, the U.S. Navy took Chief Hodikoff and Alfred Prokopeuff, the second chief, on board the seaplane tender *USS Casco* so the local men could show them likely shore landing spots.