

The Invasion of Kiska

The Aleutian Campaign



"Push the enemy into the sea. Get Kiska back."

Instructions to the 11th Army Air Force and
Navy Patrol Wing 4



Above: Three PV-1 (Ventura) planes fly by cloud-capped Kiska Volcano during the Allied invasion of Kiska on August 15, 1943. *Courtesy National Archives*



Top Left: The crew of the U.S. Aerological Detail on Kiska prior to their capture by the Japanese in 1942. William C House is in the second row, third from left. *Courtesy National Archives*



Bottom Left: Pilot and crew pose with the bomber "Kiska Katie," in 1942/1943. *Courtesy National Archives*

On June 7, 1942, the Japanese invaded the Aleutian island of Kiska. The island's sole inhabitants were the crew of the U.S. Aerological Detail (pictured at left) who fled to the hills; most were captured after a few days. Senior Petty Officer William C. House managed to remain at large for 50 days eating only plants and earthworms until, weighing a mere 80 pounds, he was forced to choose between capture and starvation and surrendered to the Japanese.

"We can't understand... why we continue to send our (air)men out into this God awful stuff against a target which can't be seen..."

11th Air Force Squadron Commander

In the following year, the 11th Army Air Force and Navy Patrol Wing 4 dropped seven million pounds of bombs on the Japanese on Kiska. The pilots, many of whom were fresh out of flight school, had to contend with both Japanese anti-aircraft fire and the unpredictable Aleutian weather. Fog, hurricane -force winds, and freezing temperatures were responsible for scores of deaths. The relentless bombing, coordinated with an Allied blockade, strangled the Japanese supply line to Kiska and Attu and prepared the way for an Allied (American and Canadian) invasion in August, 1943.

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Above: The first round of Japanese soldiers escaped from Kiska in the summer of 1943 by submarine. Eventually, the Japanese were forced to abandon the use of submarines as evacuation vessels because of high casualty rates and depend instead on a surface fleet to evacuate.
Courtesy National Archives



Left: An Allied soldier pets Explosion, one of half a dozen dogs that originally belonged to the Aerological Detail on Kiska. Cared for by the Japanese, the dogs survived the relentless Allied bombardment of Kiska. August, 1943.
Courtesy National Archives



Above: A Japanese flag on Kiska captured by members of the Royal Canadian Fusiliers. August 23, 1943. *Courtesy National Archives*

"We... threw our rifles and bayonets into the water and then went away. They never saw us."

Karl Kasukabe, Japanese veteran of Kiska

On July 29, 1943, the Japanese forces on Kiska executed a daring escape plan. They wired "Kiska City" with demolition charges and destroyed supplies, ammunition, and buildings. During the night, the US battleships that circled Kiska were diverted by radar blips that they mistakenly interpreted as a Japanese evacuation fleet. In their absence, the real evacuation fleet of eight warships steamed into Kiska Harbor. In 55 minutes the entire Japanese force of over 5,000 men boarded the vessels and drifted off silently under the cover of darkness.

"The island appears desolate and unoccupied."

Billy Wheeler, 36th Squadron, August, 1943

Nearly 35,000 Allied troops landed on Kiska on August 15, 1943. The original plan was to invade Kiska in the spring, before Attu, but the invasion was postponed to allow the Allies time to gather the resources they needed for a major attack. Allied troops expected to meet a Japanese force several times the size of the one on Attu, and they were prepared for heavy casualties. The men were greeted instead by half a dozen dogs, among them "Explosion," who originally belonged to the captured Kiska Aerological Detail (pictured on page 1 and at left), and who the Japanese had cared for during the occupation.

Allied commanders refused to believe that the Japanese could have completely evacuated Kiska. For eight days, troops searched the island, firing into the dense fog and sometimes accidentally shooting their comrades. 24 Allied soldiers were killed by friendly fire, four by Japanese booby traps, and a further 71 died when the ship *Abner Read* struck a floating mine. 168 Allied soldiers were wounded or fell ill on Kiska. The bombardment and invasion of the deserted island was written off as a "training exercise," and the Aleutian Campaign officially ended after 439 days of warfare.



Above: The 1998 reunion of Battery #411, who retook Kiska in 1943. From left: Fritz Waldvogel, "Beans" Beale, Charles Henry, Jim English, Red McCharque, Roger Jeanfaivre. *Courtesy Roger Jeanfaivre*