

## = Military history of the Aleutian Islands =

The military history of the Aleutian Islands began almost immediately following the purchase of Alaska by the United States . Prior to the early 20th century , the Aleutian Islands were essentially ignored by the military of the United States , although the islands played a small role in the Bering Sea Arbitration when a number of British and American vessels were stationed at Unalaska to enforce the arbitrators ' decision . By the early 20th century , a number of war strategies examined the possibility of conflict breaking out between the Empire of Japan and the United States . While the Aleutian Islands were seen as a potential staging point for invasions by either side , this possibility was dismissed owing to the islands ' dismal climate . In 1922 , the Washington Naval Treaty was signed , after which the United States Navy began to take an interest in the islands . However , nothing of significance was to materialize until World War Two .

In June 1942 , the Imperial Japanese Navy attacked and captured Attu Island and Kiska . The Americans wanted to recapture the two islands , and in January the following year began their advance by capturing Amchitka without opposition . On March 26 , the Battle of the Komandorski Islands ensued after the United States Navy imposed a naval blockade on the two islands to reduce the opportunities for the Japanese to keep their Attu and Kiska bases supplied . In May , Attu Island was recaptured , with a total of almost 3 @, @ 000 deaths from both sides combined . The Americans then prepared to attack Kiska in August , only to find that the entire island had been evacuated by the Japanese in late July . During the recapture of Kiska by the United States , 313 men died as a result of friendly fire and a mine , despite no Japanese soldiers being present on the island .

During the 1960s and early 1970s , the United States Atomic Energy Commission ( AEC ) executed a number of nuclear tests on the island of Amchitka in the face of vehement opposition from environmental and local indigenous groups . The first test , conducted in 1965 , caused significant damage to the surrounding area , although the details of this damage were not released to the public until 1969 . In 1969 , the AEC executed a ' calibration shot ' to determine whether Amchitka would be suitable for future tests . In 1970 , the AEC announced plans to detonate a bomb named ' Cannikin ' , set to release a blast 385 times that released by the dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945 . After a United States Supreme Court challenge to the testing failed by one vote , the testing proceeded as scheduled in November 1971 .

## = = Early history = =

In 1853 , prior to the purchase of Alaska by the United States , the United States Navy sent the USS Fenimore Cooper to the Aleutian Islands with the aim of locating potential harbors and find coal deposits . No coal deposits were found . In 1867 , the United States purchased Alaska from the Russian Empire . By 1869 , a number of military posts had been established by the Government of the United States , although the Aleutian Islands did not receive such a post , with the nearest post being located on Kodiak Island . The United States Army made the decision to leave the exploration of the Aleutians to the United States Navy , and the latter showed little interest in doing so . The Aleutian Islands played a small role in the ongoing sealing dispute between the United Kingdom and the United States , which later culminated in the Bering Sea Arbitration . In 1888 , following what the United States Government saw as an infringement on the nation 's sovereignty by Canadian and Japanese sealers , the United States Navy sent a number of its ships to Unalaska to police the foreign sealers . By 1891 , an accord had been reached between the United Kingdom and the United States , and for some time a number of British and American vessels remained in Unalaska to enforce the deal .

By October 1906 , many in the U.S. government , including Secretary of State Elihu Root , were worried that war could break out in the Pacific between the United States and Japan . However , the Aleutian Islands were believed to be of little strategic importance to the United States , and were ignored by a number of pre @-@ war strategies formulated by the U.S. armed forces , including the Naval War Board 's 1896 plan , which would have brought only a few scout ships to the Islands . In

1911 , the Naval War Board considered three options through which Japan could mount an invasion of the United States , one of which involved an attack on the Aleutian Islands . However , this option was discarded by the Board owing to the cold climate of the islands .

The Aleutian Islands played little part in the proceedings of World War I , as the events of this war were concentrated in Europe . In 1922 , the Washington Naval Treaty was signed by the United States , the British Empire , the Empire of Japan , the French Third Republic , and the Kingdom of Italy . Article XIX of the Treaty required Japan , Britain and the United States to maintain the status quo in terms of military fortifications in their respective Pacific Rim territories . While Japan and Britain gained a number of exemptions from the terms of Article XIX ( for example , Australia and New Zealand were not prevented from building up their fortifications as a result of the Treaty ) , Japan made it a requirement of their agreement to the Treaty that the Aleutian Islands were not to be exempted .

= = The interwar period = =

Although the United States Navy was prevented from developing fortifications on the Aleutian Islands due to the terms of the Washington Naval Treaty , the Navy believed that at some point the United States ' treaty obligations would no longer apply , and began to scout the Aleutians for possible naval bases . In 1923 , two scouting ships investigated the possibility of establishing anchorages off the Islands , and attempted to claim the United States Army 's bases on the Aleutians for the purposes of national security .

After the mid @-@ 1920s , little attention was paid to the Aleutian Islands as a potential strategic area . United States President Herbert Hoover did not concentrate his government 's resources on developing the nation 's military due to the economic challenge posed by the Great Depression . In 1930 , one of Hoover 's aides claimed that North America 's coastal islands would play little part in a potential war between the United States and Japan unless the Navy was rendered ineffective and Canada turned against its southern neighbor . In June 1933 , a Japanese ship visited Attu Island three times . Although the ship was purportedly only carrying farming and forestry specialists , John Troy , then the Governor of Alaska , believed that the Aleutian Islands was a possible target for enemy navies and lobbied the federal government for military support . While Major General Benjamin Foulois was willing to commit to deploying more military resources in the resource @-@ rich strip of land stretching from Fairbanks to Anchorage , he was not willing to devote more of his military 's resources to the Aleutians , as , according to him , there was " nothing in southeastern Alaska or along the Aleutian Islands which is worth making an effort to defend . "

In May 1934 , following reports of a Japanese spy operating out of Dutch Harbor , the United States Navy dispatched Edwin T. Layton to the Aleutians to investigate the allegations . The result of this investigation was the arrest of the only Japanese man in the region , as well as the town 's only prostitute , a woman accused of conspiring with the Japanese man . During the 1930s , a number of United States governmental committees , boards and reports concluded that air bases in the Aleutians would be for the most part impractical due to the region 's inclement weather .

= = World War II = =

= = = Preparing for battle = = =

On December 7 , 1941 , the Imperial Japanese Navy executed a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor , bringing the United States into a war against Japan , Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy . The Pacific Theater was divided into three sectors ? north , central and south , with the Aleutians falling inside the north sector , though it was also part of the American theater . With the Aleutians located just 650 miles ( 1 @,@ 050 km ) east of the Kuril Islands , the former served as an ideal physical bridge between the two nations of Japan and the United States . Although dismal climate conditions on the Aleutians made an approach by Japan unlikely , neither of the two countries could afford to not

cover their bases with respect to these islands . On April 18 , 1942 , sixteen aircraft bombed Tokyo in what has become known as the Doolittle Raid . The Imperial High Command were unsure of where the aircraft originated and speculated that a hidden air base existed on the western tip of the Aleutian Islands , sparking interest by the High Command in capturing the island chain .

An early strategic plan by Isoroku Yamamoto involved the occupation of the western Aleutians and Midway Island as a ' decoy ' to lure the United States Navy 's Pacific fleet away from Pearl Harbor so as to effect the complete destruction of the Hawaiian base before reconstruction efforts could take hold . However , the Aleutians campaign meant that fewer ships could be devoted to the Battle of Midway , a turning point during World War Two . The United States armed forces had broken the Japanese communications code , and were able to learn of the Japanese plan to attack the Aleutians by May 21 , 1942 . The Imperial Japanese Navy 's plan was to attack and hold Attu and Kiska for future use , while inflicting damage on Dutch Harbor and Adak . Once the United States Navy learned of the plan , Admiral Chester W. Nimitz sent a third of his Pacific Fleet to the Aleutian Islands , under orders to hold Dutch Harbor at all costs .

= = = The initial attacks = = =

By June 1 , 1942 , the American military contingent on the Aleutians numbered 2 @, @ 300 . On 2 June , a patrol plane spotted a Japanese armada 800 miles ( 1 @, @ 300 km ) southwest of Dutch Harbor . On June 3 , Imperial Japanese Navy Admiral Boshir? Hosogaya ordered some of his aircraft to attack Dutch Harbor , despite rough conditions in the air and on the ground . Only half managed to attack the town , with 17 aircraft arriving in the airspace above Dutch Harbor around 6 : 00am . Finding themselves confronted by U.S. forces , the aircraft hastily dropped their bombs and quickly returned to their carriers . On June 4 , the aircraft returned , and attacked the town 's oil storage tanks , a barracks ship and part of the military base 's hospital . On that day , 43 Americans died and 64 were wounded . Ten Japanese aircraft were lost , as were 11 American planes .

On June 6 , the Imperial Japanese Navy returned to the Aleutians , occupying Kiska on that day and Attu Island the next . Despite the U.S. not posting any forces to oppose the occupation of those islands , the Japanese public was informed of a great triumph over U.S. forces on the islands . It was the desire of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to recapture these islands as quickly as possible , and on August 30 , 1942 , 4 @, @ 500 U.S. Army troops secured the island of Adak , to be used as a staging post to recapture Kiska . In two weeks , Army engineers had constructed an airfield on the island , and on September 14 , a number of Consolidated B @-@ 24 Liberators took off from Adak to attack Kiska . Repeated bombings during the fall season convinced the Japanese of the Americans ' desire to recapture Kiska and Adak , and by November the Japanese had bolstered troop numbers on the ground on both islands . During the winter months , the short daily sunshine period and inclement weather protected the Japanese from attack .

= = = Moving towards Kiska = = =

On January 11 , 1943 , U.S. forces captured Amchitka , an island just fifty miles from Kiska . However , challenges faced the Americans stationed there from the outset ? on the first night that the Americans spent on the ground , harsh winds destroyed many of the Americans ' boats , and on the second night a blizzard reduced the base 's line of sight . By mid @-@ February , Army engineers had completed an airfield on the island , after which attacks on the island by the Japanese became less frequent .

With the Americans moving closer towards Kiska and Attu , the Japanese were finding it increasingly difficult to resupply their bases there . In March 1943 , Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid established a naval blockade around the islands , refusing to let Japanese ships through . On March 26 , Admiral Hosogaya attempted to break the blockade with eight battle ships as well as three transports , resulting in the Battle of the Komandorski Islands , the last battle fought only between surface ships in the Pacific War . Following the American victory in this battle , the Japanese were forced to resupply their occupied possessions in the Aleutian chain by submarine .

Following the Battle of the Komandorski Islands , Admiral Kinkaid requested a larger force of 25 @, @ 000 troops to support an assault on Kiska . However , as there were not enough ships to transport such a large division to the Aleutians , Kinkaid suggested that the Americans ' objective change from Kiska , which was defended by about 9 @, @ 000 men , to Attu , which was home to only 500 Japanese . On April 1 , Kinkaid received approval from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to execute the operation , codenamed SANDCRAB . The terrain of Attu Island was not hospitable for such an operation ? much of the island 's landmass not covered in snowy peaks was covered in muskeg , a marshy soil type that is almost impossible to cross by foot . In addition , Attu Island was subject to frequent storms and soupy fogs .

= = = The recapture of Attu Island = = =

The 7th Infantry Division was selected to undertake the task of recapturing Attu Island . The Division arrived at Cold Bay on April 30 , 1943 , and despite the cold weather prevailing in the region , many of the American troops were wearing only regular field clothing as the Division had previously been stationed in California . Due to poor weather , the Americans ' assault on Attu was delayed twice ? first to May 4 and then to May 11 . When the operation commenced on May 11 , heavy fog shrouded the recapturing force from the Japanese , which hampered the latter 's attempts at defending the island .

However , the inclement weather also hampered the Americans ' advance , and until May 15 the recapturing forces were unsure of whether the Japanese had held their position or retreated . When the fog lifted on that day , it became clear that the Japanese had retreated further west . However , when the American forces gave chase , they were immediately slowed by an accidental air strike upon them by an American aircraft . By May 29 , the Japanese forces numbered only 700 ? 1 @, @ 000 , and these troops attempted to run through the advancing American forces as a last show of defiance against the recapturing forces . By May 30 , the Americans had recaptured Attu , and although a few small pockets of Japanese troops remained on the island , the Battle of Attu had essentially concluded .

During the American assault on Attu Island , 2 @, @ 400 Japanese troops were killed , and only 25 were captured . The Americans ' losses were significantly lower , at 566 dead and 1 @, @ 442 wounded . The bodies of the killed Japanese troops were buried in mass graves on the island ? only five per cent of Japanese troops fighting on Attu Island wore dog tags , making identification difficult . In addition , many fallen Japanese were buried by their fellow soldiers up in the island 's peaks , and many bodies still remain undiscovered . The American burials were undertaken at Massacre Bay as well as at Holtz Bay ? in the former case , the bodies of the soldiers were buried in group graves . Large holes of seven feet in depth were dug by bulldozers , and eight small foot @-@ deep graves were dug at the bottom of each of these holes to serve as the American soldiers ' final resting places .

= = = The recapture of Kiska = = =

With Attu Island secure , the Americans diverted their attention towards forcing the Japanese off Kiska . U.S. intelligence estimated at that point that the number of Japanese troops on Kiska was likely to be 10 @, @ 000 , so Kinkaid deployed 34 @, @ 426 men , composed of both Americans and Canadians , to the Aleutians to work on recapturing Kiska . With the recapturing operation scheduled to begin on August 15 , the Eleventh Air Force dropped 424 tons of bombs on Kiska during the month of July . In addition , the Navy fired 330 tons of shells onto the island during the same period . In late July , the pilots charged with scouting for enemy forces on Kiska reported a sharp decline in the amount of fire received by their planes from Japanese forces on the ground . The Americans believed that one of two events had occurred ? either Kiska had been evacuated , or the Japanese had retreated into the hills of Kiska .

By 4 : 00pm on August 15 , a total of 6 @, @ 500 troops were on the ground on the west side of Kiska . The Canadian contingent came ashore on the north side of the island the next day .

However , the invasion was an embarrassment for the Allied forces . The island of Kiska was , in fact , uninhabited ? the entire Japanese force of 5 @, @ 183 men had left the island on July 28 without the Americans noticing . However , the Americans suffered significant casualties during their ' invasion ' ? 313 men died as a result of accidents , with many dying due to accidental fire . Of the total 313 dead , 70 died when the destroyer USS Abner Read struck a mine , while at least 21 died due to friendly fire . The Japanese had completely deserted their buildings on the island , leaving behind them scrawled messages on the walls for the Allied troops to read ? most attacked President of the United States Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Winston Churchill ; for example , one of the messages read , in a mixture of English and German , " You are dancing by foolische order of Rousebelt [ sic ] . "

On August 24 , 1943 , Kiska was declared secure by the American forces . The Aleutian Islands campaign was officially over .

For the commanding officers stationed on the Aleutian Islands during the Aleutian Islands campaign , attacking the Kuril Islands from the Aleutians was a logical continuation to recapturing Attu and Kiska . However , these officers faced resistance from their superiors in Washington and their troops on the ground . Troop morale had sharply declined as a result of the island 's dismal conditions , creating a condition that the troops called the ' Aleutian stare ' amongst those who had been on the island for more than six months . An American assault of the Kuriles never materialised .

= = Nuclear testing = =

During the 1960s , the United States Atomic Energy Commission ( AEC ) conducted nuclear tests on Amchitka . Despite being designated as a national wildlife refuge by President William Taft in 1913 , Amchitka was chosen as a nuclear testing site by the AEC . There were several reasons for this decision . Firstly , Amchitka was close to the former Soviet Union , making it an ideal location for a nuclear test to intimidate the latter . However , the public reason given by the AEC was the island 's remoteness . Forceful objections were raised against the testing by a number of organisations and groups , most notably the Aleut people , who , although they vacated the island in the 19th century after Russian fur traders reduced sea otter numbers in the area , are resident on nearby islands , and were concerned about radiation leaks as well as potential physical damage resulting from the nuclear tests .

In 1965 , the Long Shot nuclear test was executed by the Department of Defense . Almost immediately , fallout from the nuclear test began to leak into adjacent freshwater lakes , although details of this contamination were not made public until 1969 . On October 2 , 1969 , the AEC executed a calibration shot underground to determine whether the island would be a safe place for future tests . However , this test set off a number of reactions in the surrounding area ? the test triggered earthquakes and landslides , and sent water from lakes flying 50 feet ( 15 m ) up into the air .

In 1970 , the AEC announced plans for another test , named Cannikin . The environmental movement , then in its infancy , vehemently opposed the testing , and filed a suit in the United States Supreme Court to stop the testing . This motion was denied by a 4 to 3 vote . On November 6 , 1971 , the Cannikin bomb was detonated , creating a 60 feet ( 18 m ) deep crater in the island , killing 1 @, @ 000 sea otters and thousands of birds . The blast was 385 times that created by the Hiroshima bombing , and was the largest underground test of a nuclear weapon in history .