

THE ALEUTIAN CAMPAIGN IN WORLD WAR II:
A STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE

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Military History

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ABSTRACT

THE ALEUTIAN CAMPAIGN IN WORLD WAR II: A STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE,
by MAJ John A. Polhamus, 96 pages.

This work is a detailed historical study of the Second World War's little known Aleutian Campaign in the North Pacific, commonly referred to as the "Forgotten War." After describing the events that transpired in the North Pacific throughout the war, this work focuses on the strategic reasons why the United States and Japan decided to dedicate critical and limited resources to a secondary effort in the North Pacific. The strategies are compared to determine which country dedicated a higher percentage of available manpower and resources to the region and which country gained an advantage from their respective propaganda efforts. Despite the United States' tactical and operational victories in the North Pacific, the Japanese benefited at the strategic level. Secondary theaters of operations, like the Aleutians during World War II, produced many lessons that were applied to other theaters during the war and remain relevant today in the Global War on Terrorism.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A soldier stood at the Pearly Gate;
His face was wan and old.
He gently asked the man of fate
Admission to the fold.
“What have you done,” Saint Peter asked,
“To gain admission here?”
“I’ve been in the Aleutians
For nigh unto a year.”
Then the gates swung open sharply
As Saint Peter tolled the bell.
“Come in,” said he, “and take a harp.
“You’ve had your share of hell.”¹

Warrant Officer Boswell Boomhower

The Aleutian Campaign in the Pacific Theater of Operations in World War II is not a well-known or much publicized campaign. This fifteen month-long struggle is often referred to as the “Forgotten War.” It is, however, the only campaign that included ground combat on American soil in the Western Hemisphere in World War II. Why was it necessary for Japan and the United States to fight in such a remote, inhospitable, and desolate part of the world? What was the strategic significance of the Aleutians in World War II as viewed from the Japanese and American perspective?

The Aleutian chain consists of approximately 120 islands stretched over a 1,000 miles from the Alaska Peninsula on the eastern most portion to Attu Island in the west, 90 miles from the Russian province of Kamchatka. Dutch Harbor on the island of Unalaska provides a relatively good anchorage for the Navy 610 miles east of Kiska Island. This naval base is 2,000 miles from both Honolulu and San Francisco. The Aleutian chain is

only 750 miles from the northernmost of the Japanese Kurile Islands. Figure 1 depicts the Aleutians in relation to the entire Pacific Theater.

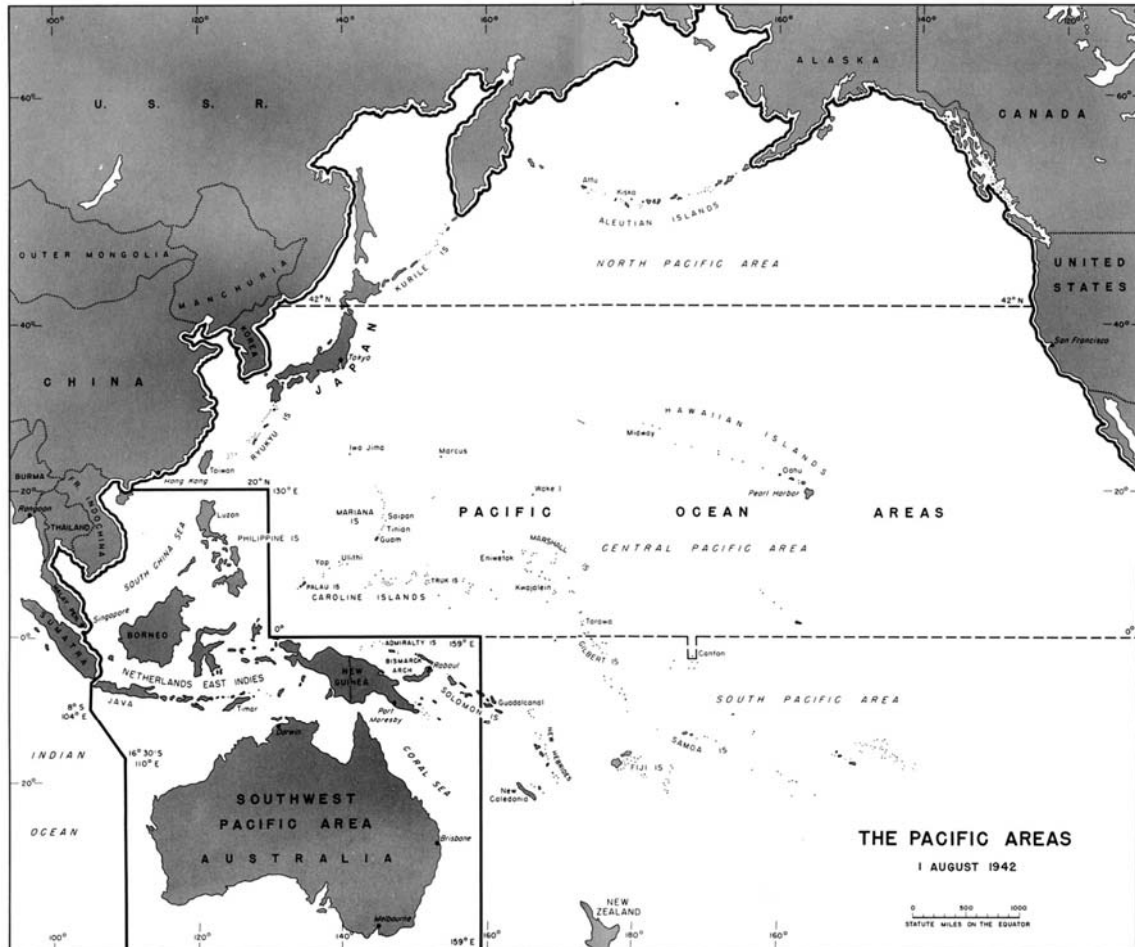


Figure 1. The Pacific Areas of World War II in 1942
Reprinted, with permission, from University of Texas, accessed 18 May 2005; available from http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/pacific_area_1942.jpg; Internet.

All the Aleutian Islands were formed by volcanoes and they are uniformly rocky and barren. There are no trees to speak of on the islands and very little brush cover the many precipitous mountains. The lowlands are covered with muskeg or tundra up to three feet thick. This spongy growth makes maneuvering, by foot or vehicle, very difficult. At

sea, navigation is hazardous due to the submerged rock formations and jagged shorelines. Aviation operations are often hampered by a wind shear phenomenon known as a “williwaw” which produces sudden gale force wind squalls. In 1943, weather conditions became progressively worse toward the western end of the Aleutian chain as rain and fog were the norm. On Attu, for example, five to six days a week were likely to be rainy and there was rarely more than ten clear days annually.

By April 1942, after a series of Japanese military victories, Japan’s military leadership was debating its future objectives. The Imperial Army commanders favored a southern push into the south pacific which would potentially lead to the invasion of Australia. The naval strategy, following the leadership of Pearl Harbor’s mastermind Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, sought to complete the destruction of the U.S. Navy by destroying its remaining aircraft carriers. On 18 April 1942, just over four months after the infamous attack on Pearl Harbor, Colonel James “Jimmy” Doolittle led a successful attack on Tokyo by flying sixteen land-based B-25 “Mitchell” medium bombers off the deck of the USS *Hornet*. The symbolic raid on Tokyo produced little physical damage but sent tremors through Japan’s leadership and struck at the nation’s morale. Unsure of where the attack originated, many Japanese incorrectly surmised that the only place that could support a land-based B-25 attack was from the western Aleutians; it wasn’t until after the war that Japan conclusively learned the true nature of the Doolittle raid.² Until the raid, Japanese defenses consisted of a picket line of vessels positioned 800 miles from the home islands in order to provide early warning. With a breach of their defensive buffer zone, the Japanese Imperial High Command expressed an interest in expanding the zone and preventing future attacks by capturing the Aleutians.

Yamamoto capitalized on Japan's perceived northern flank vulnerability by devising a comprehensive plan to destroy the American fleet while securing the Aleutians simultaneously. In an attempt to extend Japan's defensive perimeter in the north and central portion of the Pacific Theater, while at the same time defeating the remnants of the United States Pacific Fleet, Yamamoto devised a plan to capture the Midway Islands. The plan to capture Midway, dubbed "Operation MI," was approved by the Imperial General Headquarters on 5 May 1942, less than one month before its planned execution. The plan called for the employment of nearly the entire Japanese Combined Fleet consisting of over 100,000 troops and 176 warships.

As a diversionary supporting attack, Yamamoto launched a portion of his fleet to attack the American bases in the Aleutians. The Japanese Northern Area Fleet was commanded by Vice Admiral Boshiro Hosogaya and consisted of two small aircraft carriers, five cruisers, twelve destroyers, six submarines and four troop transports.³ The Northern Area Fleet was responsible for a two phased operation. First, the carriers would launch an early morning surprise attack on the largest U.S. naval base in the Aleutians at Dutch Harbor on Unalaska, followed by an amphibious assault to destroy the American base at Adak.⁴ This initial phase of the Aleutian attack was designed to lure the United States Pacific Fleet from Pearl Harbor, Hawaii in order to oppose the attack. The second phase of the Aleutian attack was to occupy Attu and Kiska, two islands on the western end of the Aleutian chain. Once the U.S. fleet was enroute to defend Alaska, Yamamoto planned to unleash his main attack to seize Midway. Since Midway was within land-based bombing range of Hawaii, Yamamoto surmised that the United States would redirect its fleet to prevent the island's capture. The Japanese fleet, spearheaded by the

massive battleship *Yamato*, would be waiting in ambush to destroy the American fleet, thereby affording the Japanese a favorable negotiating position to end hostilities.

Ever since America's entry into World War II with the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, America was moving frantically to defend her interests in the Pacific region including the U.S. territory in Alaska. President Roosevelt authorized the bifurcated defense strategy in the Pacific giving General Douglas MacArthur command of the island hopping offensive in the southwest Pacific. The remainder of the Pacific Theater, too include Alaska on the northern rim, fell to the Commander of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Chester Nimitz. Prior to the Battle of Midway, the American military had approximately 45,000 personnel on duty in Alaska with about 13,000 stationed on the Alaskan peninsula or the Aleutian chain itself.⁵ Figure 2 is a map depicting the Aleutian archipelago.

As a result of the American code-breaking skills in the intelligence community, the American military was able to decipher the Japanese Midway attack plan to include the Aleutian phase of the operation. To combat the Northern Area Fleet and defend Alaska, Admiral Nimitz created a new task force under the command of Rear Admiral Robert A. Theobald which consisted of one-third of the Pacific's surface fleet. On 25 May 1942, Theobald's force, designated Task Force 8 and consisting of five cruisers, fourteen destroyers, and six submarines, quietly left Pearl Harbor to take up positions in Alaskan waters and wait for Hosogaya's arrival.⁶ With the remainder of the fleet and in particular the aircraft carriers, Admiral Nimitz was able to turn the table on Yamamoto and to catch him by surprise at Midway resulting in the destruction of four Japanese aircraft carriers and the prevention of the capture of Midway Island. After the decisive

American victory at Midway, Yamamoto ordered his northern fleet, which was enroute back to Japan, to return to the Aleutians and to seize the islands of Attu and Kiska. This unopposed island seizure was Japan's attempt to salvage their huge lose at Midway. In fact, the Japanese government shielded the Midway defeat from their public and instead, heralded the Aleutian campaign as a decisive victory against the Americans. In contrast, the Americans, who were celebrating their success at Midway took several days to realize that Japanese forces had occupied the western Aleutians.⁷



Figure 2. The Aleutian Islands

Reprinted, with permission, from University of Texas, accessed 18 May 2005; available from http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/aleutians_1942-1943.jpg; Internet.

Now that the Japanese physically controlled a portion of American soil in the Western Hemisphere, they dug in to fortify their positions for the inevitable fight. American military commanders in charge of the defense of Alaska--Rear Admiral

Theobald, Commander North Pacific Area under Admiral Nimitz, Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, commander of the Army's Western Defense Command and his primary subordinate, Major General Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., commander of the Alaska Defense Command--all urged for an early offensive aimed at ejecting the Japanese off of Attu and Kiska. After a few weeks, however, Washington and specifically the Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, felt there were other strategic priorities and, as a result, reinforcements to the Aleutians were slow to come.⁸ For eleven months the Japanese prepared their gains by constructing extensive trench and tunnel networks and working to complete runways on each island. In order to oppose the Japanese on the western tip of the Aleutian chain, the meager American forces, with slowly arriving reinforcements, had to first traverse the length of the chain by constructing a series of bases and airfields among the islands. Adak was occupied on 30 August 1942 and the airfield was amazingly completed less than two weeks later. On 12 January 1943, Amchitka was the next island occupied and, once again, in extremely harsh conditions, a fighter strip was operational in mid-February. The nature of the conflict changed as land-based aircraft were now positioned within one hundred miles of Kiska and capable of providing frequent and steady bombing.

The Aleutian campaign, however, was not limited to just island hopping. The United States Navy and Army Air Corps actively patrolled the waters surrounding the Aleutians in order to gain supremacy and to isolate the Japanese island garrisons. On 26 March 1942, Task Group Mike, an American naval task force under command of Rear Admiral Charles McMorris and consisting of four destroyers and two cruisers, was patrolling west of Attu with orders to intercept any Japanese ships attempting to resupply

or reinforce the enemy held islands.⁹ Contact was made just before dawn and the ensuing 3 ½-hour-long battle became the longest and last classic daylight surface naval battle of the war. The Battle of the Komandorskis, named due to the proximity of the Russian islands, was considered an American victory because Task Group Mike was able to force a numerically superior Japanese naval force into withdrawing. As a result, Japan was unable to adequately resupply or reinforce Attu before the upcoming battle.

On 11 May 1943, using land-based aircraft and naval support, the American Army launched an amphibious operation, named Sandcrab, to retake Attu. What was expected to last only three days, took the 15,000 strong American force nearly three weeks to defeat the Japanese island garrison of less than 3,000 troops. With only twenty-nine Japanese soldiers taken prisoner, American forces were introduced to the Japanese spiritual Bushido code of honor, which demanded victory or death; they were amazed by the human sacrifice Japan was willing to endure.¹⁰ A determined enemy and unforgiving weather made the Battle of Attu one of the costliest fights in the Pacific, second only to Iwo Jima, in terms of percentage of casualties versus the number of enemy engaged.

In order to recapture Kiska, where more than twice as many Japanese were stationed, the Allies amassed a force of over 34,000 better trained and better equipped troops, including many Canadians. On 15 August 1943, Operation Cottage commenced to retake Kiska. Unbeknownst to the Allies, the Japanese had secretly evacuated their entire garrison nearly three weeks before. In less than one hour, Japanese surface ships managed to successfully withdraw over 5,000 men from Kiska under the cover of thick fog. This daring operation essentially ended 439 days of hostilities in the Aleutians during World War II. American forces that were once defending the United States'

northern flank, were now threatening Japan's. With the Japanese no longer occupying portions of the Aleutians, the American military worked quickly to fortify the chain. Consequently, runways were completed on Attu and Kiska and a new 10,000 foot long, heavy-bomber capable runway was constructed on the tiny island of Shemya. For the duration of the war, the Aleutian bases were used as staging areas for a handful of air and sea attacks against Paramushiro and other Japanese Kurile Island bases.

Compared to other campaigns in the Pacific during World War II, there is not a lot written about the "Forgotten War." Most of the available accounts focus primarily on the operational and tactical nature of the conflict and not the strategic level. Primary source accounts from the campaign's veterans do an excellent job of depicting the harshness of the terrain and weather at the warfighter level. These recollections are also one sided and heavily biased against their former enemy. Most of the traditional open source accounts of the conflict during the war were stifled by military censorship. In August 1941, in an attempt to mask Alaska's true defense capabilities, or lack thereof, the Army's Western Defense Commander, General DeWitt published the "publicity policy" for Alaska which stated:

Until further notice, there is to be no publicity with reference to Army stations in Alaska, or to troop movements to and within Alaska; and no newspaper or magazine correspondent, radio commentator, or other publicity agent is to be given any special access to Alaskan military stations, or to be authorized to publish or broadcast any information concerning the defense establishment there.¹¹

Most of the American strategic level, senior leader decision insights were obtained from Joint Chiefs of Staff documents and other correspondence between theater commanders as captured in *The US Army in World War II series*. Of the many books in the series that deal with the War with Japan, the following were most useful for this

thesis: Louis Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years*, Maurice Matlof and Edwin Snell, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare 1941-1944* (2 Volumes), and Stetson Conn, Rose Engelman, and Byron Fairchild, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*. In addition to the above references, Japanese strategy was determined mainly by referencing works on Yamamoto as he was the commander that conceptualized the Aleutian attack in conjunction with the Battle of Midway. Also, the Japanese monographs derived from high-ranking Japanese prisoners of war provided valuable insight into Japanese strategy. Overall, the best single source for information regarding the Aleutian Campaign was Brian Garfield's *The Thousand-Mile War: World War II in Alaska and the Aleutians*, as it is the first and only work that comprehensively depicts all aspects surrounding the campaign at all levels of warfare.

In sum, this thesis will show that, despite the American operational victory during the Aleutian campaign, the United States' buildup of the Aleutians, in response to the Japanese occupation of Attu and Kiska, was excessive and underutilized resulting in an unintended overall strategic victory for the Japanese. Although the Aleutians looked strategically impressive on a map, the chain's year-long weather was so severe--with gale force winds, constant storms, persistent fog--and terrain so harsh, that it made any major offensive operations against an enemy's homeland highly unattractive and extremely difficult to sustain. Despite this fact, the United States continued to build and improve bases throughout the 1,000-mile-long Aleutian chain and resource them with critical and much-in-demand military personnel and equipment. American troop strength in Alaska would eventually settle down to a level just over 60,000 at wars end, down from a high of 144,000 in 1943.¹²

The chapters that follow will expound upon this chapter's brief description of the Aleutian Islands and its fifteen-month-long campaign and look at the strategic realities faced by the combatants. Chapter 2 will focus on the United States strategic policy concerning the Aleutians and the Alaskan territory. Furthermore, it will explore the American objectives in the theater and how they related to the US effort in the rest of the war. Chapter 3 will focus on the Japanese perspective in relation to Aleutian policy and what they had hoped to achieve. Chapter 4 will establish certain criteria whereby both the American and Japanese strategies can be compared and analyzed to determine if the strategies were effective and if they achieved stated objectives. Chapter 5 will provide a conclusion and an analysis of the Aleutian campaign's relevance to today's military operations.

¹Poem written by Warrant Officer Boswell Boomhower in the Aleutians in the summer of 1943 in Brian Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969; reprint, University of Alaska Press, 1995), 309.

²*Ibid.*, 6.

³George L. MacGarrigle, *Aleutian Islands* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Center of Military History Pub 72-6, 1992), 5.

⁴Unbeknownst to the Japanese, there was no American base on Adak.

⁵MacGarrigle, 6.

⁶*Ibid.*, 5.

⁷Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 178.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Carl Bridenbaugh and C. Vann Woodward, *The Aleutian Campaigns, June 1942–August 1943* (Washington, D.C.: Naval Research Center, 1993), 36.

¹⁰Garfield, 214.

¹¹Otis Hayes Jr., *Alaska's Hidden Wars: Secret Campaigns on the North Pacific Rim* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), xv.

¹²MacGarrigle, 25.

CHAPTER 2

THE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

The American strategy concerning the Aleutians evolved during the course of World War II. The initial strategy was based upon existing prewar plans designed to defend the Western Hemisphere from a growing Axis (German, Italy, and Japan) threat. Throughout the conflict, the Aleutians played a critical role in maintaining a cooperative and trying to establish a collaborative relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. Once the Japanese forces occupied parts of the Aleutian chain, the American strategy changed from primarily a defensive one to one of a limited offensive designed to recapture Attu and Kiska. After the Japanese were evicted from Attu and Kiska, the American forces continued to build up the Aleutians in anticipation of offensive operations against the Japanese home islands.

In order to understand America's position on the Aleutians, the Alaskan territory's strategic position in the war must first be examined. As early as the 1920s, after Japan had acquired Germany's pacific territories and was becoming a growing power in the region, United States war planners were developing a contingency plan in the event of a future conflict with Japan. Until 1938, the plan known as War Plan Orange was primarily offensive oriented and assumed any hostilities would take place in the Far East as opposed to the Western Hemisphere. Due to improvements in aviation technology, Orange's Far East combat premise had to be reconsidered. By the 1930s, new airplanes, particularly long-range bombers, gave new significance to Alaska's strategic position by making it more vulnerable to an air attack from Asia and by increasing the danger of air strikes against the west coast if an enemy were to establish bases in Alaska.¹

If an enemy took Alaska, they would be within three hours' bombing distance to the invaluable Boeing bomber plant or the Bremerton Ship Yard in Seattle.² Additionally, Japanese aggression in China was straining U.S.-Japan relations and it forced the Americans to re-evaluate how it would protect national interests in the region, too include the North Pacific.

With a war in Europe imminent, United States planners, under the direction of the Joint Board, turned attention away from the individual theater plans and prepared for the possibility of a simultaneous two-ocean war. In 1939, the individual color coded contingency plans that were based on single enemy and single theater of operation assumptions were now superseded by a new set of war plans designated the "Rainbow Plans."³ The five Rainbow plans looked at various contingencies in terms of theaters of operation, possible enemies, and availability of Allied assistance. The five plans were designed to defend the United States homeland and the Western Hemisphere from Axis aggression.⁴ The last plan, Rainbow 5, assumed:

The United States would be allied with Great Britain and France. The U.S. would conduct actions to ensure defense of the western hemisphere but with early projection of U.S. forces to the eastern Atlantic, and to either or both the African and European Continents. A strategic defense was to be maintained in the Pacific until success against the Axis permitted transfer of major forces to the Pacific.⁵

In other words, in the event of a two-theater war, the Allied position was that the European theater had the priority of effort while the Pacific theater was relegated to a defensive posture. The defense of the homeland strategy was anchored by a "strategic triangle," which extended the country's western defensive perimeter from Alaska to Hawaii to Panama.⁶

In the beginning of 1941, with the bleak situation in Western Europe, American and British planners met to formulate a unified policy. This meeting, commonly referred to as ABC-1 (American British Conference 1), produced a joint policy recommendation calling for the defeat of Germany first, with the American effort going toward the Atlantic and European areas. Action against Japan would be limited to that of strategic defense with the corresponding commitment of resources.⁷ As a result of Rainbow 5 being so similar to the outcomes of ABC-1, the Joint Board approved the plan on 14 May 1941.

Despite the Germany first policy, it was under Rainbow 5 that Alaska's defensive build up began to gain momentum. As a result, much needed funds and resources were made available to construct a military infrastructure (airfields, bases and support facilities). Under the "Joint Pacific Coastal Frontier Defense Plan," which was a sub-plan to Rainbow 5 dated 16 October 1941, the joint services had the initial mission of denying the enemy (Japan) the use of air, land and sea bases in Alaska and the Aleutians.⁸

Within the Pacific Theater of Operations, Alaska was often considered a secondary theater. Many people, including several Army planners, had a long-held conviction that Alaska was simply not a critical area.⁹ This of course was not everyone's opinion and, in fact, some prominent citizens saw the potential of Alaska's strategic position. For example, in a presentation before the House of Representatives Committee on Military Affairs, the famous aviation advocate General William "Billy" Mitchell charged that Alaska was the keystone of the Pacific and he claimed, "He who holds Alaska will hold the world," and he thought it was "the most important strategic place in the world."¹⁰ Even though Alaska was not yet a state, its United States Territory status,

like Hawaii, was very much considered part of America's homeland and it would be defended. As early as 1937, Alaska's Delegate to Congress, Anthony J. Dimond, was a staunch advocate for military defenses in Alaska and he managed to convince Congress to appropriate money every year for its defenses. Unfortunately, year after year the Congress failed to release the money because Alaska did not have a high enough priority.¹¹ Despite the best efforts of enthusiastic Alaska supporters who lobbied for its strategic and economic importance it was too little too late. Alaska (and the Aleutians) was simply one of many up and coming American outposts that was ill-prepared for the looming war. Unfortunately, Alaska's vast expanses swallowed up even an equitable slice of available defense resources. To make matters worse, Congress was convinced that the other regions of the "strategic triangle," namely Hawaii and Panama, were more important and a preponderance of defense funding went to those locations.¹²

In September 1939, when Germany's attack on Poland started a new world war, the entire Alaskan military garrison consisted of 400 men stationed near Skagway, a relic of the Gold Rush days.¹³ The Alaskan territory was basically void of any significant infrastructure and the only direct connection to the continental United States was by air and sea lines of communication. There were no military airfields or significant bases. The only military establishments in the Aleutians were a small naval radio station and a little Coast Guard base at Dutch Harbor on Unalaska Island.¹⁴

After the war in Europe started, planning accelerated to improve Alaska's dismal defenses. By early 1940 the War Department had committed to a long-range program for Alaska that comprised five major objectives: to augment the Alaska garrison; to establish a major base for Army operations near Anchorage; to develop a network of air bases and

operating fields within Alaska; to garrison the airfields with combat forces; and to provide troops to protect the naval installations at Sitka, Kodiak, and Dutch Harbor.¹⁵ To oversee these formidable objectives, General Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, followed the recommendation of Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, Commander of the Western Defense Command, and established the Alaska Defense Force. Colonel Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr. assumed command of the newly establish force in July 1940 and it consisted of approximately 750 soldiers.

Colonel Buckner was a tenacious, 33-year veteran who did everything in his power to get Alaska prepared for war. Unlike many others, Buckner had no doubt that a war with Japan was inevitable and that Alaska was going to become a battle ground.¹⁶ Faced with a Herculean task of defending the Alaskan frontier and having little funds, resources, troops, or equipment to accomplish it, he traveled all over and learned about the territory. Buckner was a man of action and he simply could not sit still. He would do whatever was necessary to draw attention to Alaska's plight. As a result, he quickly realized the power of the pen and he became an incessant letter-writer who urged senior military and civilian leaders alike to defend Alaska. Ironically, it was not his persistent voice but the lack thereof that caused Congress to finally release funds for the territory's defense. In collaboration with Alaska Governor Ernest Gruening, Buckner remained noticeably silent as a rumor about a Nazi-Russian plot to attack Alaska from Siberia spread throughout Washington unchecked. Although eventually proven completely false, the communist "Red" scare, in conjunction with Japan's recent pledge of allegiance to the Axis powers via the Tripartite Pact in September 1940, was enough to convince Congress

to dramatically increase Alaska's defense appropriations. Within eighteen months Alaska's defense budget exploded from \$4 million to \$350 million.¹⁷

As money and resources flowed into Alaska in the fall of 1940, Colonel Buckner quickly put them to work. Consequently, years worth of construction projects were completed within months. Miles of runways, roads, and railroads were carved out of the tundra and several new bases and support facilities were erected. In spite of supply problems, weather, and a myriad of other challenges, Buckner changed the face of Alaska virtually overnight.¹⁸

While working to improve Alaska's defensive infrastructure, Buckner realized the territory's dependence on aircraft. Aside from dogsleds perhaps, an aircraft was the only feasible way to reach many small villages and outposts. Buckner concluded that any successful defense of Alaska and any future value it might have as a staging area depended on having air superiority and adequate ground forces to protect the airfields.¹⁹ Consequently, General Buckner's plan to defend Alaska centered on his ability to gain and maintain air power by:

Building advanced operating bases for bomber planes in western Alaska, including the Aleutian chain; constructing auxiliary fields near the existing main bases to prevent the undue massing of aircraft with consequent danger from bombing attack; connecting the United States and Alaska by a chain of landing fields; developing intermediate bases to facilitate the movement of aircraft to and within the territory; establishing an aircraft warning service; and maintaining in the United States a reserve of both combat and transport aircraft equipped for cold weather flying for prompt reinforcement of Alaska in an emergency.²⁰

While working hard to build the defensive infrastructure, Buckner took a personal interest in determining how he could best project power into the Aleutians. He conducted a personal sea-borne reconnaissance of the entire Aleutian chain to determine the suitable locations for future bases. With orders to help protect naval bases, Buckner correctly

realized the need for new bases in the islands and he pressed the Navy to expand down the Aleutian chain. The different services had a unique command structure in Alaska whereby the Army (including the Air Corps) and the Navy coexisted as independent and “mutually supporting” parallel commands. This incursion by Buckner into the perceived domain of the Navy generated significant consternation with Navy Department in Washington.²¹ As a result of the Navy’s staunch support against all of Buckner’s Aleutian expansion plans, the Navy accelerated their plans to expand their presence in Alaska by establishing bases in Kodiak, Sitka, and Dutch Harbor.²²

Buckner was not deterred by the Navy’s refusal to support his expansion. In August 1941, Buckner used funds secretly diverted from other projects to begin construction of an airfield in Cold Bay. All the while he deceived the Navy by disguising the effort as a project to build a fictitious fish cannery. Eventually Buckner’s persistence paid off and the official requests for funding the airfield were approved by Congress in November of that same year. The Congressional authorization allowed for the completion of an airfield on Cold Bay as well as a new airfield on Umnak Island. The Umnak base served as the western most military base in the Aleutians prior to the Japanese attack and it would prove critically to the American effort there.

Fifteen months after assuming command, the Alaskan Defense Force, redesignated the Alaska Defense Command on 4 February 1941, had grown to nearly 22,000 combat and combat support troops. Unfortunately, however, the key to Buckner’s plan, namely aircraft, was in short supply. General Marshall received a letter from COL Buckner indicating his impatience, stating, “In view of our present available strength, or perhaps I should say weakness, I would rather have one squadron of heavy bombers than

a whole division of infantry.”²³ Despite continual requests for aircraft, the position of the Army Air Corps in Washington was that if the situation in Alaska warranted it they would rush aircraft to Alaska from consolidated bases within the continental United States. Buckner knew this was an unrealistic proposition as he wrote to LTG DeWitt, stating, “Planes cannot be rushed to Alaska.” A fact played out in January 1942 when it took six weeks to deliver Alaska’s first combat squadron.²⁴

Despite having completed thirteen new runways in Alaska, Buckner did not receive any new aircraft until after America’s entry into the war. On the morning after Pearl Harbor, the recently promoted Brigadier General Buckner summed up Alaska’s dismal air force situation in a dispatch to the Chief of Staff of the Air Corps, General Henry “Hap” Arnold:

At dawn this morning I watched our entire Alaskan Air Force take to the air so as not to be caught on the field. This Air Force consists of 6 obsolescent medium bombers and 12 obsolete pursuit planes.²⁵

Finally, with American at war, Alaska’s pleas for aircraft could no longer go unanswered. Within five months of the attack of Pearl Harbor, Alaska’s military garrison nearly doubled in size and it did receive two squadrons of modern aircraft. With the early warning of Japan’s Aleutian attack provided by the code-breakers in mid-May 1942, Alaska’s air force grew to 10 heavy and 34 medium bombers and 95 fighters as well as two fighter squadrons provided by the Royal Canadian Air Force.²⁶

Admiral Nimitz, Commander of the Pacific Fleet, realized that even Japan’s diversionary attack in the Aleutians, if left unchecked, could have a very negative effect on American morale and could seriously threaten Alaska’s security.²⁷ Consequently, he created Task Force 8, under command of Admiral Theobald, to counter the Japanese

invasion. Due to very limited resources available, Task Force 8's composition was such that it was dwarfed by the carrier laden Japanese fleet. As such, Nimitz directed his subordinate commander to "oppose the advance of the enemy in the Aleutian-Alaska area, taking advantage of every favorable opportunity to inflict strong attrition," and "be governed by the principle of calculated risk"--which many of Theobald's staff interpreted to mean their force was to sacrifice itself if that would stop the Japanese.²⁸

Despite a valiant effort by the relatively small American Naval Task Force, it was incapable of preventing the Japanese occupation of the western Aleutians. American leadership was somewhat perplexed by Japan's occupation of the islands and any intentions they may have had. Nimitz knew his tiny force could not force the Japanese off Attu or Kiska but he was afraid that, if left alone, their northern ambitions would grow.²⁹ Consequently, American strategy in the Aleutians became one of constant harassment against the Japanese in order to keep them off balance, uncertain and always on the defensive.³⁰

That same June Rommel threatened North Africa; Hitler had invaded Russia; President Roosevelt was pushing for an autumn invasion against Germany; massive convoys were needed in the Atlantic to support England and Japan was pursuing objectives in the Solomons. Therefore, the War Department was disinclined to commit large amounts of forces to the Aleutians; Alaska was, once again, relegated to the lowest priority. Furthermore, the Army and Navy decided in early July 1942 to undertake limited offensive operations in the South Pacific. In effect, it meant any Aleutian offensive actions would have to be conducted with whatever forces were already in Alaska and bolstered by what units the Western Defense Command could spare.³¹

The constant pressure applied, primarily by the Army Air Corps, on the Japanese occupation forces was policy for the remainder of 1942 as the Americans worked their way down the Aleutian chain preparing for the inevitable fight. In January 1943, American and British leaders met in Casablanca to discuss the upcoming year's strategy. Consequently, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff produced a memorandum dated 22 January 1943 (CGS 168) that stated the objective in the Aleutians was to make them "as secure as may be."³² This status quo Aleutian objective essentially demonstrated General Marshall's continual reluctance to divert additional forces from pressing commitments in other theaters. He did, however, authorize General DeWitt use of the Western Defense Command's 7th Infantry Division to train up for the purpose of retaking Kiska.

United States war planners estimated it would take 27,000 troops to retake Kiska. Even though the 7th Infantry Division provided the requisite manpower, a severe shortage in the Navy's amphibious shipping delayed any possible assault. To solve the problem, Admiral Thomas Kinkaid, who succeeded Admiral Theobald, recommended that DeWitt use the forces already on hand to assault the lightly-defended westernmost Japanese garrison of Attu instead of the larger one on Kiska.³³ The War Department approved the recommendation and on 11 May 1943, Attu Island was liberated. Now with a victory in the North Pacific, albeit a very hard fought and costly one, the United States strategy in the Aleutians became more assertive. Roosevelt and Churchill met again in May 1943 and as a result of their meeting, named the Trident Conference, the new Allied objective was "the ejection of the Japanese from the Aleutians."³⁴ More troops and resources and better training became available in order to defeat the larger Japanese threat on Kiska. On 15 August 1943, the Allied coalition conducted an amphibious assault onto an abandoned

Kiska thereby signifying the end to Japan's occupation of the Aleutians. Despite the anticlimactic finish at Kiska, the United States learned a valuable lesson from Kinkaid's recommendation to bypass and isolate a difficult target in favor of an easier one. The bypass strategy would be utilized throughout the Pacific for the remainder of the war.

Maintaining a stable and cooperative relationship with the Soviet Union also factored into the United States' Aleutian strategy. On 22 June 1941, Hitler violated his non-aggression pact with Marshal Stalin and unleashed a massive surprise attack into Russia with the goal of crushing the Red army and annexing mineral-rich lands. For the remainder of that year, Soviet forces were suffering heavy casualties as they tried to halt the German offensive. Despite the existence of a Neutrality Pact between Japan and Russia, many Allied leaders felt Japan might bolster its alliance with the Axis powers by attacking Siberia. After Pearl Harbor, the United States attempted to obtain use of Soviet air bases throughout Siberia and Kamchatka in order to create an air attack route against Japan.³⁵ Stalin, although somewhat understanding of America's position in the Pacific, was engaged in a desperate struggle against Germany in Europe and expressed little desire or willingness to violate his neutrality in the Far East. Stalin felt he could ill afford a second front and divide his limited resources. In fact, Stalin urged the Allies to attack Germany; creating a European western front would relieve pressure on the besieged Russians. By March 1942 it was fairly evident that Stalin was not going to enter the war in the Pacific voluntarily and therefore was unlikely to give Japan cause for attack by allowing American aircraft use of Soviet bases.³⁶

After the Japanese landed in the western Aleutians in early June 1942, the Joint Chiefs of Staff feared that Japan's Aleutian attack was a preliminary step toward further

Japanese expansion in the North Pacific. Once again, United States planners felt that Japan was preparing for an invasion of Siberia's Maritime Provinces and consequently they desired military collaboration with the Russians.³⁷ On 17 June 1942, President Roosevelt acted on the recommendation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and personally appealed to Stalin for "an immediate exchange of detailed information" on military facilities in Alaska and Siberia.³⁸ Despite the perceived threat, Stalin remained unwilling to fully collaborate with the United States as he did not want to provoke a war with Japan. In the end, the Russians were more interested in expanding the on-going Lend-Lease program to include receiving much needed aircraft.³⁹

Three months after Germany invaded the Soviet Union, Roosevelt extended assistance to Russia through the Lend-Lease Act of March 1941.⁴⁰ Materiel started arriving in the Soviet Union in September 1941 by way of three primary routes. The first route was 13,000 miles long and it reached Russia via the Persian Gulf and Iran. The second route had to transit the German U-Boat invested North Atlantic to the ice-free port of Murmansk. The final route traveled the North Pacific through the Bering Sea and the Japanese North Kurile Islands to the port of Vladivostok in Siberia. It was determined that the best way to deliver aircraft would be to fly them from Alaska to Siberia.⁴¹ With losses mounting on the convoys to Murmansk and the great distances involved with flying aircraft via the Middle East, Russian officials finally agreed to open the Alaska-Siberia (ALSIB) air route in August 1942.⁴² The first of almost 8,000 military aircraft arrived in Russia via Alaska in September 1942.⁴³

Lend-Lease materiel was definitely welcomed by Stalin, and Roosevelt attached the highest priority to it.⁴⁴ Roosevelt correctly believed that the Lend-Lease assistance

provided to the Soviets would help to enable them to defeat Hitler in Eastern Europe. The criticality of protecting the Lend-Lease assistance program manifested itself on 5 May 1942 when the War Department published Naval Order 18 which identified the defense of the Aleutians as a strategic objective. Many global strategists argued that the best American shipping route to Russia was the North Pacific route. The route ran through the Bering Sea and across the narrow strait of Unimak Pass which was covered by the guns located at Dutch Harbor.⁴⁵ Naval Order 18 specified that Dutch Harbor was the “key to the Bering Sea” and that the “Russian Lend-Lease route must be preserved.”⁴⁶ Consequently, the Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded that America must defend the Aleutians to prevent Japan from driving a wedge between Alaska and Siberia.⁴⁷ American industrial might, as witnessed through the Lend-Lease program, played a vital role in helping Russia drive the Germans back to Berlin. Over 47% of all Lend-Lease goods shipped to Russia during the war went through Alaska or the Aleutians.⁴⁸

The final evolution of America’s strategy toward the Aleutians placed the island chain as the start point for an invasion against the Japanese home islands. As early as 1935 Alaska’s advocates like General Billy Mitchell claimed it was the best “jumping-off place to smash Japan.”⁴⁹ Even before Pearl Harbor, as the War Department was frantically trying to build up Alaska’s defenses, General Buckner insisted that his Alaska Defense Command “could easily become the Alaska Offense Command” and that the Aleutian Islands formed a “spear pointing straight at the heart of Japan.”⁵⁰ The insistence by the Army and Navy commanders in Alaska that the Aleutians were a viable attack route towards Japan was not lost to the long-range war planners.

Initially, upon America's entrance into the war, planners advocated attacking Japan through in Siberia. In fact, all land based attacks on Japan's Northern Islands relied on Russian military collaboration. Unfortunately, however, Marshal Stalin refused to cooperate for fear of provoking Japan. Additionally, Alaska's defenses were still under construction and it was estimated that it would take the better part of a year to build the necessary facilities to be able to launch any offensive operations.⁵¹ In order to prepare for the future possibility of attacking Japan from Alaska, and to bolster Alaska's defenses, President Roosevelt authorized the construction a road which would bridge the gap between Alaska and the continental United States in early February 1942. As part of the largest overseas construction project during the war, the Alaska Highway took over 11,000 men less than nine months to build 1,400 miles of road through difficult terrain at a cost of \$135 million.⁵²

Any offensive operations against Japan's Kurile Islands were shelved when Japanese forces occupied Attu and Kiska. Once the Japanese were ejected from the Aleutians in August 1943, the island chain was again considered a possible staging area for offensive operations. With recently acquired bases running the length of the Aleutians and nearly a 150,000 troops at his disposal, General DeWitt submitted a proposal to attack the Japanese base at Paramushiro Island in the Kuriles in the spring of 1944. This proposal was captured by the British and American Combined Chiefs at the Quadrant Conference in August 1943 when the final report included, "Considerations of operations against Paramushiro and the Kuriles."⁵³ With the Pacific fleet fully engaged in operations in the South and Central Pacific areas, and the fear of becoming overextended (much like the Japanese) in the North Pacific, the Joint Chiefs decided against an invasion of the

Kuriles in 1944.⁵⁴ Because of the lack of resources and the fact that the invasion plan was considered tactically sound, planners were instructed to continue planning for an invasion of the Kuriles in the spring of 1945, or earlier if the Soviet Union entered the war against Japan.⁵⁵ With the postponement of the proposed invasion, General Marshall quickly ordered the reduction of forces in Alaska in order to transfer the much needed combat power to other critical theaters.

Despite the efforts by General Marshall and others to transfer tens of thousands of troops from Alaska as soon as possible, the Joint Chiefs still intended to apply “unremitting pressure” against Japan on all fronts.⁵⁶ In other words, military forces in the North Pacific would continue to harass Japan when possible and if an invasion of the Kuriles seemed beneficial then the Joint Chiefs retained that option. Consequently, the Air Forces continued to build longer runways in the Aleutians to accommodate the new B-29 long-range bombers. The Aleutian strategy was summarized in a Joint Chiefs of Staff memorandum titled “Specific Operations for the Defeat of Japan, 1944” and dated 3 December 1943 (CCS 397 REV):

Plans for the North Pacific involve the augmentation of base facilities and defensive installations in the Aleutians in preparation for entry into the Kuriles and Soviet territory in the event of Russian collaboration. Naval surface and submarine action, including raids on the Japanese fishing fleet will be carried out. Preparations will be made for executing very long range strategic bombing against the Kuriles and northern Japan.⁵⁷

Despite the fact that the Alaska Defense Command, redesignated the Alaska Department in October 1943 and no longer part of the Western Defense Command, continued to plan and prepare for the possibility of executing the Paramushiro invasion plan, ground troops were continually siphoned out of theater during 1944. Furthermore, no B-29 bombers were sent to the Aleutians so air and naval units were constrained to

attack the Kuriles with the limited assets available in theater.⁵⁸ The Aleutians were briefly used to deceive the Japanese and mask true American objectives in the South Pacific. A deception plan, code-named “Wedlock,” took advantage of Japan’s predisposed bias of American invasion plans. “Wedlock” used deceptive radio signal traffic to simulate the arrival and presence of new combat units in the Aleutians in order to persuade the Japanese to relocate additional troops to defend the Kuriles rather than the real American objective, which was the Marianas Islands.⁵⁹ As the war progressed and the defense category of Alaska was reduced, the Aleutians became less and less important as an offensive platform. Even though the Aleutian attack plans were never formally abandoned, successes in other theaters within the Pacific offered a closer and more hospitable attack path to Tokyo.

In sum, the American strategy concerning the Aleutians and Alaska changed throughout the duration of the war. Initially, the United States was concerned with defending Alaska and it entertained the future possibility of using the Aleutians as a means to attack Japan but only with the collaboration of the Soviet Union. Once Japan actually occupied part of the island chain, the Aleutian strategy was to halt any further Japanese expansion and to retake the American islands. Even with the enemy garrisoning parts of the Aleutians, the Northwest Pacific Theater was never America’s priority mission. Even General Buckner, the commander of the Alaska Defense Force, astutely said, “We’re not even the second team up--we’re a sandlot club.”⁶⁰ It took fifteen months for American forces in Alaska to build the infrastructure and gather enough force to eject the Japanese from the Aleutians. After that and despite the strategic possibilities, the

Aleutians became known as the “forgotten war” as America never seriously pursued an attack on Japan from the north.

¹Stetson Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, United States Army in World War II Series: The Western Hemisphere (Washington: Department of the Army, Chief of Military History, 1964), 224.

²Brian Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969; reprint, University of Alaska Press, 1995), 16.

³Each country was given a color-code, for instance Japan was Orange, Great Britain was Red, Mexico was Green and Germany was Black.

⁴Robert J. Johnson. “Aleutian Campaign, World War II: Historical Study and Current Perspective” (MMAS Thesis, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Army Command and General Staff College, 1992), 11.

⁵Louis Morton, “Germany First: The Basic Concept of Allied Strategy in World War II,” in *Command Decisions*, ed. Kent Roberts Greenfield (Washington: United States Army, 1987), 24.

⁶Louis Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years*. United States Army in World War II Series: The War in the Pacific (Washington: Department of the Army Chief of Military History, 1962) 38.

⁷*Ibid.*, 44.

⁸Charles Breslin, “World War II in the Aleutians: The Fundamental of Joint Campaigns” (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 1994), 6.

⁹Conn, 225.

¹⁰Stan Cohen. *The Forgotten War*. (Missoula, Montana: Pictorial Histories Publishing, 1981), 2.

¹¹Bert Webber, *Aleutian Headache: Deadly World War II Battles on American Soil* (Medford, Oregon: Webb Research Group, 1993), 22.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Conn, 223.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Garfield, 56.

¹⁷Ibid., 53.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Conn, 240.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Johnson, 35.

²²Ibid.

²³Garfield, 59.

²⁴Johnson, 40. Only seventeen of the twenty-five P-40s made the journey. The second squadron fared somewhat better by only taking four weeks and losing only five of thirteen medium bombers.

²⁵Garfield, 69.

²⁶Conn, 261.

²⁷Johnson, 55.

²⁸Garfield, 13.

²⁹Ibid., 106.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Conn, 266.

³²Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years*, 629.

³³Johnson, 106.

³⁴Morton, 649.

³⁵Conn, 253.

³⁶Ibid., 254.

³⁷Morton, 420.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Revelations from the Russian Archives, “World War II: Alliance” [article on-line]; available from <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/worw.html>; Internet; accessed 10 January 2005.

⁴¹Cohen, 44.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., 46.

⁴⁴Revelations

⁴⁵Garfield, 13.

⁴⁶Johnson, 24.

⁴⁷Garfield.

⁴⁸Johnson, 45. The United States shipped 19.6 million tons to Russia with 9.24 million tons transported over the Pacific route.

⁴⁹Garfield, 49.

⁵⁰Ibid., 67.

⁵¹Conn, 254.

⁵²Cohen, 16-24.

⁵³Morton, 652.

⁵⁴Conn, 299.

⁵⁵Ibid.; and Maurice Matlof, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944*, The United States Army in World War II Series: The War Department (Washington: Department of the Army Chief of Military History, 1959), 316.

⁵⁶Morton, 535.

⁵⁷Ibid., 673.

⁵⁸More than 1,500 Aleutian-based U.S. sorties were flown against Japanese bases. They ended on 13 August 1945.

⁵⁹Otis Hayes Jr., *Alaska's Hidden Wars: Secret Campaigns on the North Pacific Rim* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 70.

⁶⁰Garfield, 12.

CHAPTER 3

THE JAPANESE PERSPECTIVE

Japan's strategy concerning the North Pacific Theater changed throughout the course of the war. Japan was never seriously considering using the Aleutians as a means to invade the Alaskan mainland or the continental United States. It was, however, very concerned that the U.S. would utilize this northern attack route against the Japanese homeland. Japan's initial concern in the North Pacific was an attack by their Russian neighbor. As the U.S. entered the war, the focus shifted to the possibility of an American attack via the Aleutian chain. To prevent this from happening, the Imperial High Command devised a strategy to extend their defensive perimeter into the western Aleutians. This occupation was supposed to be temporary but when the disaster befell the Japanese Navy at Midway, Japan exploited their Aleutian successes and eventually decided to stay. Unfortunately, however, their Aleutian campaign was considered a secondary effort and was not adequately resourced. As a result, Japan failed to consolidate their gains and could not match America's eventual counterattack. Japan was forced to withdraw their perimeter to its original position in the Kurile Islands.

Like the United States, in order to understand Japan's interest in the Aleutian Islands it is important to examine Japanese activities in the northern Pacific region prior to World War II. In 1875, Japan obtained the Kurile Islands from a treaty agreement with Russia. After that Japan considered the Kurile Islands as its "northern territories."¹ Although Russia acquired some land from Japan in exchange for the Kuriles, the annexation of the islands resulted in the denial of a large portion of Siberia's maritime provinces from accessing the Pacific Ocean without first transiting through Japanese

controlled straits. Unfettered maritime access concerns coupled with land dispute tensions in Manchuria led to the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-1905. Despite Japan's bloody victory, they remained very suspicious and wary of Russia's future intentions and they considered the Russians a threat to their northern border. Consequently, Japan established military bases in the Northern Kurile Islands in places like Paramushiro in order to defend, what it considered, a likely avenue of approach for Russia to attack.

Japan's anxiety toward Russia was, once again, realized in May 1939 when their forces fought in the Khalkhin Gol region of Mongolia over a border dispute. The four month long conflict ended in a virtual draw when a cease-fire agreement was signed on 16 September 1939. The conflict produced over 40,000 casualties and left both sides feeling reluctant to fight each other again.² Despite Germany's surprise attack on Russia in June 1941, Japan did not feel obligated to join its Axis partner and fight Russia. In fact, Japan was focusing on its own expansion into the Southwest Pacific and China so it brokered a Neutrality Pact with Marshal Stalin in August 1941. Regardless of the pact, however, Japan characterized Russia as a "country of quasi-enemy character" and maintained a sizeable force along its border with Russia, including its North Pacific Kurile Island bases, for the duration of the war.³ Throughout World War II, at least up until the United States dropped the Atomic bomb in 1945, both Russia and Japan were preoccupied with other fronts and deliberately tried to avoid provoking each other into war.

As the Japanese Empire grew in strength and stature in the beginning of the twentieth century, the Japanese quickly realized the United States was their largest potential threat in the Pacific theater. In addition to the United States' strong alliance with

Australia, Japan was particularly concerned about America's proximity to the Japanese mainland via the Philippines as well as the Aleutian Islands. To alleviate these concerns Japan entered into discussions concerning the Five-Power Naval Treaty, also known as the Treaty of Naval Limitations, at the Washington Conference in 1921-1922. As a result, Japan agreed to limit the amount of capital ships it constructed in return for a promise from the United States that it would preserve the *status quo* with regard to military bases in the Pacific.⁴ In other words, the United States would refrain from further fortifying existing bases or constructing any new bases in the Pacific, including along the Aleutian chain. At the time of the treaty, the United States only had a very small naval base at Dutch Harbor on Unalaska Island, which was still over 800 miles from the western edge of the Aleutian chain. The Washington Conference, in effect, bolstered Japanese strength in the Pacific by eliminating the Allied ability to build up bases and further project military power in the region. Of the Aleutians Alaska's Congressional Delegate Anthony Dimond later wrote in January 1941, "Alaska's strategic value was early recognized by the Japanese, who secured from us an agreement, in the Treaty of Naval Limitations of 6 February 1922, not to fortify the Aleutian Islands."⁵

Japan's concern for America's potential to interfere with their Pacific expansion plans culminated in the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Even though America demonstrated little aggressiveness in the Pacific in 1941, Japanese leadership wanted to take advantage of Japan's existing military superiority and crush the U.S. Pacific Fleet in a single bold attack. Following Pearl Harbor, Japan's overall strategy for the Pacific consisted of two phases. The first phase involved the Imperial Army and Navy successfully destroying important bases in the Orient which belonged to the United

States, Great Britain and the Netherlands.⁶ The purpose of the second phase was to “enlarge and secure” the strategic positions gained in the first phase and force a speedy end of the conflict by keeping the enemy always on the defensive.⁷ In March 1942, the Imperial General Headquarters published the “Fundamental Principles of Future Operations of the Imperial Army” which stated:

1. We shall complete the subjugation of occupied areas as soon as possible; make preparatory defensive positions; make military administration effective and insure the stability of occupied area as well as continuing to be victorious.
2. We shall continue to gain ground from those positions gained at the beginning of operations; continue to be victorious forever, we must keep AMERICA in a constantly defensive position; undertake necessary attacks against strategically important points along the outer fringe of occupied areas, specifically the ALEUTIANS Islands, MIDWAY, FIJI, SAMOA & NEW CALEDONIA in order to hasten the end of the war.⁸

Within four months of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Japan evicted the Allied navies from the western Pacific and had not suffered a single setback as it swallowed up island possessions throughout the South Pacific, as far south as New Guinea and the Solomons, all while not losing anything larger than a destroyer.⁹ By all accounts, Japan undeniably succeeded in executing the first phase of their Pacific strategy.

In early April 1942 the Japanese military leadership debated over how to implement the second phase of their strategy. On one hand, some analysts believed that the newly acquired lands should be secured and consolidated even at the expense of further expansion. Others, however, felt that Japan should maintain its momentum and continue to pursue further expansion while the enemy was in a weak and vulnerable position.

Like the United States military in World War II, Japan also faced significant challenges with relation to inter-service rivalry. The Japanese Imperial Navy and the

Imperial Army (there was no independent air force) had distinctly different agendas which resulted in constant competition for scarce and limited resources. It was the general consensus of the Imperial Army, who drew upon the favor of the former Army general and current Japanese Premier Hideki Tojo, that Japan press toward the Southwest Pacific and eventually invade Australia. The Imperial Navy, under the leadership of Pearl Harbor's mastermind Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, felt Japan's only path to victory lay in completing what Pearl Harbor started and destroy the United States Pacific Fleet, particularly the four remaining aircraft carriers. Yamamoto had spent time in the United States and he realized the awesome potential of American industrial capability. Yamamoto felt Japan could not sustain an extended conflict against the United States so his solution was to capitalize on Japan's 1942 naval superiority and destroy the remnants of the U.S. fleet in order to position Japan for favorable peace negotiations.

In March 1942 Japanese war planners devised an operation which would invade the Aleutians, Midway, Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia. The islands are situated such that they can provide mutual and overlapping support for each other using air or naval assets, thereby creating a protective shield for the Empire. The concept of the operation was to expand the Japanese perimeter in order to secure new gains, sever U.S.-Australian lines of communication, and provide an early-warning buffer against enemy attacks. In this plan, Japan saw the Aleutians as a strategic location capable of protecting Midway's flank from a northern attack.¹⁰

The Aleutian Islands were considered by the Imperial General Staff to be the only available invasion route from the north capable of supporting an American attack.¹¹ Furthermore, the Japanese military leadership realized that it was possible for the enemy

to strike the Japanese mainland or the Kurile Islands using heavy bombers launched from the western Aleutians.¹² For these reasons, as early as 5 November 1941, a top-secret operations order mentioned the Aleutians as a point to be invaded or destroyed at the earliest possible time.¹³ With America's entry into the war, Japan was also very concerned that the United States would ally with Russia and embolden their northern threat. In sum, the Imperial High Command was very interested in countering any potential threat from the Aleutians.

A draft of an operational plan was submitted on 2 April 1942 calling for the second phase of Japan's strategy to begin with the invasion of the Aleutian followed a month later by Midway and then Fiji, Samoa and New Caledonia.¹⁴ Despite the Imperial Army and Navy arguing over the sequence in which to invade the various islands, a compromise was reached allowing for Midway and the Aleutians to be invaded simultaneously in early June 1942. The Imperial General Headquarters issued a directive commensurate with the plan on 16 April 1942.

Two days later, on 18 April 1942, Colonel James "Jimmy" Doolittle led a daring raid of sixteen B-25 bombers against Tokyo, the heart of the Japanese Empire. Although the raid itself produced relatively insignificant physical damage, the symbolic aerial attack struck directly at the Japanese military credibility. Japan's leadership prided itself on swearing that no enemy would be able to attack the homeland.¹⁵ Even though Japan had been able to practically force its will throughout the Pacific, the superficial Tokyo Raid was deeply embarrassing and insulting to the Japanese Imperial High Command.

Despite the spot reports sent the morning of 18 April 1942 that indicated an American aircraft carrier located in the vicinity of the Japanese picket line, some 600

miles from Japan, many Japanese military leaders refused to acknowledge that the land-based B-25 bombers used in the attack originated from a carrier. Conventional wisdom of the day called for aircraft carriers to be within 300 miles of a target before launching aircraft; therefore, many Japanese military leaders followed their existing biases and incorrectly surmised that the attack must have originated from the U.S. held western Aleutians. Consequently, the balance of resource priorities shifted, at least temporarily, to executing the Aleutian-Midway Operation. Even though the operation had already been authorized prior to the Tokyo Raid, Doolittle's attack emphasized the importance of the mission and every effort was made to meet the deadlines and not postpone the operation.

The Imperial High Command issued the actual order, Naval Order Number 18, on 5 May 1942 for the Aleutian-Midway Operation. As the commander of the Combined Fleet, Admiral Yamamoto was directed to execute the operation in coordination with the Imperial Army.¹⁶ The joint operations order stated:

Object of the Operation:

Object of this operation is to capture or demolish points of strategic value on western Aleutian Islands in order to check the enemy's air and ship maneuvers in this area.

Operational Policy:

The Army and Navy, in close cooperation with each other, will invade Attu and Kiska Islands and will destroy enemy installations and equipment on Adak Island.

Operational Outline:

1. The Army and Navy, in close cooperation with each other, will capture Adak Island and withdraw after having demolished enemy installations and equipment. Following capture of the island, the Army troops and Navy Special Landing Forces will capture Attu and Kiska Islands respectively. They shall hold these two islands until the coming winter.

2. The Navy will provide strong support for the invasion force and at the same time employ a carrier unit to raid Dutch Harbor for the main purpose of reducing enemy air strength prior to our landing.¹⁷

Now that resources and command positions had been dedicated to the operation, Yamamoto worked quickly to devise a plan to lure Nimitz into a fleet engagement in order to finally destroy the U.S. Fleet.¹⁸

Yamamoto had over 175 ships at his disposal for this operation. He chose to divide his fleet into five task forces. Both Midway and the Aleutians would have a carrier task force assigned to support their respective island invasion task forces. Finally, Yamamoto would lead the main effort, comprised of Japan's massive battleship fleet, designed to destroy the U.S. Fleet. The concept of the plan was to be able to engage Nimitz's fleet either in the Aleutians or at Midway. Depending on the direction of the American counterattack, Yamamoto would essentially fix the American fleet with carriers and subs while the battleship laden main effort closed in for the kill.

The entire operation commenced with the bombing of Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians on 3 June 1942. As stated in the order, the purpose of the aerial attack on Dutch Harbor was to disrupt the base and reduce enemy air strength to support the invasions in the western islands. Additionally, Yamamoto attacked the Aleutians first in an attempt to draw the attention of the U.S. Fleet away from his primary objective at Midway. Although Yamamoto was prepared to meet Nimitz anywhere, he felt Nimitz would definitely counterattack at Midway because it was within land-based bombing range of Hawaii.

Due to the urgency of planning this huge and complex mission, plans were encrypted and sent via radio to save time. Japanese encryption codes were normally

changed monthly but due to codebook distribution challenges, the leadership postponed adjusting their April code until June 1942. Unbeknownst to Japan, U.S. naval intelligence analysts had deciphered Japan's April encryption code and were able to intercept approximately ninety percent of the entire plan. As a result, Japan suffered a devastating defeat at Midway, losing four heavy aircraft carriers.

In an effort to salvage something from his loss at Midway, Yamamoto elected to continue with the invasion of the western Aleutians. The attack on Adak was considered to risky and was cancelled. The original intent of occupying Attu and Kiska was to neutralize or delay America's capacity to use the Aleutians as an attack route to Japan.¹⁹ To accomplish the Aleutian invasion, Japanese war planners relied heavily on intelligence gathered prior to the war.

Despite the expiration of the Treaty of Naval Limitations in 1934, the U.S. failed to build any new naval facilities in the Aleutians beyond Dutch Harbor until after the war started. Consequently, the United States had very little knowledge of or experience with the waters surrounding the western Aleutians. Japan, however, had a robust commercial fishing fleet that frequented the Aleutian waters. In fact, Japan's North Pacific angling fleet had been growing steadily for over three decades and it was estimated to have caught one-fourth of the world's fish in the 1930s.²⁰ While "fishing" off the Aleutian Islands, they determined depths and suitability of nearly every inlet and harbor in the chain. Additionally, they landed on several islands and even placed markers on the coastlines.²¹

In 1931, a Tokyo newspaper promoted a so-called "good-will" flight of a single engine plane from Tokyo to San Francisco.²² In order to provide emergency supplies

should the plane be forced down in the Aleutians, Japan maintained a “watch service” in the western islands. The “watch service” consisted of a group of men and supplies being dropped off at various locations in the western Aleutians. The “good-will” flight and accompanying “watch service” were abruptly cancelled that summer and all the men returned to Japan with pictures, sketches of harbors and mountains and harbor sounding data.²³

The data gathered during the 1930s allowed Japan to determine advantageous approaches to and landing locations on certain islands. By 1939, Japan was overtly reconnoitering the Aleutians, including Dutch Harbor, using submarines and patrol boats.²⁴ Despite their advanced knowledge of the western Aleutians, Japan’s intelligence on actual American military activities in the Aleutians during 1942 was highly inaccurate. Japanese intelligence reports indicated the presence of one or two U.S. aircraft carriers operating in the Aleutians as well as “strong military installations” on Adak, Attu, and Kiska where, in actuality, none existed.²⁵ This faulty estimate was a contributing factor in determining the size and composition of Yamamoto’s North Pacific task forces. Accordingly, a sizeable invasion force of about 2,500 total troops landed virtually unopposed on Kiska and Attu on 7 June 1942.

The Imperial Headquarters heralded the occupation of Attu and Kiska as a great victory while they sequestered the truth about their defeat at Midway. Despite the loss of four aircraft carriers at Midway, the Imperial Navy retained a numerical advantage over America’s two remaining carriers. Once again, Yamamoto saw an opportunity to destroy the U.S. Fleet with an engagement in the North Pacific. Yamamoto positioned four aircraft carriers in the Aleutian waters in order to ambush Nimitz should he come to

the aid of Alaska. Nimitz, in fact, created a naval task force (TF 16), under the command of Admiral Raymond Spruance, to sail north and “seek and destroy enemy in Alaska.”²⁶ On 11 June 1942, after sailing half way to Alaska, Admiral Nimitz concluded that his two remaining aircraft carriers, with recent aircraft and pilot losses at Midway, were no match for the Japanese carriers and any planes flying from Attu or Kiska. With no amphibious means to affect the Japanese occupying forces, Nimitz recalled Spruance’s task force.

The original Aleutian occupation order called for Attu and Kiska to be held only until the upcoming winter. The notorious Aleutian weather was thought to be too severe for the Americans to fight in.²⁷ If necessary, Japan was prepared to re-occupy Attu and Kiska the following spring in more favorable conditions. In the meantime, Japanese leaders knew that the U.S. would eventually oppose their landing. With America’s closest base at Umnak still over 600 miles away from Kiska, Vice Admiral Boshiro Hosogaya, Northern Pacific commander under Yamamoto, began to prepare the islands’ defenses.

In July 1942 the U.S. Navy task force in the Aleutians was dwarfed by the available Japanese naval strength and it was not inclined to seek a decisive engagement in western islands. Despite the 800 mile long line of communication with Kiska, Japan was able to successfully build its initial defenses on the islands. The U.S. Army Air Corps, however, began bombing Kiska on 11 June 1942 and did not stop until the end of the campaign. The Umnak-based American planes bombing Kiska did not have the range to attack Attu. Despite the bombings, Japanese forces on Kiska dug in and created a nearly impervious underground bunker complex. Furthermore, Hosogaya transported large amounts of anti-aircraft artillery to the island to shield the garrison. Numerous seaplanes, both fighters and bombers, were flown to Kiska in order to provide protection. In the end,

the Japanese air power provided by the seaplanes was no match for the unrelenting, land-based U.S. aerial attacks.

To combat the enemy's growing air superiority advantage which was starting to disrupt resupply efforts, Hosogaya ordered a runway built on Kiska to make room for more Japanese aircraft. Since an airfield was not part of the original plan, the Kiska garrison did not have any heavy construction equipment necessary to build a runway. To make matters worse, by the end of July 1942, pressing needs in the South Pacific had caused Yamamoto to withdraw most of Hosogaya's naval assets, leaving him with a skeletal force comprised of some submarines and destroyers to support the Aleutians. Without the proper transport ships, Hosogaya had no way to deliver the equipment to the islands. Similar to United States leadership, the Imperial High Command viewed the Aleutians as a minor, secondary effort where they could not afford to waste vital resources.²⁸ Since the plan was to abandon the islands with the onset of winter, the Imperial High Command denied Hosogaya's construction equipment requests.

Despite the lack of equipment, Hosogaya felt an airfield was necessary to ensure the security of the islands so he ordered his garrison commanders to construct one by hand. Nearly every available person on the islands, except those manning the air defense positions, was forced from the safety of their underground bunkers to build the runways. The manual labor was intensive and slow going. Any progress made quickly became a primary target for the unrelenting American bombers.

By September 1942, with resupply missions becoming increasingly scarce and no new reinforcements available for the Aleutians, Hosogaya decided to consolidate his two island garrisons. Hosogaya believed he could accomplish his mission of preventing a

northern attack by America if he held only Kiska. With the plan of leaving the Aleutians with the upcoming winter, Hosogaya surmised that maintaining another garrison at Attu was redundant and wasteful. By the end of the month, Japan had abandoned Attu and transferred the 1,500 strong garrison to Kiska.

The nature of the conflict changed dramatically in late September 1942 when, unbeknownst to the Japanese, the United States established a new airfield on Adak Island. With the normal 1,200-mile round trip bombing run from Umnak cut in half, the American planes were able to ratchet up the pressure by increasing the amount of sorties and ordnance delivered per day. Additionally, Adak allowed the U.S. land-based planes to range the entire length of the Aleutian chain, including Attu.

As a result of the American movement westward in the Aleutians and the subsequent build up of the air base at Adak, many Japanese leaders considered this a prelude to a northern invasion of Japan.²⁹ Consequently, the Imperial Headquarters changed its Aleutian plans and ordered that the islands be held and not abandoned with the upcoming winter. In fact, with some new attention focused on the Aleutians, Japanese Premier Tojo broadcast a speech describing Kiska's plight and promised to send reinforcements.³⁰ More naval assets were made available and reinforcements, consisting of Infantry, Engineers and Anti-Aircraft units, were sent to the Aleutians in accordance with a published agreement between the Imperial Army and Imperial Navy. The *Central Agreement Between the Army and the Navy* stated that the objective of the operations was "to strengthen defenses in the area through supplying the required forces, and to reinforce and make secure the key points in the western Aleutian Islands throughout the winter."³¹ Consequently, Attu was re-occupied on 29 October 1942.

To counter America's growing air superiority in the region, the agreement placed special emphasis on establishing air bases. The small, flat and narrow island of Shemya, not far from Attu, was selected as a location to establish an airbase. Also, Hosogaya preferred to build an air base on the flatter Amchitka Island, located forty miles east of Kiska, rather than continue to manually carve one out of Kiska's mountains.³² The agreement also called for all of the aforementioned defenses to be completed by the end of February 1943. To meet this deadline, it was determined that the necessary resources had to reach the islands no later than early December 1942 to allow for adequate construction time.

Once again U.S. naval intelligence deciphered the new Japanese plans. Accordingly, Nimitz ordered an increased effort to thwart the new Japanese re-supply efforts. Admiral Hosogaya task organized several airfield construction units and attempted to transport them to Shemya Island. As a result of increased American pressure from the air and sea, poor weather, rough seas and inadequate anchorage capabilities, all attempts to occupy Shemya Island failed. What limited assets that did get through to the Aleutians and were not forced to withdraw back to the Kurile Islands were distributed to either Attu or Kiska. Knowing Japan's intentions and having studied scouting reports concerning Amchitka Island, Admiral Nimitz felt it would be a shame to let Japan get there first.³³ Consequently, Nimitz authorized U.S. forces in Alaska to occupy Amchitka and establish an airfield as soon as was feasible.

U.S. forces landed on Amchitka Island on 12 January 1943. Despite an incredibly harsh winter, even by Aleutian standards, and aerial harassment attacks by Japanese seaplanes, American airfield engineers were able to complete a runway by 17 February

1943. Once again, U.S. bombing runs were shortened and more sorties were brought to bear against the Japanese island garrisons and any of their resupply efforts. On a clear day, U.S. planes operating from Amchitka could fly up to eight sorties during daylight hours. Even on a traditionally poor weather day, the close proximity of Amchitka to Kiska allowed U.S. planes to take advantage of any unpredicted breaks in the weather and execute a quick strike.

To make matters worse, the U.S. North Pacific Force received a new commander in early January 1943. Unlike the outgoing commander Admiral Theobald, Admiral Thomas Kinkaid was offensive oriented and was willing and eager to work with his army counterparts to defeat the Japanese. As a result, Kinkaid ordered his meager U.S. naval fleet, both surface ships and submarines, to sever the Japanese sea lines of communication and blockade their garrisons. This aggressive action led to the sinking of at least two Japanese transports full of critical runway construction equipment.³⁴ With U.S. air power firmly entrenched on Amchitka, and Japanese forces still trying to manually build a runway on Kiska, Japan had little chance of air parity in the western Aleutians. The Japanese found themselves in a “catch 22;” in order for their garrisons to receive vital transports carrying supplies and reinforcements they needed a functioning air force to counter the U.S. threat, but the runway necessary to support that same air force required transports to bring heavy construction equipment.³⁵

A combination of poor weather, inadequate transport and seaplane support and a re-energized American aerial interdiction effort was severely straining Japanese resupply efforts. In August 1942, the Attu garrison started rationing food and Kiska followed suit in January 1943. Plans to build an airfield on Shemya Island were also shelved. By the

end of February 1943, limited amounts of supplies and reinforcements trickled into the Japanese garrisons. In fact, Attu's first resupply shipment of 1943 did not arrive until March.

With transport losses continuing to rise and the hope of establishing adequate defenses on Attu and Kiska fading, Admiral Hosogaya was determined to break through the U.S. blockade. After weeks of discussions, Hosogaya was able to convince Yamamoto and the Imperial General Staff to transfer much needed transports and accompanying escorts to the North Pacific. Never before had Japan committed so much combat power to an Aleutian resupply effort.³⁶ In late March 1943, Admiral Hosogaya personally led a twelve ship convoy, consisting of three transports and nine warships, to break the American blockade and deliver a tactical blow to the understrengthened U.S. navy. Unfortunately for Japan, Hosogaya's resupply efforts culminated in the Battle of the Komandorskis, and sealed the fate of the Japanese garrisons entrenched on Attu and Kiska. After Hosogaya's defeat, no more resupply convoys reached the island garrisons; all resupply efforts were accomplished via submarine.

With no way to expand their Aleutian defenses, the Imperial High Command was faced with two options--to return in force to the North Pacific and reinforce their Aleutian garrisons or withdraw from the Aleutians and establish their defensive perimeter in the Kuriles.³⁷ The Japanese chose to defer this decision and instead embrace a "watchful waiting" policy in the North Pacific as they concentrated their attention on the South Pacific. The U.S. North Pacific forces, on the other hand, continued to plan and resource an effort to evict the Japanese from American soil.

On 11 May 1943, U.S. forces invaded Attu. The initial Imperial High Command response was to issue Operation Order 19 which called for the immediate reinforcement of Attu by over 4,500 troops stationed in the Kuriles, in order to “annihilate the enemy.”³⁸ Japan also tried to attack the U.S. naval forces surrounding Attu using Kurile based planes and submarines but all attacks were ineffective. Despite the Imperial High Command’s rhetoric, they realized they could not counter the estimated 10,000 American troops on Attu so they rescinded Operations Order 19 on 19 May 1943. Two days later on 21 May 1943, the Imperial High Command ordered the evacuation of all troops from Attu and Kiska because, it reasoned, the garrisons would be better employed in the Kurile Islands, which would soon become Japan’s northern perimeter.³⁹ Japan did attempt to rescue the Attu forces using submarines but they could not penetrate the U.S. naval blockade. On 28 May 1943, Japan cut its losses on Attu and abandoned any efforts to aid the beleaguered garrison, leaving it to fend for itself. Kiska, however, was successfully evacuated in a daring mission on 29 July 1943 unbeknownst to U.S. forces and a new defensive perimeter was established in the Kuriles.

As the U.S. consolidated their gains in the Aleutians and built more runways on Attu and Shemya, the Imperial High Command heavily reinforced the Kurile archipelago, nearly tripling its strength, in order to bolster their northern homeland defenses against a U.S. northern invasion. The majority of the forces transferred to the Kuriles came from the China-Manchuria Theater. Japan also used the Northern Kuriles as a staging base to launch intermittent aerial harassment attacks against U.S. forces in the Aleutians. American bombers began attacking the Northern Kurile bases as early as 18 July 1943. These bombing runs launched from the Aleutians were the first attacks on the Japanese

homeland since Doolittle's Tokyo raid. To respond to the increasing U.S. air attacks, the Japanese constructed several airfields throughout the Kuriles and eventually transferred an estimated one tenth of their air force to the region.

Throughout 1944, Japan was convinced that the U.S. intended to invade from the north as evidenced by the continual flow of American troops and materiel into the Aleutians. With the number of Japanese forces defending the Kuriles approaching 100,000, the Imperial High Command felt prepared for a northern invasion. Late in 1944, Japan defiantly launched the first of over 9,000 bomb-carrying balloons, known as Fu-Go Weapon balloons, designed to ride the favorable North Pacific wind currents to the United States where they would start forest fires and create panic.⁴⁰ Approximately two hundred reached the Aleutians and Alaska while several hundred drifted to the U.S. mainland. Most were harmlessly shot down while the few that did get through caused negligible damage.

Similar to the United States, by mid-1945, as U.S. forces steadily advanced in the Southern and Central Pacific Theaters, Japanese leadership was not focusing on the North Pacific. Consequently, large amounts of Kurile defense forces were transferred south to defend against a more likely southern invasion.

In summary, the Japanese strategy concerning the North Pacific evolved throughout the duration of the war. Initially, Japan was concerned with defending her northern border against a Russian attack but as the U.S. entered the war, their attention shifted to defending an American invasion from the Aleutians. To counter this possibility, Japan expanded its northern perimeter to include the western Aleutians. Unfortunately for Japan, garrisons on Attu and Kiska were not adequately resourced which, over time, led

to insurmountable odds against them. After being ejected from the Aleutians, Japan heavily fortified their defensive perimeter in the Kuriles for an anticipated American northern invasion but it never materialized.

¹John J. Stephan, "History of the Kuril Islands c1800-1945" [article on-line]; available from <http://.fortunecity.com/olympia/ince/698/rurik/kuril.html>; Internet; accessed 28 January 2005.

²Sherwood S. Cordier, "Red Star vs. the Rising Sun" [article on-line]; available from http://www.historynet.com/wwii/blred_star_rising_sun/index.html; Internet; accessed 25 January 2005. The casualty figure includes both wounded and killed in action. Each side lost nearly 9,000 dead.

³Japanese Monograph No. 46, *The Aleutian Islands Campaign*, Japanese Studies in World War II, translated by the U.S. Army (United States Army, Headquarters, FEC (Far East Command), n.d.), 3.

⁴Louis Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years*. United States Army in World War II Series: *The War in the Pacific* (Washington: Department of the Army Chief of Military History, 1962), 25.

⁵Brian Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969; reprint, University of Alaska Press, 1995), 313.

⁶Japanese Monograph No. 88, *Aleutian Naval Operation, March 1942-February 1943*, translated by the U.S. Army (United States Army, Headquarters, Army Forces Far East, Office of Military History, n.d.), 1.

⁷*Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁸Japanese Monograph No. 46, 8.

⁹Garfield, 5.

¹⁰Japanese Monograph No. 88, 3.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 2.

¹²*Ibid.*, 6.

¹³*Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Robert J. Johnson, “Aleutian Campaign, World War II: Historical Study and Current Perspective” (Masters Thesis, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Army Command and General Staff College, 1992), 45.

¹⁶Japanese Monograph No. 88, 8.

¹⁷Ibid., 9.

¹⁸Morton, 279.

¹⁹Otis Hayes Jr., *Alaska’s Hidden Wars: Secret Campaigns on the North Pacific Rim* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), xi.

²⁰Garfield, 313.

²¹Ibid., 314.

²²Bert Webber, *Aleutian Headache: Deadly World War II Battles on American Soil* (Medford, Oregon: Webb Research Group, 1993), 19.

²³Ibid., 20.

²⁴Garfield, 314.

²⁵Japanese Monograph No. 46, 7.

²⁶Garfield, 104.

²⁷Ibid., 103.

²⁸Ibid., 126.

²⁹Ibid., 156.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Japanese Monograph No. 88, 62.

³²Garfield, 156.

³³Ibid., 157.

³⁴The *Montreel Maru* was sunk on 6 January 1943 and the *Akagae Maru* was sunk on 19 February 1943.

³⁵Johnson, 91.

³⁶Ibid., 93.

³⁷Ibid., 101.

³⁸Ibid., 144.

³⁹Morton, 433.

⁴⁰Hayes, 83.

CHAPTER 4

A STRATEGIC COMPARISON

The leadership of the United States and Japan considered the Aleutians and the North Pacific Theater a “secondary” effort while their primary focus was on the Southern and Central Pacific regions. Japan’s main concern was to consolidate and retain the gains they achieved in the resource-rich South Pacific. The United States, however, wished to protect its existing lines of communications with Australia. Additionally, the U.S. determined the Southwest and Central Pacific areas provided the best attack routes to Japan, which would ultimately lead to Japan’s capitulation. Despite the reputed harsh weather conditions, the North Pacific was a strategically viable attack route and both sides could ill afford to leave their homeland’s northern flank unsecured. Consequently, both the United States and Japan were forced to face this reality and divert much needed resources to the region. At the beginning of the war, Japanese forces defended the Northern Kuriles while United States forces defended the far eastern Aleutians and the Alaskan mainland, leaving a void of military power in the thousand mile long Aleutian chain.

After Doolittle’s raid on Tokyo, which many Japanese incorrectly assumed originated from the western Aleutians, Japan regained the initiative and captured Attu and Kiska in conjunction with the Battle of Midway in June 1942. Japan’s strategic objectives were to continue to put pressure on American forces, while denying the United States the Aleutian attack route, in hopes of ending the conflict quickly. At the time, United States’ North Pacific strategy was very reactionary. The American strategy consisted of two major components. First, it had to rapidly bolster its Alaskan defenses to

prevent further Japanese expansion. Second, the United States had to build enough combat power in order to eventually counterattack the length of the Aleutians and expel the Japanese. Because this campaign took place on American soil, a first since the War of 1812, both sides realized the propaganda value and took steps to benefit from it. President Franklin D. Roosevelt expressed considerable concern that, while the Japanese thrust into the Aleutians was not strategically vital, it struck a psychological blow and, for that reason, Japan had to be expelled.¹

After the Americans defeated the Japanese forces on Attu and forced the evacuation of the Japan's Kiska garrison, the United States strategy evolved to one of consolidating its regained territories and preparing for a northern invasion of Japan.² To counter the United States build up in the Aleutians, Japan reciprocated in its northern territories--the Kurile Islands.

This chapter will analyze both countries' North Pacific strategies. To accomplish this, North Pacific resource allocations, both personnel and equipment, will be compared to determine which combatant nation diverted the greater percentage of its limited resources away from their main efforts. Also, each country's propaganda effort will be examined to determine who benefited the most.

In order to determine the amount of resources utilized by each nation in the North Pacific Theater, the conflict will be examined in two distinct phases. The first phase starts with the beginning of the war and ends at the completion of 1943. This phase encompasses the entire Japanese occupation of Attu and Kiska and includes all combat operations on the Aleutian Islands. The second phase starts in 1944 and ends with Japan's unconditional surrender in August 1945. Additionally, despite the fact that the Pacific

Theater in general was a secondary national priority until the war in Europe was resolved, all American resources diverted to the North Pacific will be compared to Pacific Theater allocations only.

Admiral Yamamoto realized that Japan could not win a protracted war with the United States due to America's industrial and manufacturing capabilities. It was for this reason that Yamamoto petitioned for the attack on Midway which was ultimately designed to destroy the remnants the U. S. Pacific Fleet and end the conflict quickly. To appease those in the Imperial High Command who feared an American attack from the Aleutians, especially after Doolittle's symbolic raid on Tokyo, Yamamoto agreed to a diversionary attack into the Aleutians in order to support his main effort at Midway. As a result, Japan's commitment in the North Pacific grew.

Prior to the Japanese attacks in the Aleutians in June 1942, Japan's main effort in the North Pacific was their defense of the Kurile Islands from an attack from Russia. After a relatively short four-month long Japanese-Russian conflict in Mongolia, which produced over 40,000 casualties in 1939, Japan transferred its 7th Division to the Northern Kuriles to secure the islands from a northern invasion. This 24,000 man division began occupying Paramushiro in September 1940. Units stationed in the Northern Kuriles eventually became the North Seas Detachment and were the same units that eventually occupied another part of the North Pacific--the western Aleutian Islands of Attu and Kiska.

To execute his battle plans, Yamamoto committed 39 of his 187 available ships in the Combined Fleet (almost 21%) to the diversionary effort in the North Pacific. The Northern Force included two of eight available aircraft carriers, six submarines, and

2,450 troops and laborers to occupy Attu and Kiska.³ Yamamoto chose to disperse his available aircraft carriers among four separate task forces during the operation in order to support his battleship laden main effort. Naval doctrine at the time viewed aircraft carriers as combat multipliers for battleships; aircraft carriers were primarily used for reconnaissance, fleet protection, and attacks on enemy bases, typified by the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁴ American doctrine was similar but due to the devastation of the United States' battleship fleet at Pearl Harbor, the aircraft carriers became the backbone of the U.S. Navy operations in the Pacific by default. Ironically, had Yamamoto embraced his aircraft carriers as his main effort instead of his battleships, the outcome at Midway could have been decidedly different.

The American response to the Japanese excursion into the Aleutians was to rapidly build up combat power in theater. This build up was only possible because the United States had the benefit of knowing most of Yamamoto's intentions. At the beginning of America's entry into World War II the United States had less than 17,000 troops in the Alaska. In response to Japan's Midway plan, the United States sent over 17,000 reinforcements in June 1942 alone, which was more than any other Pacific theater.⁵ Despite knowing Japan's attack plans, the United States was incapable of effectively preventing Japan's occupation of western Aleutian Islands because the nearest U.S. base was more than 600 miles east of Kiska at Umnak. As a result, Japan's occupation of Attu and Kiska was virtually unopposed and they enjoyed naval and air superiority in the western Aleutians for several months.

With Japanese forces fully entrenched on American soil, the United States poured resources and troops into Alaska in an effort to build the necessary combat power to

recapture the Aleutians. Japan also increased the size of its occupation garrisons on Attu and Kiska. The Japanese garrison on Attu reached approximately 2,800 people and Kiska peaked around 6,000 soldiers and laborers. The difference between the Japanese and American forces flowing to the region was that Japan had no intention of leaving the forces there whereas American forces were committed to ejecting the Japanese occupiers and securing the entire Aleutian chain until war's end. The original Japanese plan was to withdraw their occupying forces back to the Kurile Islands before the onset of winter. Consequently, the Imperial High Command was not overly concerned with its Northern Pacific operations. In fact, when attention focused back to Japan's main effort in the South Pacific, the bulk of the North Pacific Naval Fleet was transferred to the south in August 1942.

By the time Japan determined it needed to stay in the Aleutians, which coincided with America's occupation of Adak Island, Japan was ill prepared. Since Japan did not originally have lengthy aspirations for the Aleutians, they were forced to play "catch up," especially in terms of land-based aviation support. A few attempts were made to deliver vital runway construction equipment but most of the equipment was sunk or forced to turn back to Japan. The growing strength of American air and naval power in the region significantly hampered the amount of supplies able to be delivered to the occupying Japanese garrisons. From December 1942 to February 1943, only 4 out of 15 provision-carrying supply transports successfully made it to their destinations and two were forced to leave their ports before unloading all of the cargo.⁶ Japanese soldiers on Attu were forced to survive on half rations starting in November 1942.⁷ The Kiska garrison followed suit in January 1943.⁸ Once the American blockade effectively isolated the

Japanese garrisons, the Imperial High command elected to cut its losses and not attempt to send additional troops or supplies to the Aleutians. After the brutal defeat at Attu and unbeknownst to the United States, Japan managed to covertly evacuate the entire Kiska garrison back to Paramushiro.

While Japan struggled to break the American blockade and deliver vital supplies, the United States continued to pour men and materiel into the region. By the summer of 1943, when the United States was preparing to recapture Kiska, there were over 400,000 Allied forces in the North Pacific Theater.⁹ The amount of replacement troops flowing into Alaska and the Aleutians during Operations Sandcrab and Cottage, represented close to thirty percent of all new troops introduced into the entire Pacific Theater.¹⁰

In an effort to place continual and unrelenting pressure on the last remaining Japanese garrison at Kiska, the United States increased the amount of bombs dropped on the island using air and naval assets. The United States Navy even dispatched two battleships to support the operation.¹¹ Although aerial bombardment of Kiska began in June 1942, once the United States established bases on Adak and Amchitka, the volume of bombs delivered rose dramatically. In January 1943, the Eleventh Air Force dropped 150 tons of explosives on Kiska alone. In comparison to the Rabaul campaign, which was a concurrent operation in another Pacific Theater, United States planes dropped 197 tons in December 1942.¹² By the spring and summer of 1943, it was not uncommon for the Eleventh Air Force to deliver three times their January totals.¹³ What is more amazing is that this significant accomplishment occurred under some of the worst flying conditions imaginable. In fact, this impressive aerial pounding took place despite non-combat loss

rates being more than double that of any other Pacific theater. Harsh Aleutian weather contributed to the loss of over six aircraft for every one lost in combat.¹⁴

In July 1943, the United States Navy also increased their bombardment of Kiska. On 22 July, the Navy delivered 2,793 shells in conjunction with on-going aerial attacks.¹⁵ In one month alone, over a million pounds of bombs were dropped on a single island encampment in the Aleutians and were, therefore, not being utilized elsewhere in the Pacific. Despite the overwhelming firepower delivered, Japanese records indicate only fifteen soldiers killed and thirteen wounded on Kiska in July 1943.¹⁶ These casualty figures were less than the Americans received as a result of fratricide when the United States and Canadian forces invaded an unoccupied Kiska in August 1943.¹⁷

From the start of the war in December 1941 to the end of 1943, the United States Army alone shipped over 4,906,726 tons of cargo into Alaska and the Aleutian Islands.¹⁸ In comparison of tonnage delivered to the rest of the Pacific during the same time period (3,138,732 tons to Central Pacific, 2,423,512 tons to South Pacific, and 4,229,530 tons to Southwest Pacific), the North Pacific received approximately thirty-four percent of all materiel shipped into the Pacific by the United States Army.¹⁹ The amount of cargo Japan delivered into the North Pacific, beyond what had already been established in 1940, was infinitesimally smaller than the United States effort.

At the height of the Aleutian Campaign, the number of United States troops defending Alaska more than tripled the 75,000 strong Alaskan population. Since Alaska could produce almost none of its required food and consumables, nearly 100 percent of all its needs were shipped from the continental United States. While Japanese occupation forces were surviving on half rations, valuable cargo space was being utilized in order to

sustain the American forces and the Alaskan citizens. In fact, as the war progressed, quarters and food, particularly in the western Aleutian Islands actually improved considerably.²⁰

After Japanese forces were ejected from the Aleutians, the Imperial High Command elected to bolster their Kurile Island defenses in preparation for an inevitable United States invasion from the north. With 113,000 troops still under his command at the end of 1943, General Buckner's resolve to attack Japan via the Aleutians remained unchanged. Despite Buckner's wishes and overt comments to utilize the Aleutians as an invasion staging base, the United States Army Chief of Staff, General Marshall, was not overly enthused about the North Pacific invasion strategy.²¹ Furthermore, Marshall was struggling to fill manpower shortages throughout the rest of the Pacific as well as to continue to support the nation's main effort in preparing for a European cross-channel invasion. Consequently, on 5 October 1943, with an effective Japanese counterattack against a heavily fortified Aleutian chain no longer probable, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered the troop strength in the region reduced to 80,000 by 1 July 1944.²²

Despite the reduction in troops stationed in the region, the construction and maintenance of the infrastructure continued. Even though the Aleutian invasion route did not have many advocates outside of the Alaska and Western Defense Commands, United States military leadership refused to discount such an invasion. The leadership desired to maintain the strategic flexibility of a northern invasion in case the other Pacific regions did not progress as planned or in the event the Soviets were convinced to enter the war. In fact, assuming that a northern invasion would become feasible or necessary, the Joint Chiefs of Staff set a target date of spring 1945 for the proposed campaign.²³ As a result,

airfields at Shemya and Amchitka were improved and prepared for use by the new, long-range B-29 Superfortresses to bomb Japan. Construction was completed on a 50,000 man capable processing center on Adak Island which would serve as an invasion staging base. Roads, ports, navigation aids, and communication systems were also enhanced in preparation for a possible invasion. Also, the Alaska Department created a North Pacific Combat School (NPCS) which was established to prepare and train any future invasion force.²⁴ By 1944, the United States Corps of Engineers alone was spending over a million dollars a day on construction projects.²⁵

In January 1944, with the United States firmly in control of the waters of the North Pacific, the Imperial High Command ordered reinforcements to bolster the Kurile Island defenses in preparation for an American invasion. Like the United States in the Aleutians in 1942, Japan was racing to secure the chain of Kurile Islands. The preponderance of forces deployed to the Kuriles were transferred from Manchuria and Sendai (located in northern Japan) and included anti-aircraft units, engineers, communications troops, infantry, special naval landing forces, and field hospital units.²⁶ By May 1944, the Kurile defenses were established and their strength stood at approximately 41,000 troops. Even with the shortened lines of communication, increased American submarine effectiveness was having a devastating impact on Japan's ability to transport and resupply forces throughout the Pacific. The Kurile Islands reinforcements suffered up to six percent losses from submarine attacks.²⁷

Despite the War Department's inflated G2 estimates of enemy strength in the Kuriles, which estimated nearly 96,000 troops in November 1944, there is no doubt that Japan was forced to divert some critical and very limited resources to the region.²⁸

Japanese troop strength nearly tripled in the Kuriles by mid-1944. In particular, at least fourteen runways and their accompanying defenses were constructed in the Kuriles, which accommodated nearly 500 aircraft.²⁹ The Alaskan-based Eleventh Air Force estimated that one-tenth of Japan's air strength had been tied up in defense of the Kuriles.³⁰

As Japanese units flowed into the Kuriles and were stationed on over thirty different islands extending over 600 miles, the Imperial High Command reorganized the force structure and established the Fifth Area Army on 27 March 1944.³¹ The Fifth Area Army was responsible for defense of the northernmost Japanese home island of Hokkaido and the Kuriles. By April 1945, the Fifth Area Army was only allocated slightly over seven percent of Japan's fortification materials (fuel, explosives, cement, and steel).³²

As the United States steadily progressed in the Southwest and Central Pacific, both nations were forced to re-evaluate their commitments in the North Pacific. In September 1944, the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Marshall wrote in a memorandum describing future operations in the Pacific, "The major difficulty in planning for the coming months is a shortage of resources, particularly those which must be furnished by the Army, such as service troops, and those required to support land forces, such as cargo shipping."³³ Consequently, all peripheral theaters like the Caribbean, Panama and Alaska were ordered to transfer more troops. The Alaska Department would shrink to approximately 60,000 soldiers by war's end.

Japan also had to face increasing pressure in the Southwest and Central Pacific regions and, like the United States, troop strength in the North Pacific was reduced. By September 1944, in an effort to strengthen the Philippines and Formosa, all air units

stationed in the Kuriles, except for one air regiment in the Northern Kuriles, were transferred to the south.³⁴ On 19 April 1945, Imperial General Headquarters ordered a reconsolidation of Fifth Area Army forces in an attempt to prepare a better defense of Japan's home islands.³⁵ Although lack of adequate transportation hampered execution of redeployment orders, Japan's northern forces eventually decreased to approximately 25,000 troops which was slightly higher than their pre-war totals.³⁶

The United States, however, continued to build bases and fortifications until the completion of the war. The United States military constructed over thirty-two bases and scores of outposts in Alaska and the Aleutians, at a cost of over a billion dollars; these bases accommodated nearly 60,000 troops at war's end, more than three times the amount of American pre-war figures.³⁷

In all, almost a half-million United States military personnel served in the North Pacific in World War II, a figure five times greater than the Japanese level.³⁸ The United States Navy and Army Air Corps flew a combined 4,313 combat sorties, an average of eight a day in the world's foulest weather.³⁹ They dropped over 7,590,000 pounds of bombs on the enemy.⁴⁰ The Allies lost 471 aircraft in the Aleutians while Japan lost approximately 269.⁴¹ In terms of naval vessels, Japan lost about thirty ships to American submarines, ships and planes while the United States lost fifteen ships, patrol craft or submarines mostly to bad-weather.⁴² United States submarine losses in the North Pacific accounted for over sixteen percent of all submarines lost in the Pacific.⁴³

Despite the secondary nature of the North Pacific Theater of Operations as it related to both Japan's and America's overall Pacific strategies, Japan's occupation of American soil, albeit very remote, created a very emotionally charged situation and a

propaganda target for both sides. In a United States Public Opinion Research nation-wide poll taken in June 1942, 71% of the people could locate Alaska and the Aleutians on a map while only 21% could pinpoint the Hawaiian Islands.⁴⁴ This demonstrated the impact the Aleutian Campaign had on the American public. Although each country realized their media was being monitored by the other, the primary target audience for both Japanese and American propaganda was their respective populations.

Japan did not initially intend to exploit the occupation of the western Aleutians because that particular portion of the Midway operation was viewed as a temporary and diversionary mission in support of the occupation of Midway and the destruction of the United States Fleet. After the disaster at Midway, Japan's Imperial High Command was compelled to exploit their only success, the virtually unopposed landings at Kiska and Attu, in an effort to mask the truth from the Japanese public. Elaborate preparations were made, literally overnight: hospital wings were cordoned off, naval units were reorganized and deliberately confusing reports fooled the relatives of Midway's 3,000 dead into believing their loved ones were fighting for the Emperor in others parts of the Pacific.⁴⁵ On 8 June 1942, Japanese Premier Tojo issued a press release stating that the "diversionary" attack on Midway assured Japan's devastating success in the "great Aleutian victory."⁴⁶ Furthermore, the release claimed that Japan "sunk" two United States aircraft carriers and many other ships while the Imperial Navy only lost a single carrier.⁴⁷ Despite Allied news releases published around the world, which indicated the true outcome at Midway, Japan's dictatorial control of the media allowed the government to shield the truth from its populace. In fact, the Japanese domestic propaganda scheme was so successful that the Japanese public did not learn the truth until after the war.⁴⁸

The United States government's approach to propaganda concerning the North Pacific was to release as little information as possible. In August 1941, four months before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the Western Defense Command established a new "publicity policy" for Alaska to enhance operational security and compensate for inadequate Alaskan defenses. The policy was a volunteer censorship program between the military and the media, which laid the foundation for the coming security curtain in the North Pacific.⁴⁹ On 19 December 1941, President Roosevelt issued an executive order creating the Office of Censorship.⁵⁰ The Territory of Alaska was quickly designated a military combat area, which resulted in any information concerning military matters to be rigidly controlled by military censors and public relations officers.⁵¹

After Midway, the mere fact that Japan occupied American soil, a first since the War of 1812, the United States government tried to downplay its significance and mitigate its impact. Despite intercepted Tokyo radio reports, obtained by American media outlets, that claimed Japan had occupied islands in the western Aleutians, the Navy Department denied any knowledge of it until 12 June 1942, five days after Japan's initial landings.⁵² When the news of the occupation did finally break, the censor-approved versions lacked meaningful detail and appeared to down play any significance. For example, the New York Times published an article on 13 June 1942, entitled "Foe Wins Toehold," which emphasized (using sub-titles) the area was "uninhabited" and "no strategic gain" was achieved by the enemy. Other newspapers, claimed that the attack on the Aleutians was "long expected" as a Japanese "face-saving device" in retaliation for the Doolittle raid.⁵³

After the initial shock of the occupation wore off and the public realized that Japan was not going to attack the Alaskan mainland from its new “toehold,” the Aleutian campaign was seldom newsworthy as no new significant information became available. For the next year, as America slowly built its combat power in Alaska, the public was able to generally follow the Aleutian situation as war correspondents would occasionally publish censor-approved articles. It was not until May 1943 that the North Pacific reemerged in the headlines as a consequence of the Battle of Attu.

Although the much anticipated eviction of the Japanese from Attu was not a surprise to the American public, the victory did serve to boost public morale. What military leaders believed would take three days to accomplish, the fight for Attu raged on for over eighteen days as it became the bloodiest battle in the Pacific.⁵⁴ Despite the apparent setbacks, American media reports tracking the battle painted a brighter picture. On 19 May 1943, a week into the battle, the New York Times quoted Frank Knox, Secretary of the Navy, who claimed, “Our casualties are much lighter than we expected so far.”

Until the Battle of Attu, the Japanese public had been accustomed to receiving positive news regarding Japan’s war efforts.⁵⁵ After Attu, the Japanese government began to advise the people in more realistic terms.⁵⁶ With the tide now turned against the Japanese in the North Pacific, and increasing pressure from their enemies, Japanese propaganda efforts appeared to aim at rallying Japanese patriotism and pride. Japanese media outlets glorified the defenders of Attu and assured the public “that their sacrifices would lead to ultimate victory.”⁵⁷ Japan’s Emperor recognized the Attu defenders for their sacrificial devotion which exemplified the “bushido” code. Colonel Yamasaki, the

Attu garrison commander, and other defenders became national heroes. In fact, Yamasaki was posthumously promoted two ranks to Lieutenant General and was cited for “conspicuous gallantry.”⁵⁸ Throughout the rest of the war, Tokyo radio referred to the courageous example set by Yamasaki and the defenders of Attu. On the first anniversary of the battle, in the province where Yamasaki was born, an estimated 100,000 Japanese attended a memorial service for their fallen hero.⁵⁹

Operation Cottage, involving the mission to recapture Kiska, was the final significant event in the North Pacific that kept the public’s attention. The invasion of Kiska, which was considered a large operation involving over 34,000 Allied combat troops, turned out to be very anticlimactic.⁶⁰ The Allies invaded an evacuated Japanese garrison. The “bloodless” victory was reported and the military’s intelligence failures were replaced with bravado. The New York Herald Tribune reported “it was the threat of ‘power’ that made the Japanese give up Kiska without a struggle, since they undoubtedly know they were in for a licking if they chose to stay and shoot.”⁶¹ With the Aleutians now back in American control, the media reported that the “northern road to Japan” was open and it “point[ed] at Tokyo.”⁶² With an Army estimate of 7,000 potential casualties projected for Operation Cottage, some media outlets painted an overly optimistic view creating a dangerous hope that Japan had “taken such a terrific beating in engagements of recent months, that it can no longer expect or exact from its soldiers the ‘fight to the last man’ type of defense.”⁶³ This false impression would eventually be refuted, as future casualty numbers in places like Iwo Jima and Okinawa would dwarf any Kiska casualty estimates.

Japan's Imperial High Command rejoiced over the daring, clandestine, and highly successful Kiska rescue operation.⁶⁴ Despite its defeat at Attu, Japan used the Kiska evacuation to belittle their enemy. They claimed the Americans had invaded an abandoned, desolate, weather-beaten island which tied up hundreds of thousands of troops that otherwise could have been used elsewhere.⁶⁵ In fact, United States forces in the South Pacific conducted an amphibious invasion of Vella Lavella in the Solomons on the exact day of the Kiska landings.⁶⁶ As Japan bolstered its Kurile defenses, Tokyo radio continued to boost public morale and inspire its listeners to resist the anticipated American invasion.⁶⁷ Although the fight in the North Pacific was not its primary focus, Japanese media continued to mention it until July 1945.⁶⁸ Starting in December 1944, however, Tokyo radio's coverage of the war shifted away from the North Pacific in order to exclusively cover America's ever increasing pressure on Japanese defenses in the Central and Southwest Pacific areas.⁶⁹

After Kiska and the initial bombings of the Kuriles, many Americans considered the Aleutian Campaign over along with America's involvement in the North Pacific. As Alaska-based troops were transferred to other theaters, so went the majority of war correspondents.⁷⁰ Fewer than two dozen war correspondents were permitted in the Aleutians and the military kept tight control of disseminated news reports.⁷¹ Up to that point, military restrictions had been so strict that America's public concern for and interest in the North Pacific conflict had been stifled.⁷² Even the famous Hollywood director/producer, John Huston, who produced a positive, complimentary propaganda piece, entitled *Report from the Aleutians*, had his work shelved by government censors until after the campaign.⁷³ By the time it was released, the North Pacific Theater was a

footnote in the war, as public attention focused on current Allied successes in other parts of the world. Despite a rare news piece concerning America's harassment bombings of Japan's Kurile bases, the North Pacific had become the "forgotten war." The security curtain was finally lifted in the North Pacific on 1 October 1945, six weeks after Japan's surrender.

¹*History Undercover: The Bloody Aleutians*, 45 min., A&E Television Network, 2000, videocassette.

²This northern attack axis was one of three developed by U.S. planners. The other two attack avenues were located in the Southwest and Central Pacific Theaters.

³Mitsuo Fuchido and Masatake Okumiya, *Midway: The Battle That Doomed Japan* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1955), 214-222.

⁴Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1996), 220.

⁵Robert W. Coakley and Richard M. Leighton, *Global Logistics and Strategy 1940-1943*. United States Army in World War II Series: The War Department (Washington: United States Army, Chief of Military History, 1955), 732.

⁶Japanese Monograph No. 88, Aleutian Naval Operation, March 1942-February 1943, translated by the U.S. Army (United States Army, Headquarters, Army Forces Far East, Office of Military History, n.d.), Chart No. 11.

⁷*Ibid.*, 75.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Robert J. Johnson, "Aleutian Campaign, World War II: Historical Study and Current Perspective" (Masters Thesis, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Army Command and General Staff College, 1992), 195.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 186.

¹¹USS *New Mexico* and USS *Mississippi*

¹²Johnson, 180.

¹³*Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁴Ibid. The remainder of the Pacific aircraft loss rates were 3 to 1 (non-combat to combat losses).

¹⁵Ibid., 155.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷25 U.S. and Canadian soldiers were killed and 125 wounded or suffered medical problems necessitating evacuation.

¹⁸Robert W. Coakley and Richard M. Leighton, *Global Logistics and Strategy 1943-1945*. United States Army in World War II Series: The War Department (Washington: United States Army, Chief of Military History, 1968), 835.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Brian Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969; reprint, University of Alaska Press, 1995), 303.

²¹Louis Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years*. United States Army in World War II Series: The War in the Pacific (Washington: Department of the Army Chief of Military History, 1962), 429.

²²Otis Hayes Jr., *Alaska's Hidden Wars: Secret Campaigns on the North Pacific Rim* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 44.

²³Ibid., 45.

²⁴Ibid., 85.

²⁵Johnson, 195.

²⁶Hayes, 71.

²⁷Japanese Monograph No. 21, Homeland Operations Record. Vol. 4. Fifth Area Army, translated by the U.S. Army (Army Forces Far East, Headquarters, Military History Section, 1952), 5.

²⁸Hayes, 77.

²⁹Japanese Monograph No. 21, 10-14.; and Garfield, 305.

³⁰Hayes, 79.

³¹Japanese Monograph No. 21, 9.

³²Japanese Monograph No. 17, Homeland Operations Record, translated by the U.S. Army (USAFFE and Eighth U.S. Army, Headquarters, Chief of Military History, n.d.), 215.

³³Coakley, 415.

³⁴Japanese Monograph No. 21, 16.

³⁵Ibid., 22.

³⁶Hayes, 86.

³⁷Garfield, 302.

³⁸Hayes, 86. Approximately 100,000 Japanese servicemen served in the Kuriles at some point in the war. This number includes units stationed in the Kuriles throughout the war defending against a Soviet Invasion.

³⁹Garfield, 328.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., 304.

⁴³Kevin Hutchinson, *World War II in the North Pacific: Chronology and Fact Book* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), 221-222.; and James Dunnigan and Albert A. Nofi, *The Pacific War Encyclopedia*. Vol. II (New York: Facts On File, 1998), 558.

⁴⁴Johnson, 169.

⁴⁵Garfield, 102.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Hayes, xv.

⁵⁰Ibid., 3.

⁵¹Ibid., 4-5.

⁵²*New York Times*, 13 June 1942.

⁵³*Baltimore Sun*, 4 June 1942.

⁵⁴In terms of percentage of casualties sustained per enemy killed. Iwo Jima would eclipse the Battle of Attu as the bloodiest battle in March 1945.

⁵⁵Hayes, 68.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

⁶⁰Garfield, 294.

⁶¹*New York Herald Tribune*, 22 August 1943.

⁶²*Ibid.*

⁶³*Ibid.*

⁶⁴Garfield, 298.

⁶⁵Webber, 148.

⁶⁶Garfield, 298.

⁶⁷Hayes, 78.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 79.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 78.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 44.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 13.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 45.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 14.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Japan and the United States considered the North Pacific Theater of operations to be secondary in nature and on the periphery of their country's overall Pacific strategy. Based on that fact, which country, regardless of the tactical and operational outcomes, gained the most from their strategy to commit troops and resources to the region? It is clear from the facts presented in Chapter 4, that the United States committed a much larger force package, perhaps as much as five times larger, than the Japanese throughout the course of the war. At the beginning of World War II the American defenses in Alaska and the Aleutians were inadequate or non-existent. Consequently, scarce resources were quickly diverted to fill the security void. In April 1942, this flow of equipment and personnel actually increased dramatically after intelligence analysts deciphered Yamamoto's plans to attack Midway and the Aleutians. Once enemy forces were entrenched on American soil, the United States leadership determined that the Japanese would have to be evicted.

Despite the Japanese garrisons on Attu and Kiska, and their apparent strategic insignificance, in a very desolate portion of the globe, the United States under the leadership and guidance of President Roosevelt felt a Japanese presence, regardless of the size, in the Western Hemisphere was unacceptable. As a result, the United States took almost a full year to mass the combat power necessary to travel the length of the Aleutian chain and fight the Japanese. Even though Japan had decided to occupy the Aleutians to initially support the Midway operation and then to thwart an American invasion, which the United States had no intention of or capability to conduct, the end result was

approximately 400,000 Allied troops were committed in the North Pacific while Japan utilized a 24,000 man division, which had been in the Kuriles since September 1940. Ironically, because of America's huge build up and re-occupation of the western Aleutians, in response to Japan's Aleutian strategy, an American invasion via a northern route was now viable and Japan was forced to defend the Kuriles accordingly. Despite Japan's build up in its northern territories from January to May 1944, United States troop strengths in the North Pacific always far outnumbered that of the Japanese.

Although slow to start, the military build up in Alaska and the Aleutians quickly escalated and continued for months, even after the Japanese had quit trying to resupply, let alone build up, their paltry occupation garrisons. After the Battle of the Komandorskis, with Attu and Kiska virtually isolated, Japanese military influence in the Aleutians was essentially over. With no air or naval support to assist their dwindling garrisons, the Japanese were impotent to effect United States military operations in the region. Theoretically, Allied forces could have continued to contain and harass the enemy forces without the need for additional invasion forces. America's will to eradicate Japanese presence from the Western Hemisphere and achieve its first theater wide victory in the Pacific took precedence and the United States military build up continued until it peaked in the summer of 1943. At the end of July 1943, over 143,000 American troops were readied for battle against a Japanese garrison force at Kiska that had already evacuated the island. The American military build up in Alaska and the Aleutians was simply too much, too late.

After the unexpectedly brutal and bloody Battle of Attu, it is understandable why the Allies increased the size, training, and resources of its Operation Cottage invasion

force in order to attack a larger and presumably equally defiant Japanese garrison on Kiska. Regardless of the reason for the build up, the fact remains that the United States was diverting massive amounts of equipment and personnel to a theater that the Japanese were not and those resources were not being utilized in other Pacific theaters which were also engaged in combat operations. Furthermore, the Herculean task to sustain the North Pacific forces, as well as the Alaskan civilian population, along very long lines of communication, occurred at the expense of the rest of the Pacific forces. To further illustrate the excessiveness of the American military build up, one can examine wasteful and needless expenditures. General DeWitt, Western Defense Commander, ordered the construction of a staging base to support the invasion of Attu. Despite the urgings of others to build the base at Juneau, which already had docks, power and port facilities, DeWitt insisted the base be constructed seventy miles away at Excursion Inlet where no significant infrastructure existed. Even though the base was not completed in time for Operation Sandcrab, DeWitt ordered construction to continue. It was finally completed near the end of 1944, whereby it was immediately demolished as unnecessary.¹

The little known construction folly at Excursion Inlet was one of many mistakes associated with America's involvement in the Aleutian Campaign. The most prominent error, however, was the Allied invasion of an abandoned Japanese garrison at Kiska. Despite all attempts to depict Operation Cottage as a "bloodless victory" resulting from America's overwhelming dominance in the region, no one could explain why or how the Allies failed to realize the enemy escaped unscathed. This anticlimactic conclusion of Japan's occupation of American soil came to symbolize the United States involvement in the North Pacific. Because the battle for Kiska never really happened, the operation was

quickly overshadowed by actual combat accounts in other theaters. The Kiska blunder abruptly ended America's attention on the theater. Consequently, America's participation in the North Pacific for the remainder of the war became known as the "Forgotten War." The American public's lack of acknowledgement or interest in the region would have a devastating impact on the morale of the troops stationed in Alaska. In July 1945, military censors reviewed a typical letter from an officer which stated, "This may sound unpatriotic, but most of the men have been up here for more than two years and they are fed up with soldiering. Their patriotism has all been used up. They feel that they are the forgotten men."² A month later, an enlisted man wrote, " My morale is at its lowest right now The way things look, we have been left here to rot. Someone is giving us a raw deal."³

Even during the highlights of the Aleutian Campaign, like the Battle of the Komandorskis, victory at Attu, or the initial bombings of the Kuriles, strict United States government censorship prevented the American people from realizing the full scope of their troop's accomplishments until well after the fact. The Aleutian Campaign represented America's first theater-wide victory over the Japanese, and it definitely boosted public morale, as any victory would, but the celebration was short-lived and definitely not exploited effectively by American propaganda. A military imposed security curtain, which started before Pearl Harbor and lasted until after Japan's surrender, descended upon the North Pacific and, as a result, relatively few meaningful, detailed and relevant stories emanated from the theater. United States concerns over operational security, designed to deny the enemy valuable intelligence – in this case, the poor state of

Alaska's defenses, took priority over propaganda efforts which were designed to incite national spirit.

On the contrary, Japan effectively used propaganda to its advantage by exploiting its involvement in the Aleutian Campaign. All aspects of the campaign, good or bad, were cast in a positive light and were used as propaganda. After the debacle at Midway, the Imperial High Command's decision to occupy the western Aleutians gave them an unintended way to claim overall victory. Japanese occupation of American soil was also used to bolster Japan's self-proclaimed prowess at a time when United States forces were gaining momentum after Midway. Even after Allied blockades rendered the Imperial Headquarters helpless to support and protect its Aleutian garrisons, the sacrificial defenders of Attu were heralded as national heroes. Yamasaki's defense of Attu became a hallmark which exemplified the Japanese spirit and was used throughout the remainder of the war to rally public support. Evacuating Kiska was portrayed not as conceding victory to the Americans, but as a daring rescue operation which made the Americans look foolish as they diverted hundreds of thousands of troops away from the "real" fighting in the South Pacific. Finally, the Japanese public was kept apprised of the enemy situation in the North Pacific and the Kuriles as the Imperial High Command tried to synchronize a common defense of the Japanese home islands.

By the time Japan was evicted from the Aleutians, America's military industrial production was in full swing and getting stronger. Like Yamamoto predicted, Japan could not keep pace with America's industrial capabilities. By the end of October 1944 as American pressure increased, 87 percent of Japan's total adult population was committed to food and munitions industries.⁴ Of that same group, 47 percent were also part of the

Imperial High Command's Reservist Army, which comprised the main reservoir of manpower for military mobilization. If mobilized, a huge portion of Japan's domestic work force would no longer be able to provide the critical goods and services needed to sustain the military.⁵ By September 1944, the United States Army had ballooned to over eight million soldiers, with 1,165,917 troops serving in the Pacific, including Alaska.⁶ United States leadership under the guidance of the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Marshall, was committed to winning in Europe first and then concentrating fully in the Pacific. To accomplish this strategy, Marshall's plan called for the United States to mobilize, train, and equip ninety divisions. Although the United States had the capability to mobilize many more divisions, as the existing Army statistics only equated to less than six percent of America's total population, Marshall's ninety division plan was designed to minimize the impact on the domestic economy while maintaining a large enough force to win the war.⁷ With the majority of deployed and trained forces in Europe, the Pacific Theater was experiencing manpower shortages as it tried to press its offensive against Japan. In August 1944, the Chief of Staff of the Pacific Operations Area, Major General Clark Ruffner estimated a shortage of 181,000 men for even a limited operation against a proposed mission to invade Formosa in the Central Pacific.⁸

America's self-imposed ninety-division limitation forced the United States military in the Pacific to do the best with what it had. Although some troops were gradually transferred out of Alaska to other theaters, 113,000 to 60,000 soldiers remained in Alaska and the Aleutians from January 1944 to the end of the war. While this is a relatively small percentage of all Pacific forces (13.8% in January 1944 down to 4.4% at war's end), it is a sizeable force that could have helped win the war in the Southwest or

Central Pacific Theaters. Instead, many soldiers endured over two straight years of monotonous duty in the Aleutians as their strategic level leaders showed no intention and expressed little expectation to attack Japan via a northern route. What is worse is that the troops stationed in the North Pacific literally became combat ineffective due to lack of training and morale problems. As early as June 1944, unit inspection teams from the continental United States concluded that troops stationed in Alaska and the Aleutians would need complete retraining before they could be useful anywhere.⁹

In sum, despite America's operational victory during the Aleutian campaign, the United States' military build up in the Aleutians, in response to the Japanese occupation of Attu and Kiska, was excessive. Furthermore, the United States underutilized its Alaskan forces, particularly after retaking Kiska. America also failed to effectively exploit a propaganda opportunity because of strict, self-imposed censorship rules but the Japanese managed the opposite. In the end, United States mishandling of North Pacific operations resulted in an unintended overall strategic victory for Japan. An American Officer stationed in the Aleutians summed it up by writing, "Never have so many been sent so far for so little!"¹⁰

Today's Relevance

Renowned historian and author, Brian Garfield, described World War II in the North Pacific by writing:

It was war, but not total war. Civilian populations, women and children were not threatened. It pitted men and their machines against the elements in a contest where tactical imagination meant more than brute force. There were no mass dead, no dismal trench battles. The balance of strategic power could be affected at any time by one warship, a few dozen men, a small decisive action; the individual assumed value far beyond what was artificially accorded to returning heroes from the crowded major theater.¹¹

This same portrayal could be used to describe today's Global War on Terrorism.

American military forces are currently deployed to remote locations around the world and fighting a free-thinking, imaginative enemy under some seriously austere conditions. The term "strategic corporal" has been popularized to demonstrate how individuals or seemingly minor actions can impact the entire war. Although, the "Forgotten War" ended over sixty years ago, today's military leaders can still glean some strategic lessons from America's involvement in the North Pacific in World War II.

In the Pacific in World War II, particularly in 1944 when the majority of trained troops were deployed to Europe, Marshall struggled to maintain an adequate force and still minimize the domestic impact. Consequently, secondary theaters like Alaska were reduced to support the main effort. Today's all-volunteer military is also experiencing manpower shortages because of an increased operational tempo. Current American leadership is also attempting to minimize the public's inconvenience by not raising taxes or initiating a draft. As a result, the military must accomplish its mission with the current troops available. Like World War II in the Pacific, the current leadership must not lose focus of its main effort--the fight against terrorism. Today's secondary endeavors like Kosovo or the Sinai, which are not directly connected to the Global War on Terrorism need to be scaled back. When possible, reduce the size of the force package or transfer responsibility to the United Nations, Allies, or even host nations in order to make more troops available for actually combating terrorism.

Although the Alaska Department did reduce its troop strength to support other theaters, it failed miserably to keep the remaining forces relevant, ready and trained for combat. This failure ultimately lowered the Army's overall combat effectiveness and it

shattered the morale of the soldiers. Today's leaders must understand that taking care of soldiers is not a part time endeavor. Regardless of where a soldier is assigned, be it a secondary theater or with the main effort, all soldiers are vital to the military's overall mission and they deserve nothing less than to be properly trained, equipped and cared for. Also, the Aleutian experience demonstrated that leaving a soldier in a desolate, austere environment for almost four consecutive years can have seriously negative and permanent consequences. It behooves the Department of Defense to develop a reasonable and fair rotation system in places like Iraq and Afghanistan in order to maintain morale and improve retention.

Despite the North Pacific being considered a secondary theater of operations, the United States poured massive amounts of personnel and equipment into the region. In hind sight and based on the actual Japanese threat, America's response was excessive. Unlike the unprecedented industrial production during World War II, today's military can not afford to waste time, energy and resources, particularly on something other than the main effort. The military must take full advantage of its technological capabilities to mass effects and not necessarily manpower and equipment. Also, an adequate force should be deployed to defeat an enemy threat and accomplish an assigned mission but leaders must ensure that the force is not out of proportion to the enemy threat or the friendly priority. Based on the Aleutian campaign example, a force may isolate and contain an enemy, whereby potential rendering it impotent, as opposed to committing more scarce resources and manpower to actually kill it. By isolating and containing an enemy, and essentially strangling it, an objective may be reached at a lower human cost. When or if this is not

feasible, the military always retains the option to bring in the forces necessary to destroy the enemy.

In 1941, as America prepared for a potential fight, it realized that its defensive preparations in Alaska were atrocious. In an effort to shield this fact from the Japanese, America imposed a security curtain around Alaska, with special emphasis in the Aleutians, as the country raced to secure the territory. The strictly enforced censorship of the theater would last for the entire war and would cause considerable frustration among the public trying to gather information and the media trying to report it. Even as the enemy occupied American soil, the military censorship program stifled the public's insatiable appetite for any news, good or bad, of the Aleutian campaign. Today's military leaders must develop a good and mutually beneficial relationship with the media. Of course, operational security cannot be compromised but censoring or denying the media the ability to do its job breeds contempt and ultimately ends up hurting the cause. Unlike the Aleutian campaign experience in which the country failed to effectively exploit its successes, today's military must work with the media to build trust and get the military's positive story broadcasted. Don't lie to the media, like the Japanese did, because that will diminish the military's credibility. Propaganda plays an important part in winning any conflict and it is essential to building and maintaining public support. If the enemy is allowed to dictate and steer the world-wide coverage of a conflict, then American tactical and operational victories will not automatically equate to strategic ones.

¹Brian Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969; reprint, University of Alaska Press, 1995), 303.

²Otis Hayes Jr., *Alaska's Hidden Wars: Secret Campaigns on the North Pacific Rim* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 107.

³Ibid.

⁴Japanese Monograph No. 45, History of Imperial Headquarters Army Section Rev. ed., translated by the U.S. Army (United States Army Japan, Headquarters, Foreign Histories Division, 1959), 239.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Robert W. Coakley and Richard M. Leighton, *Global Logistics and Strategy 1943-1945*. United States Army in World War II Series: The War Department (Washington: United States Army, Chief of Military History, 1968), 836.

⁷Maurice Matloff, *Command Decisions* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1984), 366.

⁸Ibid., 413.

⁹Garfield, 302.

¹⁰Hayes, 98.

¹¹Garfield, 105.

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