

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, RI

**THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS CAMPAIGN
AN OPERATIONAL ART PERSPECTIVE**

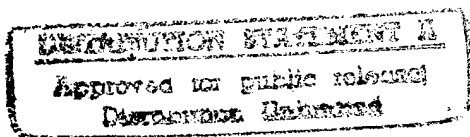
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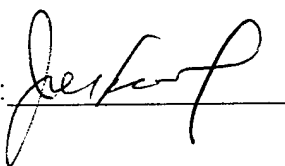
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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

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Abstract of

THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS CAMPAIGN: AN OPERATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

This paper analyzes the Aleutian Campaign from an operational art perspective.

The Aleutians Campaign, despite some major mistakes, is worth studying at the operational level because the lessons learned were put to use in both the Pacific and European theaters later in World War II. Through examining and analyzing the flawed operational leadership and command structure, operational factors (time, space, forces) and their impact on the operational level of war, and specific elements of operational design, the military commander of today can better prepare to meet the operational challenges of tomorrow.

Operational leadership was flawed in several ways. Operational commanders were too far from the North Pacific Area and lacked the expertise to conduct this cold weather campaign. The command structure was riddled with problems including dual chains of command between the Army and Navy and was plagued by interservice rivalries.

Operational factors influenced much of the decision making process of the operational commanders. The physical features of Attu and Kiska combined with adverse weather conditions impacted heavily on the freedom of action for the U.S. invasion forces.

Numerous examples of the elements of operational design can be extracted from the Aleutian Campaign. The deception plan attempted by the Japanese is clearly an excellent example of operational art despite its failure. The critical factors of the Japanese forces in the northern Pacific proved to be too vulnerable and the Japanese centers of gravity were easy to identify and neutralize. Operational design elements were applied effectively by the operational commanders.

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Chapter One -- Introduction

"The May 1943 Battle of Attu was one of the bloodiest in the Pacific, next to Iwo Jima. In proportion to the number of troops involved, it was the most costly in American casualties. The climax came on May 29 with a banzai charge by 1,000 Japanese. It was stopped, and that day 500 Japanese soldiers, knowing they were defeated, committed suicide, most with grenades held next to their bodies."¹

The Aleutians Campaign, frequently referred to as "*the forgotten war*," occurred in the far reaches of the northern Pacific under adverse weather conditions and against a fanatical enemy that was entrenched in prepared defensive positions. In this remote region of the world, a campaign was conducted that is often overlooked by modern historians. For a period of just over one year, two of the Aleutian Islands, Attu and Kiska, were home to Japanese military forces. The occupation of these islands began in June 1942 when the Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor on Unalaska Island and subsequently seized Attu and Kiska. This is the *only* time throughout the war the Japanese actually invaded and occupied American soil in the Western Hemisphere. One year later, U.S. and Canadian forces retook Attu and Kiska through amphibious assault.

The Aleutians Campaign, despite some major mistakes, is worth studying at the operational level because the lessons learned were put to use in both the Pacific and European theaters. Despite the fact that most of the available information is focused on the tactical and strategic levels, this paper will analyze the Aleutians Campaign from an operational art perspective. Through the dissection and analysis of operational leadership, operational factors (time, space, forces), and operational design, the military commander of today can better prepare to meet the operational challenges of tomorrow.

The Aleutians Campaign started as a diversionary operation by the Japanese in an attempt to draw off some of the naval strength of the already weakened American Pacific Fleet in the Pacific at Midway. However, unbeknownst to the Japanese, the U.S. had broken their codes and were fully aware of the true nature of the Midway and Aleutian Campaigns. Knowing the real threat lay at Midway, and the Aleutians were only a deception tactic to lure the remaining two aircraft carriers into a trap, Admiral Nimitz deployed approximately one third of his Fleet in defense of the Aleutians. This fleet, Task Force Eight, was commanded by Rear Admiral Robert Theobald. The Japanese split their forces, one for each operation, and were decisively defeated at the Battle of Midway. After the defeat at Midway, the Japanese, eager to achieve a victory for morale and propaganda purposes in Japan, shifted the effort to the Aleutians, invaded and occupied the islands of Kiska and Attu for the next twelve months. The tactic worked and it was not until after the war that the Japanese people learned of the devastating defeat at Midway and of how they had been manipulated by their military and government.

Strategic Setting

Prior to World War II, the United States and Japan realized the strategic significance of the Aleutians although neither country considered the North Pacific Area to be a significant theater of war. Thus, little planning or emphasis was directed towards the region. However, neither country could completely ignore the possibility that the Aleutian Islands could be used as staging areas along a potential invasion route. The Aleutians are a chain of about 150 small islands located in southwestern Alaska (Figure 1) that separate the north Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea. The island chain is also the shortest route between Japan and North America. There are four main groups of islands that comprise

the Aleutian chain: the Near Islands, Fox Islands, Rat Islands and Andrean Islands. Attu and Kiska are situated in the Near Islands on the western end of the Aleutians.

At the beginning of World War II, the Alaskan Territory and the Aleutians were isolated from the U.S. mainland. Infrastructure within the area was meager and often non-existent. In 1941, Alaska had only one railroad that ran between Fairbanks and Anchorage.² There were no major roads linking the United States with Alaska. Any land route would have to pass through Canada's sovereignty requiring the Canadian government's permission and cooperation. Airfields were few, and those that existed were primitive. Despite these limitations and obstacles, the North Pacific Area had a number of strategic points that, if occupied and improved, would offer a naval invasion route into the northern flank of Japan or the U.S. – a flank that was fairly defenseless. Historians have noted that:

“The strategic effect of these conditions is to make Alaska, in a military sense, a chain of islands without the means of self support to be held and used only by a power having full control of the sea.”³

A number of U.S. flag officers expressed concern over the vulnerability of the United States via Alaska and the Aleutians. General Billy Mitchell, one of the forefathers of air power, once stated that Alaska was “the Achilles heel of American defense.”⁴ He was not alone in the belief of Alaska's strategic importance in the North Pacific. A number of senior military officers believed Alaska might play a key role in the defense of the United States. As early as 1911, Alfred Thayer Mahan believed the best chance for victory in the event of a conflict against Japan lay in concentrating the U.S. fleet at Kiska. He argued the presence of U.S. naval power on the Japanese northern flank would dissuade them from attempting to attack Hawaii in the early stages of a war against the United States.⁵

Despite these and other strategists' views that greater attention should be given to the vulnerabilities of Alaska and the Aleutians, prevailing military leadership in the late 1930s and early 1940s paid little heed to this advice and left the region inadequately defended.

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander of the Japanese Combined Fleet and mastermind of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor⁶, was aware of the potential of the Aleutians and believed the U.S. had significantly increased its defensive and offensive capabilities in the area. Additionally, the Japanese High Command suspected that LtCol Jimmy Doolittle's April 1942 bombing raid on Tokyo had initiated from the western Aleutian Islands vice the decks of the USS Hornet. Thus, Japanese concern for an unprotected northern flank increased substantially.

Admiral Yamamoto was the first to incorporate the Aleutian Islands as a clear Japanese objective in an offensive plan.⁷ Yamamoto's primary concerns (post-Pearl Harbor) were the two aircraft carriers left in the U.S. fleet after Pearl Harbor and the threat they posed to Japanese naval forces operating in the Pacific. After considering and discarding a number of operational plans, Admiral Yamamoto convinced the Japanese High Command to agree to a surprise attack at Midway with the Aleutians serving as the diversionary tactic mentioned earlier. Although the Japanese High Command looked at the Aleutians Operation as a pre-emptive attack to prevent the U.S. from using the western Aleutians for staging bases for aerial attack of the Japanese homeland, Yamamoto held to his conviction that it was to be a diversionary tactic only. As history bears out, the Japanese lost at Midway and four heavy carriers were sunk. However, the Aleutians operation went as planned with the exception of the occupation of Adak Island. This

objective was determined to be too close to the U.S. base on Unmak Island – a base the Japanese were unaware of until the bombing raid on Dutch Harbor on June 3rd, 1942.

Operational Leadership

Admiral Nimitz, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet, was in command of the Pacific Theater with the exception of an area known as the Southwest Pacific Area which fell under the authority General Douglas MacArthur. Admiral Nimitz's area of responsibility was split into three sections known as the North, South and Central Pacific Areas. The Aleutians Campaign took place in the North Pacific Area (Figure 2) which included the area west of the continental United States, Canada, to the Asian coastline (including the Kurile and Komandorski Islands).⁸

Of the nine elements known as the principles of war, "Unity of Command" is one of the most important, particularly at the operational level. Despite this, the command relationships and structure in the Aleutians Campaign were flawed and created significant problems. Responsibility for the North Pacific Area was divided between two operational commanders, Admiral Theobald and General Buckner. Theobald was in command of all naval and air forces while Buckner was in charge of all ground forces. There were dual chains of command with little coordination at the higher levels above Theobald and Buckner. Theobald answered directly to Admiral Nimitz whose headquarters was based in Hawaii. Buckner's immediate superior was LtGen John L. DeWitt, Commanding General of the Western Defense Command located in San Francisco. DeWitt's responsibilities included defense of the U.S. west coast, Alaska, the Aleutians Islands, and western Canada. Neither Buckner nor Nimitz had a common commander nor a common point in their chains of command outside of Washington. Any disputes between Theobald and

Buckner that were not resolved by Nimitz or DeWitt had to be forwarded to Washington for a final decision. This created serious problems and forced the operational commanders in the North Pacific Area to depend on senior officers for much of the decisions that would affect the operation. For example, General DeWitt was unable to reallocate air or ground units from the U.S. west coast to Alaska or the Aleutians without the approval of Washington. Additionally, Nimitz and DeWitt were located far from the North Pacific Area, lacked experience in operating in cold weather operations, and had other, more pressing concerns, to address.

The concept of unity of command was thrust aside in favor of a less formal structure. Initial guidance provided to Theobald and Buckner was to work in a “spirit of mutual cooperation.”⁹ Compounding the command structure disconnect was a strong interservice rivalry between Theobald and Buckner. Both possessed strong personalities and a falling-out was inevitable between the two service commanders in the theater. It has been noted that, during the operational planning phase of the Aleutians Campaign, “their bristling rivalry became such a vital issue that it all but superseded the conflict between American and Japanese forces in the Aleutians.”¹⁰ Eventually, Theobald was replaced by Admiral Kinkaid who was able to put aside interservice rivalry and pettiness and concentrate on the task at hand. Unfortunately, much time and effort had been wasted during the initial phases of operational planning.

Operational Factors

The operational level of war addresses a host of concerns that are of a much different nature than either those at the strategic or tactical levels of war. The elements of operational art are designed to acquire freedom of action for military forces. To achieve

this, the operational factors of space, time and forces must be carefully analyzed in the context of how they might affect enemy *and* friendly forces. Failure to adequately address these factors will likely result in disaster for the operational commander.

Space is one of the critical factors that must be considered to ensure freedom of action for military forces. Although significant at the tactical level, its weight carries more importance at the operational level of war due to its dynamic nature. Naturally, the amount of space a force controls dictates many of the actions of the commander. It can also narrow the choice of troops needed for the mission. However, space is not simply a look at the size of the battlefield. There are many elements which can be applied to the factor of space,¹¹ elements the operational commander must focus on to be successful.

In the case of the Aleutians Campaign, space was an important consideration. Looking at the islands from an operational perspective, Kiska and Attu occupy a central, insular position. The Aleutian island chain as a whole is physically fragmented. The geostrategic position and occupation of Kiska and Attu, located on the western end of the Aleutians, could allow the Japanese the ability to use the remaining islands as "stepping stones" in an advance towards the U.S. mainland.

The Aleutian Islands extend from the Alaskan coastline westward for more than one thousand miles. Distances between the western Aleutians and Japan are fairly short. Attu, the westernmost island, is less than 700 miles from the Japanese owned Kurile Islands. Many of the islands in the western half of the Aleutians are within bombing range of Japanese bases such as the naval and air base at Paramushiro in the Kuriles. Japan's capital, Tokyo, is less than 2,000 miles from Attu and vulnerable should the Allied forces decide to use the Aleutian Islands as the starting point for an island hopping campaign

with the intent of establishing air bases for bombing raids of the Japanese mainland. This plan was seriously considered by U.S. operational planners and then discarded due to the adverse weather and extremely rough terrain.¹²

Of all the islands in the western Aleutians, Kiska offered the most potential for establishing an operating military base. Kiska is 25 miles long and five miles wide with an active volcano located on the northwestern part of the island. Of the two islands, Kiska had the only operational airfield and had some utility as a naval base. It had one of the best harbors in the Aleutian Islands which the U.S. Navy had sporadically used during patrols or exercises in these waters. This was vital because there were few good harbors in the island chain and navigation was difficult at many of them due to the continuous fog, numerous reefs, and lack of navigational charts. The island, although rough and barren, provided several flat areas that could be used to build airfields – a precious commodity that was in short supply in the North Pacific Area.

Attu, located 180 miles west of Kiska, is 15 miles wide and 35 miles long. There is scant vegetation and craggy mountains that offered excellent defensive positions for the entrenched Japanese. There was an inoperational airfield constructed by the Japanese and numerous small beaches scattered around the island, some of which were suitable for amphibious landings by small craft.

The ground on Attu and Kiska is covered with muskeg¹³ which often was not strong enough to support the weight of a combat troop and severely retarded foot movement. It also forced all vehicles to use the few and barely adequate roads. Despite existing knowledge of the terrain features of Attu and Kiska, operational planning failed to take into account the problems associated with maneuvering through muskeg. Combat

troops were equipped with standard issue footwear – the same footwear they would have worn if they had been deployed to North Africa. As a result, approximately 1,200 casualties occurred due to the combination of exposure to waterlogged muskeg and freezing cold. Throughout the campaign, adverse weather conditions continued to play a significant role.

“Despite all human courage and mechanical genius, the forces of nature in the Aleutians could always call the turns. No general or admiral was as powerful as the weather.”¹⁴

Weather is another significant element that impacts space and time factors. The weather in the Aleutians varies from poor to impenetrable. It ranks as one of the worst climates in the world and seriously curtails military operations of any nature. Much of the decision to forego building up the Aleutians militarily by either side was due to the adverse weather conditions that prevail throughout much of the year. The islands are almost continually enshrouded in fog. Violent storms frequent the region. Williwaws¹⁵ often erupt unexpectedly wreaking havoc along the Aleutian chain by damaging or destroying equipment and vessels. Weather conditions often delayed planned naval and air movements, thus the operational decision making cycle was frequently disrupted. The extreme temperatures, high winds, and heavy summer rains and fog seriously degraded the offensive and defensive effectiveness of both the Japanese and American forces.

Naturally, air assets were affected most by the poor weather conditions. Fog in the summer and unrelenting, fierce storms in the winter often delayed or canceled air operations for days or weeks. Throughout the Pacific Theater, the average non-combat to combat loss of aircraft was three to one. However, for the Aleutians, the ratio was double the rest of the theater, six to one.¹⁶ The weather was the contributing factor to the

increase in air asset losses. Bomber aircraft were lucky to be able to fly half of assigned missions. Often, even when able to fly, pilots were unable to locate targets due to drifting fog or high winds.

Naval assets were also hampered by the adverse weather conditions that prevail in this part of the world. The amphibious assault to recapture Attu (Figure 3) was delayed from May 4th to May 11th due to impenetrable fog. After U.S. troops assaulted the island, blizzards, williwaws, fog, and heavy rain squalls were often regular companions for U.S. forces during the three week operation of securing Attu. Fog provided protection to U.S. forces as they advanced over terrain that afforded the ground troops little to no cover and concealment. Unfortunately, the same fog that protected U.S. troops concealed the Japanese in their defensive positions.

The U.S. decision to recover Attu and Kiska in the summer was due to weather conditions and force availability. Summer weather tends to be somewhat better than weather in the October to April timeframe. The "better" time of year did not alleviate U.S. forces from having to face blizzards, heavy rains or thick fog. In spite of this, June to August are the best months for military operations in this region of the world. It was not by accident the Japanese invaded in June and subsequent U.S. operations took place one year later from May to August.

Time is a critical factor in operational art. Space, as defined earlier, can be regained if lost but time can never be recaptured. However, both elements of operational factors are closely interrelated. It takes time to deploy forces and equipment within a theater, particularly a theater like the Aleutians where the natural forces of the region

combine with those of the enemy forcing the commander to remain focused on the operational objective.

Leadership in Washington was concerned the Japanese occupation of the islands presaged a possible planned invasion of Alaska or possibly the Kamchatka Peninsula in an attempt to interrupt the U.S.-USSR Lend-Lease program (Figure 4).¹⁷ They directed immediate planning take place to regain control of the islands as quickly as possible. The eleven months of planning and preparation time the U.S. had before retaking the islands proved adequate. However, the time factor for retaking the islands was grossly underestimated. The operational commanders believed recovering Attu would take no longer than three days. Operational planning failed to take into account the adverse weather effects, terrain limitations, or the effect of fighting against an opponent who was in prepared defensive positions. Forward progress was extremely slow. The three day estimate turned into a three week operation. The operational factors of time, space and weather were not adequately addressed resulting in increased casualties and the loss of limited resources that might have been better used elsewhere in the war effort.

The final element of operational factors to be examined is the factor of force. Force is not simply a "battalion" or "brigade." It is a compilation of all of the assets available to the operational commander as well as the training and experience levels and logistical capabilities. Air, naval and ground forces are all portions of the "force." An appropriate force-space ratio is critical during the planning and executions phases of an operation. The relation of space-time-force must be considered by the operational.

The Aleutians Campaign's space-time ratio strongly influenced the importance of the principle of war known as economy of force. However, some significant mistakes

were made at the operational level. General DeWitt decided to use the 7th Motorized Division as the ground force for the operation. The problem with using this unit is they were training for employment in North Africa – desert training. Equipment, clothing, training and experience levels were inadequate for a cold weather operation. Most of the force deployed to the theater with only the normal issue of field gear. Cold weather clothing was in short supply. Most of the troops had no cold weather boots nor parkas. Additionally, the terrain of Attu and Kiska made DeWitt's selection of a motorized unit one of the worst choices possible.

Operational Design

The elements of operational design are absolutely vital for the success of any mission. It ensures that "one's own and friendly forces and assets are employed in a coherent manner and focused on the operational or strategic goals in theater."¹⁸ The elements of operational design that will be examined are objectives, enemy critical factors, operational fires and deception, branches and sequels and the enemy culmination point. Although there are a number of other operational design considerations that apply to the Aleutian Campaign, the elements listed above provide some excellent lessons for today's operational commander.

Operational objectives in the Aleutian Campaign are easy to identify. The U.S. objective was to regain control of Attu and Kiska and to remove the Japanese from the Aleutian Islands. The Japanese objective was to continue to occupy the islands to prevent the Allied forces from using the Aleutian chain as an invasion route or staging base for bomber aircraft.

The identification of critical factors is absolutely essential. The enemy center of gravity was the Japanese Northern Fleet commanded by Admiral Hosogaya. This naval force provided the life sustaining logistical support to the isolated Japanese garrisons on Attu and Kiska. It also was the force used for the Japanese evacuation of Kiska -- a surprise move the Americans were unaware of for three weeks. Hosogaya's fleet also protected the vital sea lines of communication (SLOC) from the Kurile Islands to the western Aleutians.

Another critical weakness affecting the Japanese was the lack of adequate air assets. Although there was an airfield located on both Kiska and Attu, the Japanese did not transfer any significant numbers of aircraft to either island. The only air assets available to the Japanese on a regular basis were several reconnaissance aircraft. Air supremacy belonged to the U.S. forces, particularly as air bases were built on the islands of Adak and Amchitka Islands, the latter only fifty miles from Kiska.

In mid-March 1943, U.S. forces capitalized on these vulnerabilities by blockading the islands in an attempt to isolate them from resupply. Task Force Eight successfully interdicted most of the Japanese resupply efforts through a combination of air, surface and subsurface assets. As the blockade's effectiveness increased and U.S. forces drew ever closer to the occupied islands, the Japanese were forced to attempt a larger than normal supply run. This resulted in the first and last daylight surface to surface sea battle of World War II took place during this campaign. In March 1943, the Battle of the Komandorski Islands was won by a numerically smaller and weaker U.S. force when a large, escorted convoy was prevented from resupplying the two occupied islands. This

was significant because it reduced resupply missions to the islands to the small Japanese submarine force and effectively completed the isolation of Attu and Kiska.

Operational fires targeted the Japanese garrisons on the occupied islands during the months preceding the U.S. invasion. These fires were synchronized, heavy, and planned. The center of gravity switched to the garrison on Attu from the Japanese fleet as U.S. amphibious forces were preparing to come ashore. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of the operational fires was significantly reduced due to adverse weather conditions (heavy fogs, winds). Exact target identification and location was difficult and bomb damage assessment almost impossible. Despite this limiting factor, there are several excellent examples of operational fires by U.S. forces.

One such example is the use of submarines in the interdiction of supply convoys. U.S. submarine forces in the North Pacific Area took advantage of the enemy's critical vulnerability of long SLOCs and sunk a number of supply, escort ships and submarines. This example of operational fires resulted in a sharp decrease in the number of supply ships able to slip through the U.S. blockade to resupply the isolated Japanese forces.

Another example is the air and naval bombardment of the two occupied islands during the months preceding the U.S. amphibious assault (Figure 4). Despite frequent weather delays and cancellations, operational fires were stepped up for the preceding three weeks before the invasion of Attu. Kiska was the recipient of even heavier operational fires. After the capture of Attu, U.S. forces built an airfield on the island of Shemya and upgraded the airfield located on Attu. During the month of July, the Eleventh Air Force pilots and naval bombardment fired and dropped 754 tons of munitions on Kiska.¹⁹

The Japanese had attempted to execute a detailed operational deception plan that, if it had succeeded, could have resulted in the annihilation of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. The plan called for a diversionary attack in the Aleutians in an attempt to draw out the two remaining U.S. aircraft carriers to the Aleutians and away from the real objective, Midway. As U.S. forces would be weakened by splitting what naval power still existed in the Pacific after Pearl Harbor, Admiral Yamamoto was reasonably confident he would be able to destroy U.S. naval power in the Pacific and sink the carriers by ambushing them between Midway and the Aleutians. The Japanese deception plan was targeted against the U.S. commander (Nimitz) who had the authority to react operationally, it was credible (both sides realized the strategic value of the Aleutians), and it was detailed and well coordinated. The Japanese attempt to manipulate U.S. perceptions might have worked if Japanese codes were not broken. Admiral Nimitz was fully aware of Japanese intentions and retained his aircraft carrier power and defeated his opponent at the Battle of Midway.

The ability to adjust to a rapidly changing situation is absolutely vital for the operational commander. To ensure this, the operational commander must incorporate branches from the beginning of the planning process. The Japanese decision to drop the planned invasion of Adak Island due to the unexpected discovery of an operating U.S. airfield on Unmak Island, 350 miles away, is an excellent example of the use of a branch in an operational plan. Instead of invading all three islands,²⁰ the Japanese moved on to the two objectives of Attu and Kiska.

The culmination point for the Japanese on Attu and Kiska occurred before they assumed control of the uninhabited islands. The long SLOCs combined with literally no air assets doomed the occupation of the two islands. The closest Japanese base was

Paramushiro air and naval base in the Kuriles – 650 miles from Attu. Resupply of the islands proved to be almost impossible due to the blockade and the operational fires that would target supply points. It is clear, with the benefit of hindsight, the Japanese would not be able to occupy these positions for an indefinite period of time without significant force reallocation to the theater. As there were other pressing needs in the Pacific for the Japanese, for example, the Solomons (Guadacanal), few assets were available for this remote area. Ergo, the Japanese had reached their culmination point before occupation of the islands.

Conclusions

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from the Aleutians Campaign. The operations and battles that took place helped to shape the thinking of strategists who were responsible for planning U.S. strategy in the Pacific for the remainder of the war. Possessing the obvious advantage of hindsight, it is clear the Japanese occupation of Attu and Kiska presented no real military threat to either the United States or Canada. The islands were seized in an attempt to downplay the debacle at Midway and to bolster public opinion for the war effort in Japan. The seizure of the islands was used extensively in Japanese press to demonstrate the military ability of the Japanese against U.S. military forces. However, the occupation was doomed to fail for several reasons. First, the sea lines of communication were extremely long and vulnerable to interdiction. Second, the Japanese did not have naval supremacy in the North Pacific Area. Admiral Hosogoya's Fifth Fleet was of only moderate strength, definitely not strong enough to control his area of responsibility. Additionally, an inferior and numerically outnumbered U.S. fleet was able to defeat the northern Japanese fleet at the Battle of the Komandorskis.

Third, the Japanese had neither air supremacy nor air superiority. Paramushiro Naval and Air Base in the Kurile Islands was too far to be able to offer continuous air cover for the western Aleutians. Despite these overwhelming reasons, the Japanese made the decision to hold the islands, a decision that ended in failure and a loss of manpower and equipment that could have been put to better use elsewhere in the Pacific.

For the United States, the occupation of Attu and Kiska represented a potentially real threat of invasion of the U.S. at Alaska. It was also a psychological blow to the American government and people that Japanese military forces occupied American soil. However, this backfired as U.S. public sentiment called for the removal of all Japanese forces from the U.S. territory at all cost. The Aleutians Campaign provided the first step in the joint planning process for the amphibious campaigns in both the European and Pacific theaters. It was often this operation from which future operational planners in World War II drew lessons learned.

The Aleutian Campaign will continue to be referred to as the forgotten war. It occurred in the most remote region of the Pacific theater and during a time when the emphasis in this theater was focused on the Solomons Island campaign and the defense of the Philippines. In the European theater, the North African campaign and other operations were grabbing the headlines. As a result, little attention was given to the Aleutian Campaign. Despite this oversight, this campaign produced a number of tangible and intangible lessons learned in operational art that can benefit the operational commander of today.

NOTES

¹ Rearden, Jim. "Kiska: One Island's Moment in History." Alaska, September 1986, p. 18.

² Pratt, Fletcher. "Campaign without Glory: The Navy in the Aleutians, 1942-1943." Harper's, November 1944, p. 558.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Franklin, William M. "Alaska, Outpost of American Defense." Foreign Affairs 19 (October 1940), p. 245.

⁵ Allard, Dean C. "Naval Views on the North Pacific Before and During World War II" in Alaska at War, ed. Fern Chandonnet, p. 4. Anchorage: Alaska at War Committee, 1995.

⁶ Takahashi, Hisashi. "The Japanese Campaigns in Alaska" in Alaska at War, ed. Fern Chandonnet, p. 35. Anchorage: Alaska at War Committee, 1995.

⁷ The Aleutians Campaign, June 1942-August 1943. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992, p. 4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, p. 6.

¹⁰ Garfield, Brian. The Thousand Mile War: World War II in Alaska and the Aleutians. New York: Doubleday, 1982, p. 15.

¹¹ The Factor of Space encompasses many elements to include geostrategic position, distances, changing of space (gains, losses, exclusion zones), physical characteristics (topography, vegetation, population, size, etc.), weather, and shape (landlocked, island, peninsula).

¹² The island hopping campaign planning for the Aleutians was put to good use later during throughout the Pacific theater.

¹³ A swamp or bog formed by the accumulation of thick moss and decayed matter. The muskeg of the Aleutians was a thick mass of vegetation covered with lichens and moss. Its tendency to be waterlogged, due to effect of the Japanese currents, caused the majority of casualties during the Aleutians Campaign (trench foot and exposure).

¹⁴ Garfield, p. 28.

¹⁵ A williwaw is a violent gust of extremely cold wind blowing seaward from a mountainous coast. Winds have been known to hit hurricane force and have caused many ships and barges to capsize or be destroyed on the numerous reefs in the region.

¹⁶ Russell, Admiral James. "Recollections of Dutch Harbor, Attu, and Kiska in World War II" in Alaska at War, ed. Fern Chandonnet, p. 73. Anchorage: Alaska at War Committee, 1995.

¹⁷ The U.S. operated a crucial lend-lease program with the USSR. Vital aircraft, supplies, and replacement equipment/parts were ferried to the USSR over the Alaska-Siberia Route. This effort was critical and allowed USSR forces the ability to blunt the German Eastern Offensive and force the German war machine to fight on two fronts simultaneously.

¹⁸ Vego, Milan Fundamentals of Operational Design. U.S. Naval War College, August 1996, p. 1.

¹⁹ The Aleutians Campaign, June 1942-August 1943. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992, p. 24.

²⁰ The initial plan of the Japanese called for the occupation of three islands, Adak, Attu and Kiska. This plan was changed upon the discovery of a newly constructed U.S. airfield on Unmak which would place Japanese troops on Adak under the threat envelope of bomber aircraft.

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