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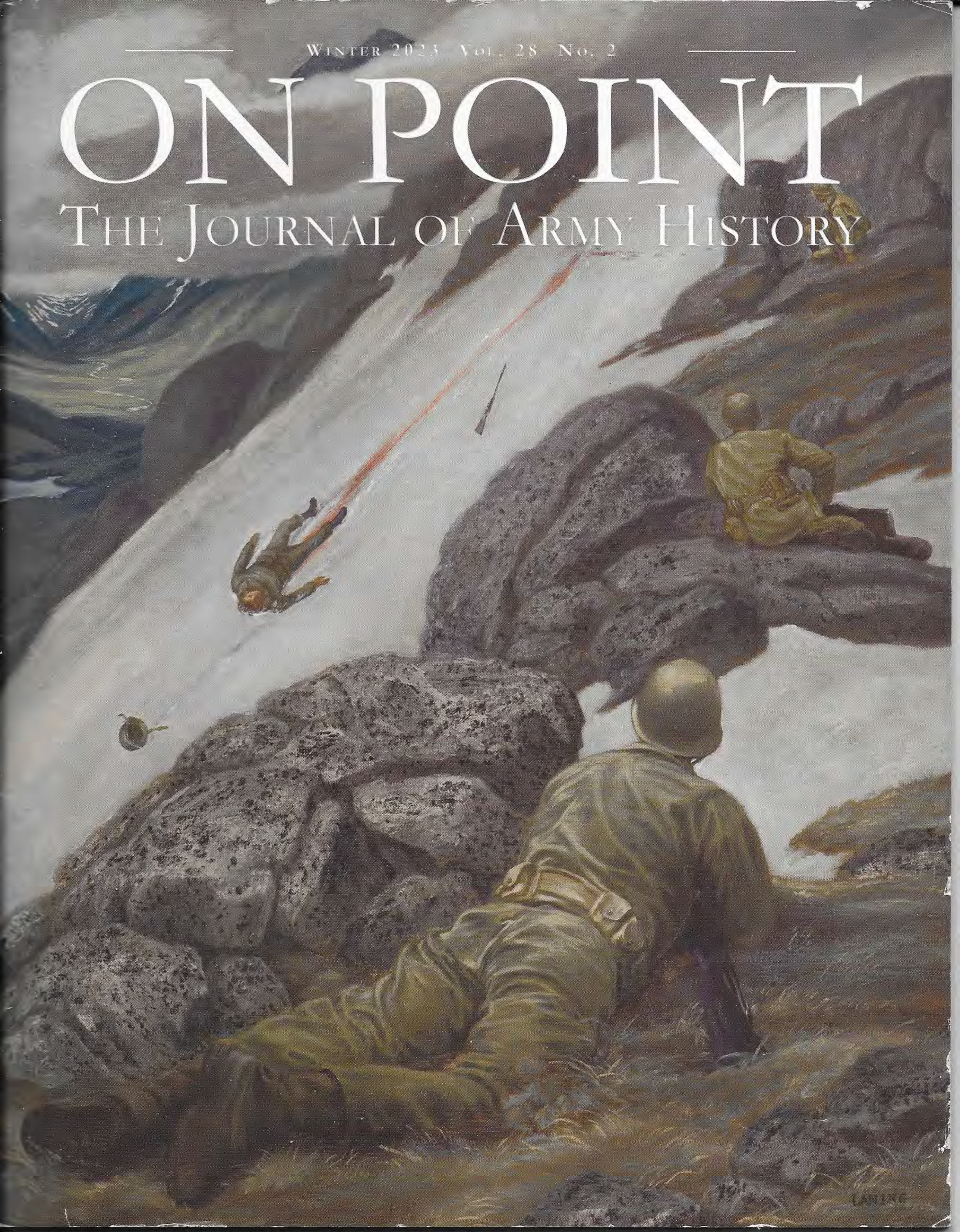


THE BATTLE OF ATTU

A Forgotten Battle Eighty Years Later

By Lieutenant Colonel Roderick A. Hosler, USA, Ret.

"I am thinking of Alaska. In an air war, if we were unprepared Japan could take it away from us, first by dominating the sky and creeping up the Aleutians...Japan might well seize enough of Alaska to creep down the western coast of Canada. Then we would be in for it."
Brigadier General Billy Mitchell, 1923.

"I believe that in the future, whoever holds Alaska will hold the world. I think it is the most important strategic place in the world."
Brigadier General Billy Mitchell testifying before the U.S. Congress, 1935.[1]

While many Americans are familiar with the battles for Bataan and Corregidor, Wake Island, Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Okinawa and other operations in the Pacific Theater of World War II, there is one campaign largely forgotten. 11 May 2023 marks the eightieth anniversary of the American landing and operation to recapture Attu in the Aleutian Islands. The battle led to the recapture and reoccupation of U.S. territory seized by the Japanese the previous year. American forces, aided by their Canadian allies, conducted combat operations against the Japanese on Attu, part of the Territory of Alaska, as the first step of the Aleutian Islands Campaign. In contrast with combat in tropical climates found elsewhere in the Pacific Theater, Attu was the only operation in which American and Japanese forces fought in cold weather conditions. In terms of casualty percentages, the battle was the bloodiest action in the Pacific Theater next to Iwo Jima.[2]

Six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces, in conjunction with the strike on Midway in the Central Pacific, attacked the Aleutian Islands. The Japanese bombed the U.S. naval base and U.S. Army's Fort Mears at Dutch Harbor on Unalaska Island on 3-4 June 1942. They then landed and occupied the island of Kiska on 6 June, capturing a ten-man U.S. Navy weather detachment. On 7 June, the Japanese landed on Attu. In both cases, Japanese troops landed unopposed and began almost twelve months of occupation of American soil. Attu was inhabited by forty-three Aleut natives and two Caucasian Americans, Charles and Etta Jones. Mr. Jones was killed during the invasion and Mrs. Jones and the Aleut villagers were interned in Japan until the end of the war.[3]

U.S. military leaders feared both Attu and Kiska would be turned into Japanese air bases from which attacks could be launched against mainland Alaska and the West Coast of the United States and Canada. In response to the Japanese invasion, U.S. Army Air Forces bombers of the Eleventh Air Force began long-range bombing of Kiska on 11 June. On 15 June, the Joint Chiefs of Staff decided to conduct operations leading to the recapture Kiska and Attu. At this point, however, an amphibious assault was impossible. Until then bombers and fighters of the Eleventh Air Force and the Royal Canadian Air Force conducted attacks against the islands when weather permitted. On 30 August, ninety days after the Japanese seized Kiska and Attu, 4,500 U.S. Army troops landed on the island of Adak and established

Japanese threats to military installations in the Aleutians, such as those at Dutch Harbor on Unalaska, as well as potential targets on mainland Alaska and the West Coast led Allied planners to launch a campaign to recapture Attu and Kiska in 1943. (*Defense of the Aleutians*, by Domenic D'Andrea, National Guard Heritage Series)

a forward operating base. The landing force included the 807th Engineer Aviation Battalion, which began constructing a forward air base 275-miles from Kiska and 450 miles from Attu. The U.S. Navy began to encircle and blockade the Japanese, culminating in the Battle of the Komandorski Islands on 27 March 1943, effectively cutting off Japanese ground forces in the Aleutians. Now, the Japanese could only receive limited supplies and reinforcements via submarine. On 12 January, U.S. Army troops landed on Amchitka, where the 807th Engineers completed another air base that placed aircraft even closer to Kiska and Attu.[4]

The island of Attu was twenty miles wide and thirty-five miles long. Its 245 square miles featured mountainous, treeless volcanic terrain surrounded by a treacherous and rocky coastline. Attu's harsh weather could change quickly from light winds and fog to strong wind gusts, driving rain or snow, and fog so thick that visibility was cut to several hundred feet. Even in May, snow covered the mountains and passes. To make things even more difficult for any invader, the Japanese had constructed a series of strong camouflaged defensive positions incorporating the stark landscape.

Japanese forces on Attu were commanded by Colonel Yasuyo Yamazaki, who arrived at Attu on 19 April by submarine. Establishing his headquarters at Chichagof Harbor, Yamazaki's command equaled a reinforced infantry brigade of almost 2,900 men of the 83rd, 301st, and 303rd Independent Infantry Battalions, Northern Kurile Fortress Infantry Battalion, Aoto Provisional Antiaircraft Battalion, 6th Independent Mountain Artillery Company, 302nd Independent Engineer Company, 2nd Company of the 6th Ship Engineer Regiment, support troops, and a field hospital. The bulk of the Japanese garrison was concentrated in the vicinity of Holtz Bay and around Chichagof Harbor, where the strongest defensive positions had been emplaced. All mountain passes were fortified with troops, artillery, and machine guns.[5]

The Aleutian Islands Campaign was the first joint offensive operation in the Pacific involving the U.S. and Canadian forces. The U.S. Navy's North Pacific Force, commanded by Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, had operational control in and around the Aleutians, and Rear Admiral Francis W. Rockwell commanded the Amphibious Force landings on Attu (and later Kiska). The Army component was the Western Defense Command, commanded by Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, and the Alaska Defense Command, commanded by Major General Simon B. Buckner, Jr. Army ground troops stationed in Alaska included units at Fort Richardson-Elmendorf Field near Anchorage and at Fort Mears, with the Eleventh Air Force split between Elmendorf and Dutch Harbor.[6]

U.S. intelligence estimates indicated over 10,000 Japanese troops occupying Kiska and about 500 on Attu. It was decided on 3 March 1943 to attack the lightly held Attu and to bypass and isolate Kiska. On 24 March, the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the plan to attack and occupy Attu, with D-Day set for 1 May and dubbed Operation LANDCRAB. DeWitt and Army planners expected the recapture of Attu to be completed in about three days and be conducted by a single infantry regimental task force. No one anticipated how difficult the weather and grueling conditions on Attu would be. None of the planners, commanders, or assault troops had experienced the bleak conditions on Attu or the determination of the Japanese. In *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, the volume in the Army's official history of World War II (the "Green Books"), the authors' state, "Seldom had operations been planned with less knowledge of what the troops would have to face."[7]

The 7th Infantry Division, commanded by Major General Albert E. Brown and based at Fort Ord, California, was selected for the assault on Attu. The 7th was in a high state of readiness since it had recently undergone desert training in preparation for deployment to North Africa. Desert training, however, would not prepare the 7th for the Aleutians. Selection for the Aleutian mission caused the 7th to be reorganized from motorized to light infantry. In January 1943, the 7th began intensive amphibious training for the landing in the Aleutians.[8]

The 7th Infantry Division totaled 14,235 men comprising the 17th, 32d, and 159th* Infantry

ABOVE: Colonel Yasuyo Yamasaki led the Japanese forces on Attu. Like most of the Japanese defenders on the island, he would not survive the battle. (Wikimedia)

RIGHT: Major General Albert E. Brown, shown here during desert training in 1942, commanded the 7th Infantry Division, which was selected to lead the assault force against Attu in May 1943. (National Archives)

Regiments (a California National Guard unit). Other combat and support units included Division Artillery with the 31st* (155mm howitzers), 48th , 49th and 57th* Field Artillery Battalions (all 105mm), 13th Engineer Combat Battalion, 7th Medical Battalion, 7th Scout Company, 7th Reconnaissance Company, 7th Signal Company, 707th Ordnance Company*, 7th Quartermaster Company*, and the 7th Division Headquarters Company with staff, band*, military police platoon*, and a counterintelligence detachment. During the operation on Attu, the 50th Engineer Regiment (minus one battalion), 20th Field Hospital, 78th Coast Artillery Regiment (Antiaircraft) (less one battalion), and a shore party company from the 5th Engineer Regiment were attached to the 7th for the invasion. (*Did not participate in the landing.)[9]

Updated intelligence reported an increased Japanese strength on Attu, causing the Army planners to increase the number of troops to be committed. The 17th Infantry was selected as the primary assault force with support from a battalion of the 32d Infantry. The remaining two battalions of the 32d and two 105mm howitzer batteries constituted a floating reserve and follow-on force. Four plans were drawn up for the assault and a revised hybrid plan was proposed and accepted.[10]

The assault on Attu would require multiple landing beachheads using two assault forces broken down into battalion landing teams. The Southern Force (two battalions each from the 17th Infantry and 32d Infantry) constituted the main landing force and would take place on a flat, 2.5-mile-wide beach at Massacre Bay (Blue Beach: 2d Battalion, 17th Infantry; and Yellow Beach: 3d Battalion, 17th Infantry, and 2d Battalion, 32nd Infantry) and drive inland up the wide Massacre Valley. The Northern Force (1st Battalion, 17th Infantry, followed by 3d Battalion, 32d Infantry on 13 May) would make the secondary landing at Red Beach on Goltsov Point near West Arm of Holtz Bay. The troops at Red Beach would have to climb the near-vertical 250-foot embankment behind the narrow, rocky beach and then make their way approximately three miles southwest over the rugged narrow plateau and then down steep slopes to the main Japanese camp, fighting the entire distance. Simultaneously, the 7th Provisional Scout Battalion (7th Reconnaissance Troop and 7th Scout Company) would land on Scarlet Beach at Austin Cove. One platoon from the 7th Reconnaissance Troop would land at Alexia Point. Artillery would land and provide fire support for the Southern and Northern Forces. All elements would converge on the Japanese from several directions trapping then in a small valley at the head of Chichagof Harbor. Close air support was supplied by the Eleventh Air Force and the Navy provided naval gunfire support.[11]

On 23 April, the 7th Infantry Division assembled at Fort Masson, the port of embarkation in San Francisco, for deployment to the Aleutians. While at Fort Masson, "winter" uniforms and equipment were issued. Each soldier received: an "Alaskan" field jacket, gloves, overcoat, wool underwear and socks, rucksack, wool-lined sleeping bag with a cover (not waterproof), two-piece rain suit, and leather blucher-style boots. Kersey wool-lined "Alaskan" trousers were turned back as deemed unnecessary until well after the invasion began. This was a bad decision that could not be easily rectified because ongoing combat operations would not allow for reissue. The leather eighteen-inch high laced blucher boots, which were not waterproof, retained the cold, and provided no traction on snow and ice, proved to be an inferior combat boot. The footwear of choice was the waterproof shoepacks (rubber bottoms and leather tops), but these were not available in sufficient quantities to issue to division troops in time for the invasion. Most of the frostbite and trench foot casualties later incurred on Attu were caused by unsatisfactory footwear.[12]

The assault force sailed from San Francisco on 24 April in four naval attack transports, three cargo ships, and eight Army troopships and headed north to the Aleutians. The naval task force include three World War I-era battleships (two of which, the USS *Nevada* and USS *Pennsylvania*, were at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941), one escort aircraft carrier (USS *Nassau*) and a flotilla of destroyers, support ships, and two submarines. The assault force arrived at Cold Bay on the tip of the Alaska Peninsula almost 1,000 miles from Attu on 30 April. The American assault to recapture Attu, scheduled for 1 May, was postponed due to bad weather.[13]

The weather would prove to be a constant issue. The original 1 May D-Day was pushed back ten days in hopes for better weather. The assault force sailed from Cold Bay and arrived off Attu on 10 May, but still the weather would not cooperate. The landing was postponed twenty-four hours. Unable to delay any further, the landing would take place on 11 May, come hell or high water. The fog was heavy around Attu when the 7th Provisional Scout Battalion came ashore at Austin Cove on schedule at 0530 from two submarines. At 0840, assault troops of 7th Infantry Division climbed down cargo nets of their assault ships into waiting landing craft for the dash to their designated beaches. Dense fog continued to cover

This map shows the U.S. landings and axes of attack against the Japanese on Attu, as well as the Japanese counterattack on 29 May 1943. (U.S. Army Center of Military History)

LEFT: Landing craft carrying the first assault wave carefully maneuver through thick fog off Attu, 11 May 1943. (National Archives)

RIGHT: Soldiers carry ammunition from a landing craft for 105mm howitzers preparing to go into action against the Japanese, 11 May 1943. (National Archives)

the area, causing a delay in the landing for almost eight hours. Finally at 1700, escorted by the shallow-draft minesweeper USS *Pruitt*, the troops of Southern Force came ashore at Massacre Bay's two beaches devoid of Japanese defenders. The fog, coupled with the lack of naval gunfire and air support, helped the Americans achieve complete tactical surprise.

Colonel Edward P. Earle, commander of the Southern Force and the 17th Infantry Regiment, with Major Edward P. Smith's 2d Battalion, 17th Infantry, less Company F, designated Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 17-2, landed on Blue Beach, while Major James R. Montague's BLT 17-3 (3d Battalion, 17th Infantry) landed at Yellow Beach. 2d Battalion 32d Infantry, was attached as reserve. The Southern Force maneuvered up Massacre Valley toward Jarmin Pass. The surprise did not last long as the Japanese positioned inland began to engage the Americans with light artillery fire from the two 75mm mountains guns and machine guns in the Clevesy Pass area.[14]

Meanwhile, Colonel Frank E. Curlin, commander of the Northern Force and the 32d Infantry with BLT 17-1 (1st Battalion, 17th Infantry), commanded by Major Albert V. Hartl, came ashore on Red Beach at Goltsov Point followed by Lieutenant Colonel John M. Finn's BLT 32-3 (3d Battalion, 32nd Infantry). The Northern Force pushed rapidly up the west arm of Holtz Bay southward toward Jarmin Pass practically unopposed. Major General Brown and his divisional staff came ashore at Massacre Bay at 2100 and set up their command post near Lake Elwood. With all beachheads secured, batteries of the 48th Field Artillery Battalion came ashore to set up and begin firing their 105mm howitzers in support of the infantry advances.

American soldiers soon found themselves unprepared and ill-equipped for operations against the Japanese on Attu. Difficult and mostly mountainous and barren terrain, exposure to drenching rains, freezing cold, snow, strong winds, and damp, foggy conditions, coupled with inadequate clothing and equipment would cause more casualties than enemy fire. Hundreds of troops suffered from frostbite, trench foot, gangrene, and pneumonia. Equipment failures, physical fatigue, and inadequate rations contributed to the miserable conditions, and low morale affected soldiers as they maneuvered across the island fighting against a determined enemy. American troops had arrived from "sunny and warm" California and had not been given an opportunity to get acclimated to the condition in the Aleutians. This, coupled with previously mentioned shortfalls, would have a major impact on the American troops and the conduct of the battle.

LEFT: A 105mm howitzer is prepared for action against the enemy Attu. Note the wicker mats to prevent the howitzer from sinking into the muskeg, the boggy terrain found over much of Attu. (National Archives)

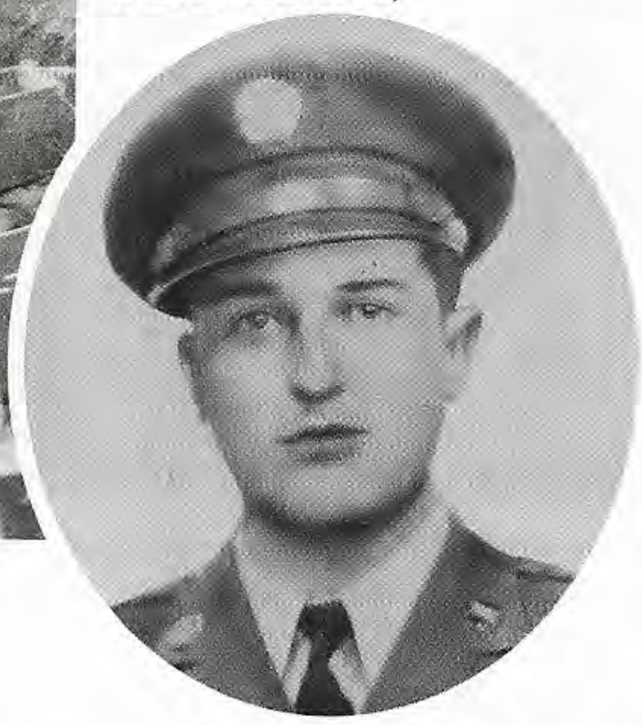
RIGHT: Soldiers evacuate a wounded comrade on Attu. Transporting anything on Attu—ammunition, supplies, wounded—was a labor-intensive effort due to the inhospitable terrain and weather. (U.S. Navy photograph, Library of Congress)

LEFT: A GI slides lifelessly down an icy slope after being shot by the enemy on Attu in Edward Lanning's painting, *Death in the Snow*. (Army Art Collection)

The Japanese, on the other hand, were better equipped to withstand the harsh Aleutian weather. Having spent ten months on Attu, the Japanese had become accustomed to the Aleutian climate and became familiar with Attu's topography. The only shortcoming for the Japanese was a shortage of food, which had to be strictly rationed, and their supply of ammunition that would eventually run out.

Mud and the terrain of Attu immobilized trucks and tractors preventing artillery and supplies from moving inland beyond the beach. Despite being on the ground, Brown and his field headquarters had difficulties establishing communications with Rear Admiral Rockwell aboard the *Pennsylvania*. Most of the long distance radios had not arrived, and were still aboard the USS *Perida*, which lay off Yellow Beach, sinking after running aground. Communications from Brown were almost nonexistent, keeping Rockwell in the dark about the progress of the assault. The lost communication equipment further hampered command and control of the operation before the battle began.[15]

On 12 May, the 7th Infantry Division continued a two-pronged thrust toward Jarmin Pass supported by naval gunfire and air support. Frontal attacks from the Southern Force up Massacre Valley stalled and failed to gain ground. Patrols were sent forward



LEFT: This dual-purpose 75mm gun was hastily abandoned by the Japanese and captured intact by U.S. troops, who later used it against enemy on Attu. (National Archives)

BELOW: Private Joe P. Martinez, an automatic rifleman serving with Company K, 32d Infantry, 7th Infantry Division, was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously for actions on 26 May 1943. Martinez was the only serviceman awarded the Medal of Honor for the Aleutian Islands Campaign. (National Archives)

probing enemy positions in order to develop the situation. While moving forward to ascertain the actions taking place, Colonel Earle was killed by enemy machine-gun fire. He was replaced by Colonel Wayne L. Zimmerman, the 7th Infantry Division's Chief of Staff. 2d Battalion, 32d Infantry (2-32 IN), commanded by Major Charles G. Fredericks, came ashore at Massacre Bay to reinforce the push forward. At the same time, the Northern Force was having some success. Finding the Japanese in prepared positions on Hill X, 2-32 IN made a double envelopment attack that gained a foothold on the crest. The 7th Provisional Scout Battalion continued screening the invasion's left flank as it moved to link up with the Northern Force. However, communications from Brown's field headquarters to Rockwell had not yet been established.[16]

The battle continued on 13 May, with further efforts of 2d and 3d Battalions, 17th Infantry, in Massacre Valley to break into Jarmin Pass repelled by enemy. Heavy fighting occurred to the north as the Japanese attempted to drive the 1-17 IN troops from Hill X, but the crest was firmly in American hands. Naval gunfire and air support continued as weather conditions and observation permitted. Communications at all levels were sporadic. Troops continued to face determined Japanese resistance and mounting casualties. At this point of the battle, Rockwell on the *Pennsylvania* and Rear Admiral Kirkland at Lieutenant General DeWitt's field headquarters on Adak had little to no idea of the progress of the operation. DeWitt's timetable for a three-day battle to recapture Attu was behind schedule. Major General Brown's request for reinforcements, the 4th Infantry on Adak, was denied.[17]

3-17 IN, depleted by combat losses and cold weather casualties, was withdrawn from the Massacre Bay battleline on 15 May, leaving 2-32 IN to continue the fight alone. Major Montague, commander of 3-17 IN, and two of his company commanders were relieved by Colonel Zimmerman because they were so exhausted that they had become combat ineffective. Montague was replaced by Major Jack K. Siddens, the 3-17 IN's executive officer.[18] Still, no progress was made in attacks against determined Japanese defenders despite artillery support. Dense fog postponed the attack of the Northern Force at Holtz Bay. Nevertheless, Colonel Culin's force achieved success in capturing the Japanese camp. 1-32 IN (less Companies A and B), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Earnest H. Bearss, came ashore at Massacre Beach and advanced 2,000 yards up to Hogback Ridge.

Four American infantry battalions were committed against two Japanese companies defending the Jarmin and Clevesy Passes. As the fog finally lifted, the Americans discovered that the enemy had withdrawn to a ridge in the center of valley. Two American infantry battalions swept south along Holtz Bay pushing the Japanese as they went. The Provisional Scout Battalion then linked up with the Northern Force. However, the continued lack of communications and reports from the battle area failed to tell the true story of the actions on the ground and had an adverse impact on Major General Brown's ability to command and complete the operation.

Five days into the battle, Rear Admiral Kirkland and Lieutenant General DeWitt had lost confidence in Brown's ability to accomplish the operations on Attu. Without ascertaining the true conditions on the ground, the decision was made to relieve Brown on 16 May. Major General Eugene M. Landrum, deputy commander of the Alaska Defense Command on Adak, assumed command of the 7th Infantry Division and the battle.[19] Landrum continued using Brown's operations plan to reduce the Japanese positions on Attu. Outnumbered by the Americans and in danger of being taken from the rear, the Japanese withdrew toward Chichagof Harbor during the night of 16 May to continue the fight.

Troops from the Northern and Southern Forces resumed active patrolling, seeking enemy contact. The Japanese had aban-

Edward Lanning's *Aleutians Cemetery* depicts one of the two temporary cemeteries for American troops killed on Attu. (Army Art Collection)

doned multiple defensive positions. Southern Force units finally occupied Jarmin Pass. A patrol from the Southern Force made contact with the Northern Force early on 18 May. Holtz Bay was soon secured and preparations were made for the next phase of the battle, the attack on Chichagof Harbor area. To reinforce the troops on Attu, Rear Admiral Rockwell finally released 1-4 IN, with the battalion arriving on 18 May at Massacre Bay to join the fight.[20]

For the next ten days, 19-28 May, American units maneuvered against determined Japanese infantry. Dug into positions in the mountains and in the passes, the Japanese continued to inflict casualties on 7th Division units. Weather continued to play a critical part in the battle. Prolonged cold, rain, occasional snow, and dense fog hampered American advances as well as air and naval gunfire support. The harsh terrain physically taxed the soldiers as they fought and hauled supplies to the front by hand. Still, determined American infantry slowly moved forward on all points pushing the Japanese as they went. Seven U.S. infantry battalions were now engaged in the fight supported by two field artillery battalions. One by one, American units cleared and secured major objectives: Clevesy Pass, Holtz-Chichagof Pass, Fish Hook Ridge, Prendergast Ridge, the upper section of Sarana Valley, and other key areas and tightening their grip on the Japanese. At the same time, U.S. casualties continued to mount from both combat and inclement weather.

While clearing the way through the Holtz Bay-Chichagof Harbor Pass, Company K, 32d Infantry, was pinned down by intense Japanese machine-gun fire and stopped cold. Private Joe P. Martinez, an automatic rifleman, rushed forward and single-handedly engaged several Japanese machine-gun positions with hand grenades and his automatic rifle. Martinez's actions enabled his company to advance at Washburn Peak, but during is engagement he was mortally wounded. His valor enabled the company to continue its advance and sweep the area. Martinez received the Medal of Honor posthumously for his actions, the only one awarded during the Aleutian Islands Campaign.[21]

Progress was slow but the effective fire support provided by 105mm howitzers of the 48th and 49th Field Artillery Battalions, coupled with the 75mm pack howitzers of the 17th and 32d Infantry Regiments' cannon companies zeroed in on the Japanese positions. Even the regimental antitank companies joined the fray, using their 37mm antitank guns to provide direct-fire support against the Japanese. Moving artillery over the muskeg and water-soaked ground on Attu was difficult and became a major task. Artillery had to be moved by hand, relegating the heavy 105mm howitzers to be employed from firing positions along the shoreline of Massacre Beach and Goltsov Point during most of the battle. To keep the guns from sinking into the soft muskeg, soldiers fabricated wicker mats for the howitzer's tires to rest on. The lighter 75mm pack howitzers and 37mm antitank guns were easier to haul around by hand.

While the infantry sought out and destroyed the Japanese, Army engineers were kept busy as well. The 13th and the 50th Engineer Combat Battalions completed the construction of a road to Clevesy Pass, and the 807th Engineer Aviation Battalion that arrived on 28 May began construction of a fighter airstrip at Alexei Point. Heavy engineer equipment suffered the same fate as the heavy artillery pieces and became mired in the muskeg, rendering them useless. When not employed in construction, engineers and support troops manually hauled supplies and ammunition from the beach area to units on the frontlines.

The 7th Infantry Division maintained pressure on the Japanese throughout the 28 May, who, by end of day, had been compressed into small area of Chichagof Harbor. Messages urging the Japanese to surrender were dropped from the air but ignored. The plight of the Japanese on Attu was becoming desperate. About 1,300 Japanese had been killed during seventeen days of fighting and about 600 were wounded and languished in the overcrowded field hospital. Food that had been rationed was running out, and medical supplies and ammunition were being depleted quickly. The outlook for the Japanese was bleak.

Without hope of relief or rescue and no other options available, Colonel Yamasaki determined to lead his remaining 1,000 troops fit for duty in a frantic "banzai charge" against the Americans. Yamasaki hoped get to his troops into the American rear, seize supplies and equipment, and capture U.S. artillery, turning these guns against the Americans at the head of Massacre Valley. It was a bold but futile plan with little hope of success.[22]

Yamasaki assembled his troops before dawn on the morning of 29 May. Moving silently forward the Japanese began the banzai attack. On cue from their colonel, the Japanese troops from

Chichagof Harbor moved rapidly into and across Siddens Valley toward the slopes of Engineer Hill and Clevesy Pass, Concealed by heavy fog, the Japanese screamed as they charged down Jim Fish Valley and broke through the thin line held by Company B, 17th Infantry, deployed across the valley floor. The charge caught the Americans by surprise. Breaking into the field hospital area, the Japanese bayoneted and killed or wounded dozens of American patients and medical personnel of the 7th Medical Battalion and 20th Field Hospital in an attack lasting about thirty minutes. Killed during the Japanese onslaught were Lieutenant Colonel James Fish, executive officer of the 17th Infantry, and Major Jack Siddens, commander of 3-17 IN.[23]

As the banzai charge swept through the American encampment, the rear-echelon troops—mostly engineers—were soon fighting in hand-to-hand combat with Japanese soldiers. Officers and noncommissioned officers quickly organized a hasty defense centered on Engineer Hill under the direction of Brigadier General Archibald Arnold, the assistant division commander of the 7th Infantry Division. Fleeing infantrymen were rounded up and put into the defense line. The fighting was desperate and many Americans were killed and wounded.

By dawn Colonel Yamazaki's banzai attack was all but annihilated with most of his men killed outright. Yamasaki, with his sword in his hands, was found among the dead. Many that survived the charge committed suicide by hand grenade rather than surrender. At about the same time, Japanese medical personnel killed over 600 of their own wounded in their field hospital by lethal injection before committing suicide with hand grenades. Some survivors of the banzai charge scattered into small groups and went into hiding in the hills and valleys, where they were hunted down by several companies from the 4th Infantry, with some sixty Japanese soldiers killed. Twenty-eight Japanese were taken prisoner.[24]

By 30 May, all organized enemy resistance had ended. American forces finally secured Attu from the Japanese, and the island was back in U.S. hands. The battle for Attu was the last combat action of the Aleutian Islands Campaign.

American wounded were evacuated and all 7th Infantry Division units, except the 159th Infantry Regiment, which arrived after the battle, redeployed to Adak for the invasion of Kiska. In nineteen days of combat, the 7th Infantry Division suffered 549 soldiers killed in action, almost 1,148 wounded in action, and another 2,100 suffering non-battle casualties due to injuries and disease. The Japanese lost over 2,100 men, including Colonel Yamasaki.[25] Army grave registration personnel established two temporary cemeteries on Attu during and after the battle—the small Holtz Bay Cemetery near the West Arm of Holtz Bay, and the larger Little Falls Cemetery near the shoreline of Massacre Bay at the foot of a Gilbert Ridge waterfall. The Japanese dead were collected and buried in several large common graves. After the war, many American and all Japanese were reinterred at the Fort Richardson National Cemetery, while other American dead were sent to other cemeteries across the country.

The Battle of Attu was the last combat action of the Aleutian Islands Campaign. Not wanting to engage in another costly defeat, the Japanese secretly evacuated its garrison on Kiska on 28 July 1943. This was unknown to the Allies, who continued to plan and train for an assault on Kiska. When the 7th Infantry Division, attached infantry regiments, the Canadian 13th Infantry Brigade, and two battalions of the American-Canadian First Special Service Force stormed ashore on 15-16 August, they found Kiska deserted. Still, extremely foggy conditions and the fear of Japanese ambush resulted in fifty-four soldiers killed and 100 wounded, mostly American and all by friendly fire.[26] With Kiska firmly in American hands, the Japanese occupation in the Aleutian Islands was over.

Endnotes

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About the Author

Lieutenant Colonel Roderick A. Hosler, USA-Ret., is a 1972 graduate of the University of Montana, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, and the Canadian Command and Staff College. He served in Korea and had assignments with the 82d Airborne Division, 6th Infantry Division, and Headquarters, First U.S. Army. Retiring in 1997, he served as the Assistant Professor of Military Science at Kent State University and Youngstown State University in Ohio. A military historian, he has written and spoken on the War of 1812, the American Intervention in Russia, and early World War II in the Philippines.