

The Forgotten Battle for Alaska: Part 2

Small village had one shotgun to defend itself from Japanese attack

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Japanese soldiers are shown on Attu Island in 1943 during World War II. This photo was found among others on Attu after its re-capture by the United States. (Anchorage Museum of History and Art)

By [Jack Marshall](#)

FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

Editor's note: This is the second of a three-part series about the battle for Alaska during World War II. Part two looks at the Japanese invasion of Attu. Part three, which will publish Jan. 5, details the U.S.'s counteroffensive to retake the village.

The Aleutian Islands, which are a partly submerged extension of the mountain chain that forms the Alaska Peninsula, stretch 1,100 miles from the tip of the peninsula west to Attu. From Attu, it was only 720 miles across the water to the northern Kurile Islands of Japan and only 600 miles to the Soviet base at Petropavlovsk. For the Japanese, it was a gateway to Alaska and Russia.

Before the war, Aleut Native villages existed on Akutan, Atka, Attu, Umnak, Unimak, and Unalaska islands. Thus, of the two islands the Japanese invaded, only Attu was inhabited.

The Aleuts were discovered by Vitus Bering in 1741 and not long afterward, ruthless Russian frontiersmen roamed through the islands hunting sea otters for their furs. The Aleuts were a peaceful people who were not treated well; sometimes they were used as slaves. By the time America purchased Alaska, the Aleut population had been reduced by many thousands and the sea otters were almost wiped out in the Aleutians.

In the early 1930s, the Japanese had depleted the runs of fish off their coast and began fishing along the American coast all the way from Mexico to the Aleutians. In 1932, the Japanese sent floating canneries across the Bering Sea. By 1937, the U.S. State Department had protested to Tokyo concerning Japanese encroachment on American fishing areas. Again, the Aleuts were treated badly, this time by the Japanese, and by the time World War II began, the Aleuts were extremely fearful.

After the purchase of Alaska, the state became a military district run by the U.S. Army. Sitka was the site of the first military installation. All through the late 1800s and early 1900s, many forts were built in Alaska. Other Army units were busy during these years conducting geographic and scientific expeditions and, in the early 1900s, setting up communications systems plus road and trail networks.

In 1904, the Navy designated Kiska Island in the Aleutians a naval reservation but did not develop it.

In 1922, the United States, Japan, and several other nations signed the Washington Conference Treaty limiting armaments. The United States agreed to not fortify the Aleutian Islands and scrapped several warships. America also closed all but one Army post in Alaska. Japan renounced the treaty in 1934 with no response from the U.S.

Attu is America's most isolated parcel of land. It is located at the western tip of the Aleutian chain. In the winter, snow covers its soaring mountains. Cold, dense, impenetrable fog soaks the land. Howling winds and piercing cold make the island's environment forbidding to most. Storms can last for days and the spongy tundra becomes slick; Frozen muck. Waves as high as 50 feet are not uncommon and reefs offshore make navigation extremely hazardous. But, in spite of this, the quiet and dignified Aleuts survived this extreme environment for thousands of years. By summer 1941 there were 45 Aleuts, of which half were children, living independently, as their ancestors had for centuries, on Attu. There was the recent addition of a white couple (Etta and Foster Jones) sent there by the Alaska Indian Service, Department of the Interior, to teach school and send weather reports to the Weather Bureau.

In January 1942, all non-Native women and children were evacuated from Dutch Harbor and the island of Unalaska because Dutch Harbor was a naval base and heavily fortified. The United States believed that if the Japanese attacked Alaska, Dutch Harbor would be the first target. To protect the Aleutians, two secret airfields were developed, one in Cold Bay and the other in Umnak (an eastern Aleutian island).

In April 1942, the Attu islanders learned that a rescue ship traveling to each populated island would be at Attu to evacuate all the villagers along with Etta and Foster Jones.

The Joneses were to be replaced by 12 military men, some of whom were to carry on the meteorological duties. But as May passed, the ship did not arrive. On Sunday morning, June 7, 1942 the Japanese attacked with about 2,000 soldiers. Except for a shotgun that Foster Jones had, there were no weapons other than bows and arrows to protect the village. The Japanese had assumed that the island would be fortified and had slipped onto the back side of Attu during the night. The ground was frozen with some ice and snow and was slippery. As the soldiers roared and screamed down the ridge into the village they were slipping and falling, causing their weapons to go off. This created a panic among the soldiers and villagers as Japanese bullets flew, wounding or killing some of their own men. All the noise caused the villagers to run into their houses and barricade the doors.

The whole attack was utter chaos. It has been said by some that two armed Japanese in a row boat could have captured the village. Bullets began raining through the windows, and stones were dislodged and came crashing down chimneys. Foster had been trying to send out the weather on his radio when the attack began. His final words were: "the Japs are here!"

After the attack, the Japanese read a proclamation that said they were on Attu to rescue the natives from the tyranny and exploitation of the Americans. They must not be afraid and life would go on as normal except that the villagers must obey all orders.

Etta and Foster were placed under guard in the empty schoolhouse, as their house was being confiscated by the commanding officer.

The next day, Foster was taken to headquarters for interrogation. The Japanese demanded to know what secrets he had passed on to the American military particularly the U.S. Navy. The interrogation went on for hours. The Japanese demanded that Foster repair his smashed radio and show the captors how to send and receive messages. When he responded that he did not know how to repair it, they shot him in the head.

Etta was kept in isolation and not told of her husband's death. In fact, she was told that he was warm and well. Finally, the guards took her to a room where she found Foster lying in his own blood, dead. They forced her to watch while they beheaded him and mutilated his body. Then she was taken back to her isolation.

A Native man named Mike Hodikoff buried Foster's body by the Russian Orthodox Church in the village. It turned out that the Japanese were sure that the Joneses were spies for the Russians. However, after endless hours of accusations and denials, the Japanese finally acknowledged that she was not withholding military information.

Etta Jones was taken via Japanese troop ship to Japan and held as a POW. She was first kept in Yokohama with some Australian women who had been captured in New Guinea. Later, they were transferred to Totsuka where they were kept until the war was over. The natives were left in the village on Attu for three months and then sent to Japan via an old coal carrier as POWs.

Initially, The Japanese deployed about 8,600 troops on the islands of Kiska and Attu. Only 2,500 went to Attu. Japan's Aleutian campaign had three objectives:

1. To prevent American use of the chain to mount offensive operations.
2. To drive a wedge between United States and Soviet insular possessions.
3. To establish bases for air operations against Alaska and the west coast of Canada and the United States.

Because of the Japanese loss at the Battle of Midway, the capture of the two Aleutian Islands was almost pointless.

Instead of forming a link in a new forward-defense perimeter, the islands were an isolated outpost of no strategic value and extremely difficult to maintain. On the other hand, the United States considered the loss of those two islands and the attack on Dutch Harbor a standing offense to America.

Because of other naval actions in the Pacific, Admiral Chester Nimitz, chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, felt he could not spare the large force he believed he needed to recapture the islands.

This meant it took a long time before the recapture began. During that time, the U.S. Air Force and Navy bombed the two islands and a U.S. naval force set up a blockade such that few supplies or additional forces got through.

At the end of March 1943, a significant sea battle occurred between two fleets off the Komandorski Islands about 200 miles west of Attu. The smaller American fleet was heavily outgunned by the

Japanese, but the U.S. Navy force conducted a skilled fight to extricate itself. This was one of the few times in 20th century American naval history where fleet actions occurred on the open sea. Several ships on both sides were badly damaged, but none were sunk. Most importantly, the Japanese fleet was covering several armed merchantmen that had supplies for Attu and Kiska. The ships were turned back.

In April, a submarine ferried a Col. Yamasaki into Attu to take charge of the troops. At that time he had 2,650 soldiers, 12 anti-aircraft batteries, and some coastal artillery. Knowing that it was just a matter of time before the Americans tried to take back the island and because Attu was just too big to cover by his slim force, he ordered his men into the mountains to build fortifications on the ridges above Massacre and Holtz valleys. Then he moved his main camp to Chichagof Valley. All the Japanese soldiers knew that there could never be any thought of surrender.

Acknowledgements:

“Last Letters from Attu,” by Mary Breu

“The Forgotten War Vol. 1,” by Stan Cohen

“The Pacific Campaign,” by Dan van der Vat

The Forgotten Battle for Alaska, part III: U.S. makes attempt to reclaim Attu

Battle lasted 19 days with more than 3,000 combined casualties

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Courtesy of University of Alaska Fairbanks, UAF-1970-11-46

As American troops landed on Attu, Aleutian Islands, May 11, 1943, a navy combat photography unit accompanied the first wave of American troops ashore at Japanese-occupied Attu, the westernmost island of the Aleutian chain. Some of the photos, such as the one pictured, were made under fire as the Japanese snipers in the hills in the background, half hidden by fog, attempted to wing American men, shown in the foreground, near Massacre Beach. The Japanese, skillfully camouflaged, came down to the line of fog and fired from crevices in the rocks.

By [Jack Marshall](#)

FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

Editor's note: This is the final segment in a three-part series about the battle for Alaska during World War II.

On the morning of May 11, 1943, a 34 ship convoy with 16,000 American troops invaded Attu Island. The troops had trained in California for action in the South Pacific and were ill trained and not properly clothed or supplied for work in Alaska. The leadership at the highest level expected the invasion to last just a few days. It would be a matter of clearing the enemy out of the hills and it would be over.

In the end (May 30), it took 19 days until the battle was over. In all, 549 Americans were killed, more than 3,200 were wounded or suffered from exposure. Of the 2,650 Japanese troops only 28 were taken prisoner. As the battle came to an end the Army engineers began building an airfield for the coming invasion of Kiska.

Early in July 1942, the Japanese reinforced Kiska Island. The Japanese were successful at concentrating a great number of anti-aircraft batteries around Kiska Harbor. Several times, Navy cruisers and battleships shelled the island. By mid-1943 the Japanese had no hope of receiving more troops to defend the island. Not only that, but with the continued air and sea blockade, food and supplies were running out. American planes flew from Attu, Shemya, Amchitka and Adak delivering as much as 300,000 pounds of explosives per day. Japanese troop strength was estimated at as high as 9,000 men.

On July 27, 1943 about 200 miles off the coast of Kiska, radar on two American battleships spotted what they thought were several Japanese warships. Both battleships were ordered to fire and several blockade ships off Kiska were sent out to help. No enemy ships were ever actually found and it was thought that the new radar had given false information. This incident was called the Battle of the Pips (Pips are marks on radar screens).

On Aug. 15, the invasion of Kiska began. The total troop strength was over 34,000 men of which 2,500 were American and Canadian members of the 1st Special Service Force and the Alaska Scouts. All the troops had trained at Adak and Amchitka; even so, expectations were that there would be many casualties.

When American and Canadian forces stormed ashore all they found were a few dogs and a massive enemy underground defense system. Military and personal gear of every description was strewn about. Although no enemy troops were found on the island, 24 men were killed and 50 others were wounded. What had happened? During the Battle of the Pips, the Japanese, under the cover of fog, slipped in and evacuated all the soldiers on the island and dashed away unseen; this ended the Aleutian Islands campaign.

August 1945 ended the war with Japan. Etta Jones was the first female Caucasian prisoner taken by a foreign enemy since the war of 1812 and she was the first female American prisoner released from Japan. She returned to San Francisco on Sept. 12, 1945 and was greeted by reporters and photographers. As her relatives could not come to meet her, the 65-year-old woman continued her travel another 3,000 miles to her family home in Margate, New Jersey. Foster Jones' body was exhumed and buried at Fort Richardson Cemetery in Anchorage.

The 40 surviving Attu Natives were taken by coal carrier in the darkness of its bilge. It took 14 damp, dark, and airless days to get to Hokkaido Island, the northernmost of Japan's four major islands. They were given a five-room shack with no running water, heat, or electricity. They were forced to work in the clay mines and were rationed 8 cups of rice per day for everyone. Death threats, whippings and food deprivation were common punishments. Tuberculosis, food poisoning, malnutrition and starvation ran rampant through the small population. The deceased were cremated and the ashes returned to the group. No services were allowed. Twenty-one of the 40 Natives of Attu died in Japan, mostly children.

On Nov. 10, 1945 the last of the Natives of Attu disembarked in Seattle. They were informed by the U.S. Government that there were too few of them to rebuild their village on Attu. Instead, they would live on Atka Island in the Aleutians; the land of their traditional rivals who spoke a different dialect. The news was devastating. What wasn't explained to them was that Attu was burdened with tons of bomb fragments and other military equipment that was too expensive to remove. In 1985, Attu's battlefield and airfield was designated as National History landmarks and in 2008 the battlefield was one of three Alaska sites included in the newly designated World War II Valor in the Pacific National Monument.

Today if you travel to Attu, there is no physical evidence that a thriving community of Aleuts once existed on this remote island. Outside of a few U.S. Coast Guard individuals checking on a LORAN station on the island, it's doubtful any American ever visits that Pacific National Monument.

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