

Attu: The Rest of the Story¹

I am a Navy Air Force veteran of the Aleutian Campaign. My squadron arrived at Dutch Harbor three days after the Japanese bombing attack June 6, 1942 and logged over 1,000 hours of flight time and the retaking of Attu in June of 1943. I regard myself as an authority in speaking of that military action.

With reference to the above film: first, let me state that any referral to Attu as being of strategic value to either the Japanese or the U.S. from a military view point is completely without merit.

An understanding of what the Japanese were attempting to accomplish at the time of their occupation of Kiska and Attu is necessary to the understanding of why they occupied Kiska and Attu.

Just prior to the battle of Midway, the U.S. Navy broke the Japanese code and thus the U.S. was made aware of the intent of the Japanese strategy to decoy the U.S. Navy away from Midway by attacking our Naval base at Dutch Harbor and occupying Kiska and Attu Islands, neither of which had U.S. military bases.. By so doing, the Japanese would be able to attack and occupy Midway with minimum resistance from the U.S. Fleet.

Of course, we now know that the Japanese suffered their largest naval loss of the entire war at Midway, a loss that put the U.S. Navy in command of the South Pacific. Less known is the fact that the Japanese, at that time, decided to hold on to Kiska and Attu as a possible way appease the Japanese public by glossing over the defeat at Midway and pointing to the occupation Kiska and Attu as a big victory by their military. Certainly, it must have become immediately apparent to the Japanese that neither Kiska or Attu could have been the launching pad for the Doolittle attack on Tokyo, which was the primary reason for their initial occupation. So too, it should also have become apparent to the Japanese that their errors at Midway were compounded drastically by their occupation of Kiska and Attu and the realization that neither of the islands had any strategic value, either for Japan or the United States.

However ill-conceived the decision of the Japanese to occupy and hold Kiska and

¹Reference: "The Last Flight of Bomber 31" - Nova; Original PBS Broadcast Date: January 14, 2003

Attu, Even more so was the U.S. military brass decision to bomb the Japanese off those islands. How dare the Japanese to think they could occupy U.S. soil without facing dire consequences. Therefore, the orders came down the chain of command to my squadron, You are to bomb the Japanese at Kiska every hour, day and night, until they relinquish their hold and in so doing “you will be governed by the principle of calculated risk.” In other words, you are “expendable”.

Thus, we found that we were indeed expendable. In slightly over three days and nights, we lost fifty percent of our squadron planes and their personnel, making suicide dive bombing missions over Kiska in Navy Patrol bombers that were never designed to accomplish such dive bombing missions.

The commander of Navy Fleet Air Wing Four who ordered these flights should have been held accountable for the death of these airmen. Instead, he was promoted to Admiral and given command of the Franklin aircraft carrier, where his poor judgement accounted for the further needless loss 3 or 4 hundred more lives.

This following account is just the beginning of the full story of what happened during the Aleutian Campaign.

In the early months of 1943, the U.S. high command decided that it was time to take back the Aleutian Islands occupied by the Japanese, starting with the Island of Attu. At that point in time, there was no one in command with a clear picture of just how this was to be accomplished. Instead command was divided between the Army, its air force, the Navy and its air force , with literally dozens of high ranking officers, including several generals and admirals, fighting with each other over who should command the show that was about to begin. As a result, there was never an individual who could be held responsible for the fiasco that followed.

The ground troops that were selected to go ashore at Attu were troops that had received training for fighting in the tropics, not the sub-freezing weather that existed in the Aleutians. Further, these troops had no idea of where they were bound until they were aboard troop ships and on their way. Perhaps the most grievous mistake was made in the issuance of clothing and boots that were completely unsuitable for the cold and wet weather of the Aleutians; eventually leading to the loss of toes, feet, legs and lives of many of those unfortunate soldiers who went ashore on Attu that spring day in 1943

Even this mistake, the issue of faulty clothing, would have been minimized had the

invasion gone as planned. The U.S. Army landed approx 16,000 troops on Attu. In contrasting this force with the force of less than the 3,000 force of the Japanese, the battle had it been planned correctly would not have lasted more than 3 days at the most. In such a case, the loss of life, frozen limbs, feet, and legs would have been much less than what actually occurred.

Why was there not someone in command of the U.S. forces that could have predicted the simple tactic the Japanese used of claiming the high ground above the beaches on which our forces landed? What a stunning advantage this simple tactic gave the Japanese. Any one with any knowledge of weather knows that the lifting of fog always begins at the lowest altitude and follows the slope of the terrain to the higher altitudes. As a result, the Japanese simply dug their trenches on the slopes of Attu's volcanic mountains.

As it so happened, the fog would close down over Attu every night during the period over which the invasion lasted. In the mornings, with some heating from the sun, the fog would begin to lift from the lower ground. In so doing, the Japanese would find the U.S. troops deployed in plain sight of their guns, while the Japanese would remain hidden by the fog from American gunners. So it was, the Americans were confined to their trenches during the night by zero visibility and were unable to leave their trenches when the fog lifted during the day without being killed by the fire of the Japanese hidden by the fog above on higher ground.

The mistakes which occurred during the above landing is dwarfed by what happened to the heavy guns and motorized tanks and trucks and other vehicles that went ashore to carry heavy artillery to the heights on the slopes where they could have been used effectively against the murderous fire that the Japanese were directing at our troops on lower grounds. Why was there not someone in command of our invasion aware that the tundra that covered the terrain of Attu would not support tires, treads etc of motorized vehicles? A fact that even the most ignorant of the Aleutian native would have known. As a result, none of the heavy equipment, guns, tractors, tanks etc ever progressed more than a few yards from the beach where they were initially unloaded.

After over ten days, following the initial landing, by sheer numbers, the Japanese resistance was finally overcome. But not before the loss of life of brave American soldiers amounted to hundreds, in addition to the hundreds of others that returned with loss of legs, feet and toes.

But this is still not the complete story of the screw up that was the Aleautian Campaign. Following the Attu occupation, the U.S. high command decided to retake our island of Kiska. Again, this was to be accomplished by an intensive bombing of Kiska, followed by a large landing force.

I was one of a Navy flight crew of seven that made the last bombing mission by the Navy Air Force over Kiska sometime earlier.

The softening up bombing raids on Kiska prior to the invasion was to be performed by the Army Air Force.

Again, my flight crew was involved. We were to stand off shore of the island with orders to rescue any Army flight crews that may have had to ditch their aircraft.

These air raids went on for over a week, with dozens of missions flown daily. After each mission the pilots reported on the amount of anti-aircraft fire being encountered, which in some instances they reported as being heavy.

At the end of the week of bombing, the ships and landing craft moved in to unload several thousand troops and their equipment. Again, the weather conditions were severe; heavy fog was encountered and loss of life resulted. After several days of activity, during which over 300 lives were lost, most to gunfire, it was discovered that not a single Japanese was on the island, having left for Japan several days before the Air Force bombing even began. The gun fire being encountered came from guns of the American soldiers. Because of the dense fog, they were actually shooting each other, thinking they had encountered the enemy.

On a per capital basis, we lost more lives of American soldiers during the retaking of those worthless two islands than was lost in any other battle fought in the war with Japan. In addition, billions of dollars went down the drain in establishing military bases on Umak Island, on Amchita Island, On Adak Island and Attu.

At this point in time all of these bases which had previously been declared of strategic value to the U.S. have been abandoned to the wild life that previously lived there.

Historians will never record the true story of what happened in the Aleutians during the war with Japan. Brain Garfield in his documentary “The Thousand Mile

War”, did give a fairly accurate account of some of these military activities that occurred during the Aleutian campaign. However, it was obvious his writing was sorely hampered by the fact that he was forced to befriend those high ranking officers who had pigeon-holed those documents and records needed to tell the story of the Aleutians, given the fact that these same officers may have been involved in the fiascoes that occurred.

I myself will never forget those friends of mine that were lost due to the absolute disregard for life contained in those orders that forced us to dive bomb Kiska using an airplane completely unsuitable for the task.