

ON THE ROCKS

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This may not be a popular paper in those quarters which decry war stories, but it has been on my mind for some time, and I feel the need to get it off.

So what I intend to do tonight is to join all the ancient mariners and tell it like it was in WWII. The "Forgotten War" of the North Pacific is my particular bag. It was customary in the Aleutians to refer to the islands as "rocks". This may have been true elsewhere in the world, but it is particularly apt for the Aleutians, which are mostly rock, with overlays of tundra. Collectively, they were simply called "The Chain".

A little background: you may recall that after Alaska and Hawaii were granted statehood, there was a cocktail party puzzle: which states of the Union were farthest north, south, east and west? Hawaii replaced Texas as farthest south, and Alaska took the prize as farthest north and west. That Alaska is also farthest east is due to a little geographer's legerdemain. The Aleutian Islands protrude from Alaska like an inverted walrus tusk. Attu Island, the tip of the tusk, is in the Eastern Hemisphere by several degrees of longitude (173 degrees east, to be exact). Geographically, it could be argued that the Komandorski Islands are a westward extension of the same island chain, but they have always been considered a part of Asia, and for our purposes they really don't count. Actually, the International Date Line has been jiggered to include Attu on the American side of the line, but it is nevertheless in the Eastern Hemisphere.

After the recapture of Attu and Kiska from the Japs in 1943, a top-notch war correspondent, Howard Handleman, produced a book entitled "Bridge to Victory". He pointed out that since the tip of the Aleutians was a good deal closer to Japan than any of McArthur's islands, it was the obvious jumping-off place for the invasion of the Japanese home islands.

This was great propaganda. It also seemed plausible when bombers from Attu and its little neighbor Shemya started sporadically bombing the canneries at Paramusiro in the Kurile Islands at the north end of the Japanese chain. Also for the next couple of years we had a little sporadic naval action. Some ancient cruisers and three or four old destroyers would show up in Massacre Bay on Attu for a day or two and then disappear. Sure enough, the news media back in the states would trumpet that the North Pacific Fleet had shelled Japan's northern islands again. What became of the North Pacific Fleet between raids we never found out. As a matter of fact the doings of the Navy were often obscure to their some-time allies, the U.S. Eleventh Air Force, but more about this later.

Let me give you a thumbnail sketch of WWII in the North Pacific. Stan Cohen has published a four volume soft cover 8-1/2 X 11 pictorial history of WWII in Alaska and northwestern Canada. It is appropriately titled "The Forgotten War". Another

valuable reference is Brian Garfield's "The Thousand Mile War. WWII in Alaska and the Aleutians". For ready reference, the thousand miles from the Alaskan mainland to the tip of the chain is only a few miles shorter than the stretch from Cincinnati to Denver.

There has been a huge volume of reportage of WWII in the South and Central Pacific, but precious little has been written about the North Pacific War. Nevertheless, there was a good deal of fighting, on land, on the sea and in the air.

U.S. preparations for the defense of Alaska were grossly inadequate (hardly surprising in view of the demands of the other theatres of war), and the Aleutians west of Dutch Harbor were scarcely on the map. It was said of the Aleutian chain that it was so desolate that even Mrs. Roosevelt never visited it. The Navy, then based at Kodiak Island far to the east, was nominally in overall command of the area. They complained up the chain of command when Col., later Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner took over the defense of Alaska. It was said of Buckner that he never needed a telephone, he just opened the window. Disregarding Navy complaints, he proceeded to beg, borrow and steal (midnight requisitioning, we used to call it) to steadily build up the Army defenses. At one point he used civilian construction crews. At another he used military personnel out of uniform for construction. He diverted supplies disguised as fish cannery parts to fictitious Consolidated Packing Co. at Cold Bay on the tip of the Alaskan Peninsula. From these supplies were consigned and barged to an imaginary "Blair Fish Packing Co." on Umnak Island, forty miles west of Dutch Harbor. There they build a fighter base using the famous Marston matting for the runway. (More about Marston matting later.) The Umnak fighter base was manned by the 11th Fighter Squadron of P-40's commanded by Col. Jack Chennault, the son of Flying Tiger Claire Chennault.

As an aside, the Blair Fish Packing Co. undoubtedly got its name from the Navy's seaplane tender Blair. It was based at Dutch Harbor, but I have not seen it mentioned in connection with the later bombing.

The war got under way at the end of May, 1942. Japanese intelligence was limited to submarine observations, as Japanese spies in Alaska had been rounded up earlier and interned in the States with the other Japs on the West Coast. A part of the Japs' grand plan was to lure out and destroy the American fleet at Midway. As a diversion, (they hoped), a Japanese task force of two aircraft carriers, two heavy cruisers, three destroyers and an oiler appeared out of the fog off Unalaska Island, site of Dutch Harbor. Further west in the fog lurked a supporting group of four cruisers, nine destroyers and three transports carrying 2500 invasion troops.

I have read speculation that if this substantial Japanese fleet had been joined with their fleet at Midway that pivotal action of the Pacific war might have turned out to our advantage and re-shaped the whole Pacific war. This, of course, is the type of armchair military speculation that surrounds every campaign. You can have it for what it's worth. Probably not much.

Jap carrier planes struck Dutch Harbor on June 3 and 4, 1942, doing some but not

fatal damage. When our fighter planes, based on that new airfield on the adjoining island of Umnak, joined the fray, the Japanese Rear Admiral was discombobulated. His scanty intelligence had not prepared him for this kind of opposition. Uncertain of what he was facing, he abandoned hope of capturing Dutch Harbor and withdrew to the western Aleutians. This would not be the last time that the Japs, for lack of information, would withdraw from a position of strength. This time, he withdrew to the Western Islands. On June 7, 1942, he landed his invasion forces on Kiska and Attu. Kiska was then manned by a 10-man weather station, all captured. Attu had a small village of Aleuts with an American couple as teachers. The man was gunned down. His wife was interned and survived the war. The Aleuts were put to work in Japan. Some survived.

I came through Dutch Harbor in July of 1943, thirteen months after the bombing. We stopped off on the way to Adak, and had our first experience of walking on the tundra. After months of marching on hard-topped parade grounds, it was distressing to sink in at every step. Eventually we developed a new set of leg muscles. Beyond that, I don't remember much about "Dutch". No evidence of the bombing, of naval activity or anything else noteworthy. The living quarters looked squalid. They would look even worse as we progressed for the thousand miles out the Aleutian chain.

On August 28, 1942, American forces occupied Adak, a large island about halfway out the chain. Adak would replace Kodiak as headquarters for the campaign to recover Attu and Kiska from the Japanese. Here Col. Ben Tally and his engineers built a large airfield on a shallow lakebed adjoining the harbor.

An aside on airstrip building. "Marston Matting," was named for Marston N.C. where it was manufactured. Consisting of interlocking perforated metal strips, it could be laid down over a compacted base to furnish a durable landing surface. The secret was the base beneath the matting. If it were too soft, the surface would be bouncy. The wind could lift it up and roll it over like a rug. If properly compacted it would hold up indefinitely. Certainly in the Aleutians, and probably all over the world, they provided almost instant airfields. During the battle of Attu, Col. Talley, the genius of Adak and Amchitcka, built a fighter strip on the east side of the Massacre Bay, but more of that later.

Back to Adak. After converting the lakebed to an airfield, Col. Talley went forward with the invasion troops to Amchitcka, an island *within sight* of Kiska. On January 11, 1943, a task force from Adak seized Amchitcka. The Amchitcka landing was in typical Aleutian weather. The surf was bridge high on a destroyer. A blizzard was howling. One destroyer was sunk on the rocks. A transport was blown onto a reef by an 80mph wind and not refloated until weeks later. In spite of Japanese bombing from Kiska and the continuing foul weather, Col. Talley's people built a fighter strip of the usual Marston matting in less than two weeks. Later, during the battle of Attu, he would build an airstrip on the east side of Massacre Bay. This Alexai Point field, dubbed "the Army's Northwesternmost Airfield" furnished air defense and bomber facilities for the rest of the war.

But back to Adak. In July of 1943, our 58th Fighter Control Squadron landed at Adak for a short stay. We were put up in pyramidal tents on a hillside with a contingent of Canadians headed for Kiska. On July 29, 1943, we boarded the Liberty ship Mormac Hawk en route to Attu. The next morning the fog north off Kiska was so thick that our ship followed (at a safe distance) the wake of a drogue from the invisible ship ahead of us. We pulled into Massacre Bay, Attu, on the morning of July 31st. During that interval, according to Japanese records seen after the war, the Japs evacuated Kiska in the fog.

The navy (the "Blue" as we called them on our radio code) claimed that they had a tight blockade around the island, and escape was impossible. It appeared later that the fleet had briefly withdrawn at one point for refueling and re-supply at the crucial time, during which "Away went the Japs".

Earlier the "Blue" had achieved a crucial victory west of the Aleutians. On March 26, 1943, occurred the Battle of the Komandorskis. The Komandorski Islands, remember, are the Asiatic extension of the Aleutians. A Japanese fleet destined for Attu and Kiska was intercepted in the Komandorski area by a small U.S. Navy force. After a 3-1/2 hour cannonade, reportedly the longest continual gunnery dual in modern naval history, the Japs turned back, erroneously fearing air attack from Adak. Hero of the engagement was the old heavy cruiser Salt Lake City, nicknamed "Old Swayback". Outnumbered and outgunned, the American fleet turned back the last effort of the Japanese to reinforce Attu and Kiska, which were on their own from then on.

Attu was the first amphibious landing in the history of the U.S. Infantry. (The Marines, of course, had their own amphibious operations in the South Pacific.) On May 11, 1943, the battle began. American hopes for a short clean-up operation were badly misplaced. The maps were merely old coastline surveys, showing nothing of 3000-foot elevations or the intricate interlocking valleys inland. Howard Handelman, a real war correspondent who covered the north shore landings from the front lines, sums it up: "It was the major miscalculation of the expedition, the underestimation of terrain. From this underestimation stemmed the mistake that hurt the most, the choice of footwear". This may sound silly to those who have never walked the tundra. Of 3829 casualties of all types, over 1800 - almost half - resulted from trench foot, severe cold and exposure.

The battle was the costliest ground engagement since Guadalcanal, but has received almost no attention. Why? As one of the Attu veterans has remarked "No Marines". I will not yield to the temptation to describe the battle in detail. The weather, wind, snow, fog and sleet were as tough opponents as the Japs. Howard Handelman wrote:

" ... what can't be explained, the williwaw. People just can't picture a wind that goes up and down, east and west - all at the same time. The williwaw does ... (it) goes down the back of your neck, up the front of your trousers and into both pants pockets all at once."

Willowaws can vary from 110 miles per hour to little dust devils that will tear off your hat and soak your clothing in seconds.

The Attu battle ended with a Banzai charge into the hospital and artillery areas. The enemy was finally cut down by the engineers and rear-echelon forces. A diary by a Japanese medical non-com gives the enemy point of view, reporting that before their last desperate charge, they killed all their own wounded. His diary reports: "the last assault is to be carried out. All the patients in the hospital were made to commit suicide".

We were still picking up stragglers in the hills as late as September, as they were slowly starved out. Sgt. Opperman of Army Intelligence related that his people had to catch their own prisoners for interrogation. The dogfaces refused to take prisoners, believing that the Japs would pretend to surrender but throw hand grenades instead. This was war at its ugliest – no holds barred.

It is easy to understand why the projected invasion of Kiska was not anticipated with enthusiasm.

We 3 volunteers went over the side of the Liberty ship Mormac Hawk by landing net. I use "volunteers" in the traditional military sense: "Gimme three volunteers - you, you, and you". Our mission was to scramble down the net, secure it to a waiting lighter, and then field and stow the rucksacks and barracks bags heaved down the net by the troops above. Massacre Bay was comparatively calm, but a rolling swell tended to draw the lighter away from the ship and then heave it back. I was about to drop onto the lighter from the landing net when it drew away and I was left hanging over open water. I yanked my legs back up just in time to miss the lighter as it banged back into the side of the ship with a boom that was heard for miles. I and my fellow volunteers leaped across to the lighter, breathing deeply, and proceeded with our mission: diverting and stacking the avalanche of stuff leaping down the net.

I mention this episode only because the immediate threat of losing my legs was my greatest peril for the next 27 months. Oh, there were a few items: coming around a mountain shoulder onto a working artillery range, or getting hung up in a nearly vertical mountainside covered with slipping tundra. Then there was the ominous whispering of invisible fall-out from anti-aircraft flack, seemingly coming from nowhere.

I have written too much on previous occasions about every day living in the Aleutians, and I am not going to plough that field again. I want to talk now about the military situation as we saw it from the Alexai Point airbase as the Aleutian campaign played out.

It is now August 15, 1943. The newly assembled "Ops Block" as we called it, nerve center of the 58th Fighter Control Squadron, is crowded with a mixed bag of military personnel waiting for the first news of the Kiska landings. Sergeant Opperman of Army intelligence sits in the control center with a worried frown. Men from the

Seventh Division, who had borne the weight of the Attu campaign, look forward to the Kiska campaign with clenched teeth. The Navy liaison officers whisper ominously among themselves. Only our people, Eleventh Air Force fighter pilots and fighter control personnel are relaxed and confident. We know that Kiska has been abandoned. Our pilots have been shooting landings on the Kiska airstrip and observing the total absence of activity on the island for several days now. (Jap records indicate that their final evacuation took place on July 28th, in that same fog that blanketed our approach to Attu.)

As reports began to come in on August 15, and as the day wore on, it appeared that there were, in fact, no more Japs on Kiska, although friendly fire accounted for a number of our casualties. There was at least one report that our patrols were closing in on the enemy. A small encampment revealed hot coffee on a fire. We got a big kick out of this. Since when did the Japs drink coffee? (Our radio codebook was informally rewritten to identify Kiska as the "recent cup of hot coffee").

How about the vaunted Navy blockade of Kiska? It later appeared from Japanese records that the navy briefly withdrew to the south for refueling, during which time the Japs dashed in, picked up the troops and dashed out again. How did they know when the coast was clear? Japanese submarines lurked off the islands during the whole war in the Aleutians, picking up all kinds of information about our movements. They undoubtedly knew for instance that we had several cargo ships in Massacre Bay on October 13, 1943.

Meanwhile Fighter Control had graduated from a pyramidal tent to the Janeway hut on a mountain shoulder overlooking Massacre Bay to the west and Alexai airstrip to the south. On October 13, I was on duty as "Ops B" manning a 12-drop GI switchboard connecting us to Alexai tower, Navy, various Army and Air Force nerve centers in the Massacre Bay area. The controller on duty had radio contact with Shemya, our little neighbor island to the east, and phone contact with the fighter planes at Alexai Point. About 6 PM (eighteen hundred hours in military time) radar showed several unidentified aircraft approaching from the southwest.

We promptly contacted Navy to determine whether they had anything out there. This was more than a pro-forma inquiry. The Navy PV-1s daily patrolled a series of fan shaped search sectors between Attu and Panamushiro. Each plane was equipped with an IFF (identification friend or foe) transponder, which emitted a coded signal when swept by friendly radar. When beyond the search of our radar, the PV crews turned off the IFF, explaining that it interfered with their internal communications. Occasionally and for a couple of evenings before October 13, they had neglected to re-activate the IFF when returning to base at Attu. We would call Navy, they would stall or refuse information, and we would put the island on alert. Although we maintained a so-called "alert line" of fighter planes warmed up and ready to go, abrupt take-offs or "scrambles" were always riskier than deliberate take-offs. (On a later occasion, when we had the twin-engined P-38s, one had its engine freeze in a hurried take-off and the plane cartwheeled into the ocean off Alexai point. A one-engined plane would of course be equally vulnerable).

With all that in mind, our alert-shack pilots were getting a little fed-up with our recurring evening false alarms, and were in no rush to scramble again. They got up to altitude and belatedly engaged the Jap bombers, but too late to prevent them from bombing the ships at anchor in Massacre Bay. Fortunately they were sufficiently disrupted that they didn't hit anything, and the last stick of bombs fell just short of our control shack. (I still have a fragment of that last bomb which I use as a paperweight). One of our pilots reported that his tracers went into a Jap bomber but "it didn't blow up like it was supposed to". We counted nine hostile bombers in all. The next day Tokyo Rose bragged that all seven of their planes returned safely, so maybe our pilot was more successful than he thought.

Well, that was our war. The Japs never came back, although we believed that their submarines had us under surveillance from time to time. Our bombing of Panamushiro was conducted from Shemya, a little nearby island with facilities and a runway for long-range bombers. (This was another of Col. Talley's creations by the way). The 1300-mile round trip to Panamushiro went from Shemya, not from Alexai. We kept our fighters on the alert for the next two years with only the weather to contend with. Oh, we did chase a batch of balloons once, but I'll go into that later.

Meanwhile, I want to say a few words about our some-time allies, the U.S. Navy. They undoubtedly won the Pacific War, their victory in the Battle of the Komandorskis was brilliant, but we found them difficult-to-impossible to work with. Sharing intelligence was like pulling teeth. For example: late in the war the Japs had launched a host of bomb-bearing balloons, which drifted over Attu on air currents bringing them to the Pacific Northwest. Our P-38s shot down a few which fell into Massacre Bay. Navy patrol boats hauled them in, classified them "top secret" and we had to go through higher headquarters to get them back. What difference did it make? Only that our gunnery officers were anxious to see the effects of our fire on some new and different targets. (Parenthetically the whole episode seems bizarre in retrospect.) The Japs had launched firebomb bearing balloons from somewhere in Asia, some of which followed the prevailing winds across the Aleutians and came to earth in Washington or Oregon. Actually, I think a few civilians might have been killed, but no forest fires resulted. (The Japs had this odd conception that they could start devastating forest fires in the west. Shortly after Pearl Harbor they shelled the southern California refinery and the West Coast forests, trying to start devastating fires. Even as the war wound down they were still trying.)

That's about all I'm going to tell you about the war in the North Pacific. We worked our way out from Dutch Harbor to Attu, fighting fog, gales, ice and snow all the way. We were poised to go forward to Japan itself but the high command ruled otherwise. Ultimately the Russians took the Kurile Islands. They used in part amphibious troops which we had trained at Cold Bay. I for one, and most of my buddies, were glad to let the Russkies do it. We had the satisfaction of knowing that we posed a threat to the main Japanese islands, tying up lots of their forces for the duration.

Did I ever mention that there was a school of thought in Japan, which held that

raiding B-25s came from the Aleutians? We had their attention. We kept knocking on their back door.

The war in the North was foggy, cold, wet, muddy and above all windy. It went on for over three years. Almost nobody remembers. It was indeed the "forgotten war".
