The Battle of Attu

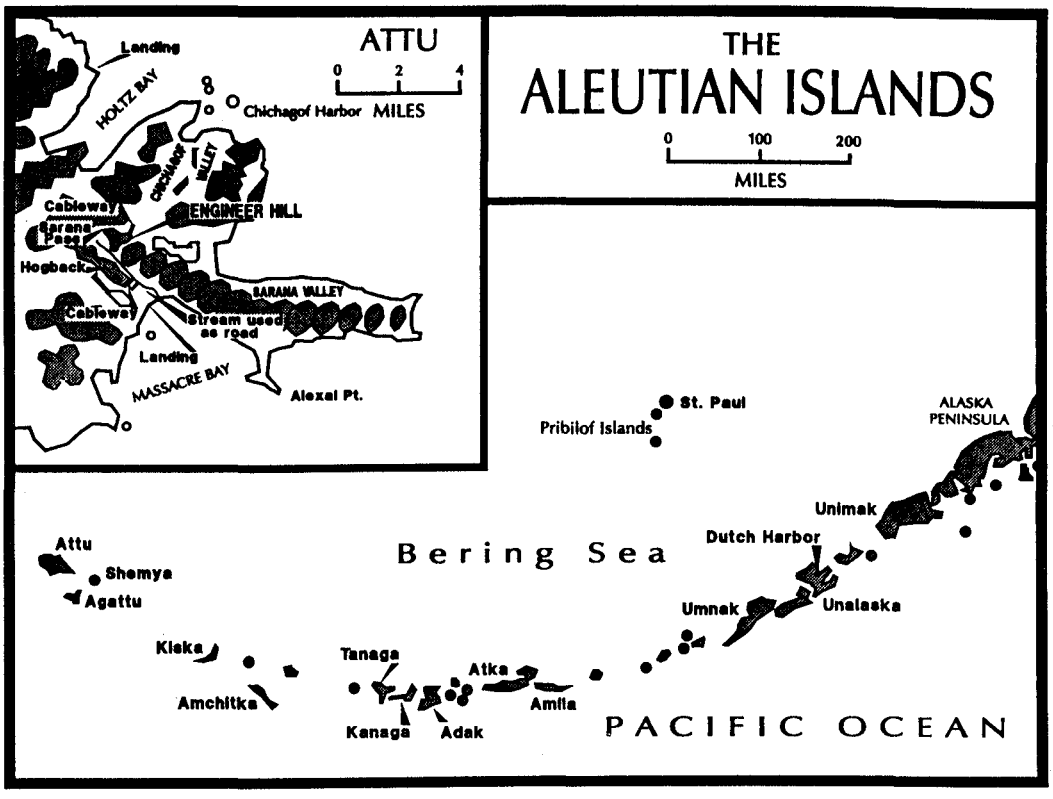
by D. Colt Denfeld

In the May 1943 battle of Attu Island, engineer troops performed both as fighters and as builders. During the battle, Army engineers devised innovative solutions to keep the supply line open to the fighting troops. Engineers also fought, repulsing a major Japanese counterattack and ending organized resistance on the island.

Japan had captured Attu and Kiska islands on 7 June 1942 during the Midway–Aleutians operation. Midway was the main battle, but the sideshow in the Aleutians, including a carrier aircraft raid on Dutch Harbor and the acquisition of two isolated islands in the western Aleutians, gained importance as compensation for the defeat at Midway. These islands blocked any northern approach to the home islands, and the capture of American soil was a political and psychological victory.

The United States responded quickly with bomber attacks. These were ineffective because of antiaircraft defenses and the cruel Aleutian weather. Then came naval bombardment, which also proved futile. The failure of bombardment to dislodge the Japanese lent support to a proposal of Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, commander of the Western Defense Command, for a land offensive. In the summer and fall of 1942, however, there were more pressing needs. The intermediate response was to advance airfields westward to Adak, 280 miles east of Kiska, and Amchitka, which is only 80 miles distant. From these bases bombers and fighters could exploit short breaks in the weather when clear skies would allow more precise attacks.

The 807th Engineer Battalion (Aviation) landed at Adak on 31 August. The first task facing its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Carlin M. Whitesell, was to find the best airfield site. Mountainous Adak had never been adequately surveyed or mapped but was known to have few suitable airfield locations. Probably the best site was a tidal marshland on Sweeper Cove. This marsh had a firm sand base that was covered



Aleutian Islands and Attu

by water twice daily. If the tide could be drained and controlled, the firm sand would create a solid base for a runway. Lieutenant Colonel L.B. Delong—an assistant to Colonel Benjamin B. Talley, officer in charge of Alaska construction—and Major James D. Bush, of Talley's staff, studied the problem. They designed a dike and canal system with gates on Sweeper Cove to drain the tidal marsh. Once the dike and gates were installed, water was drained off, the topsoil was scraped away, and the base was laid for the runway, which was then covered with a pierced steel mat. The field was ready for the first landing in nine days and combat ready in a few more days. Operations were moved from Umnak to Adak on 13 September.

The Western Defense Command received approval in December 1942 to occupy Amchitka and to plan for an amphibious assault at Kiska. Kiska was near the planned air base on Amchitka and had a better harbor than Attu. Kiska also had problems, including strong coastal defenses and more enemy troops than Attu.

On 17 December, Colonel Talley led a survey party to locate airfield sites on Amchitka. They found test pits indicating that the Japanese had recently been there, and as they were conducting their reconnaissance, a Japanese float plane flew over. The survey party was not seen and returned safely to report on suitable locations in the Constantine Harbor area.

The initial landings at Amchitka came on 12 January. The 813th Engineer Battalion (Aviation) went to work first to build a fighter strip. On 24 January, Japanese aircraft bombed and strafed the engineers, catching them at work. Casualties were light and work went on. By 16 February, the runway was ready for fighters. Eight P-40s and several P-38s landed that day. A bomber runway was begun in early March. This runway would play an important role in the Kiska operation.

By early March, it was clear that shipping for a force large enough to assault Kiska would not be available, so the more lightly defended Attu Island was substituted. Capture of this more western island would cut off supplies to Kiska, leaving it to wither on the vine. The final decision to assault Attu was made on 22 March, with the invasion scheduled for 7 May 1943. Invasion planning was helped along by a naval success on 26 March. In the battle of the Komandorski Islands, Rear Admiral Charles "Soc" McMorris repelled a Japanese force escorting three transports to Attu. Henceforth, the resupply of Attu and Kiska was limited to what could be carried on submarines and the few destroyers that made the trip.

The 7th Infantry Division sailed from San Francisco on 24 April and arrived at Cold Bay on the Alaska Peninsula on 30 April. The final plan for the assault called for the main landing at Massacre Bay (Southern Landing Force) and a Northern Landing Force to land on beaches on the north at Austin Cove and Holtz Bay. The main force was to push up Massacre Valley and seize the passes leading to Holtz and Sarana Bays. The northern force would destroy the main Japanese base in Holtz Bay, then link up with the southern force in the Holtz Bay area and drive the remaining Japanese into a pocket in Chichagof Harbor. The 7th was expected to capture Attu in three days.

The 7th Infantry Division was composed of the 17th and 32d Infantry Regiments, field artillery battalions, the 13th Engineer Battalion (Combat), and medical and other support troops. The 50th Engineer Battalion (Combat) was assigned to the division to effect the landing and movement of supplies inland from the beaches. Major General Albert E. Brown commanded the division. Elements of the 4th Infantry Regiment of the Alaska Defense Command were placed on reserve and positioned at Adak.

Bad weather delayed the departure of the attack force from Cold Bay. The ships steamed along the south side of the Aleutian chain, entered the Bering Sea by Amukt Pass, and to avoid detection steered well north of Kiska to the turn-in point 115 miles northeast of Attu. When the invasion forces finally reached Attu, an island 37 miles long and 15 miles wide, it was invisible in the heavy fog. If they could have seen the island, they would have noted that it was mountainous and covered with tundra—a thick, wet, spongy mat of grass and herbs—at lower elevations. Many of the bays had suitable landing beaches, so the Japanese could not defend them all. The most sheltered harbors were on the eastern end of the island. The Japanese had their camps on this end, and it was here that the 7th would invade.

The first landings were on a small northern beach at Austin Cove, code named Beach Scarlet. The 7th Scout Company, brought to Attu on the submarines *Narwhal* and *Nautilus*, landed there on rubber boats. The scouts walked ashore between 0309 and 0510. They were followed by the 7th Reconnaissance Troop aboard the destroyer *Kane*. Hampered by fog, the *Kane* could not disembark troops until noon on 11 May. Waiting for the Americans were about 2,500 Japanese defenders under command of Colonel Yasuyo Yamasaki. The Japanese encampments were at Holtz Bay, Chichagof Harbor, the ridgelines above Sarana and Massacre bays, and outposts at Scarlet Beach and Stellar Cove.

Both the northern and the southern landings were unopposed. The first Japanese response came in the early evening, when a northern force beach patrol surprised an outpost of four Japanese. Two of them were killed, but the others got away. Within a few minutes the northern force came under fire from 75-mm. guns at Holtz Bay.

American troops in the south met their first opposition soon afterward. Everywhere stubborn resistance halted the advance. The southern force progressed only 4,000 yards in the first 48 hours. The Japanese defenders fought with machine guns as well as with snipers who were hidden in rain washes, holes, and trenches located at various levels on each side of narrow passes leading through the mountains. In addition, small infantry groups were dug in high up on sides of the passes parallel to the axis of approach. It was impossible to approach positions on sides of a pass from the slippery snow-covered slopes above.

Cold injuries plagued soldiers on Attu Island. *(U.S. Signal Corps, Alaska State Library)*

Not only were the fighting troops stopped, but artillery, ammunition, and supplies piled up on the beaches. Once the division's vehicles and towed guns left the beach, they became mired in the boggy tundra. Cold weather injuries also confronted the troops. Their clothing and boots were not appropriate for the climate and terrain of Attu.

On 13 May, Colonel Talley reviewed the engineer supply situation with the force engineer, Lieutenant Colonel James E. Green, and Lieutenant Colonel Virgil Womeldorff, commanding officer of the 50th Engineer Battalion. Talley asked them their plans for road construction. Green replied that they did not have road construction equipment. Talley

recognized the need for roads to achieve victory and hold the island. On 14 May he asked for engineer equipment and supplies for 60 days for the final neutralization of the Japanese and post-battle construction.

The request was misunderstood to mean that neutralization of the Japanese would take 60 days. How could equipment for 60 days be needed when the original plans called for capture of Attu in three days? In fact, without an enemy before them, the 7th would have done well to have walked the spongy tundra in that length of time. But the fight would not take 60 days either, and now headquarters believed that the 7th Division anticipated a prolonged battle. Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, Commander, North Pacific Force, relieved the division commander and appointed Major General Eugene M. Landrum in his place.

Troops struggle to move a gun mired in the Attu Island tundra. (U.S. Signal Corps, Alaska State Library)

Seven companies of engineers had been assigned to the invasion, six of them with the main force at Massacre Bay. These six companies had the primary responsibility of moving the equipment and supplies off the landing beaches. This meant finding an answer to the problem of moving the guns and supplies up from Massacre Valley. There was neither the time nor the heavy equipment to build roads. Realizing that something had to be done in a hurry, the assault force

engineers, Lieutenant Colonel Green and Major Bush, hit upon a solution. They proposed to use a stream that flowed down the east side of the valley as a roadway. The 13th Engineer Battalion (Combat) improved the rocky creek bed by widening and straightening some sections. Within hours, a steady stream of tractors towed supply laden wagons up the valley. The roadway functioned as the main supply route throughout the battle.

From the stream a cableway was constructed up the slope of Hogback, The Hogback itself was a low squat ridge with only 1 to 2 feet of tundra over the bedrock so graders could construct a road by removing the tundra. But the lower slope of the Hogback was another problem. It had a much deeper layer of tundra, so the cableway was constructed from the valley floor halfway up the ridgeline to a point at which the tundra layer was only l-foot deep. From the end of the ridgeline cableway, on which a tractor with a winch pulled sleds loaded with supplies up the hill, a road was built to the northeast end of Hogback so the troops who pushed north to the final combat zones could be supplied. The north end of Hogback touched a hill at the north end of the eastern ridgeline of Massacre Valley. This hill was captured on 21 May and named Engineer Hill. A road was to be built across Engineer Hill and Sarana Pass to Prendergast Ridge,

Soldiers advance up an Attu Valley. *(U.S. Signal Corps, Alaska State Library)*

where American troops were advancing east to trap the defenders. American progress had been slow but steady.

The Sarana Pass section of road would require considerable grading and the removal of 4 to 5 feet of tundra. The fighting troops could not wait for the road, so a temporary cableway across Sarana Pass was necessary. To install the cable, a tractor would be needed at the bottom of Engineer Hill. The tractor would anchor the cableway across the valley to the foot of Prendergast Ridge and winch the supply sleds down the hill.

The 40-percent, 1 000-foot-long tundra slope of Engineer Hill was too steep to be crossed by tractors. After looking over the situation, engineers seized upon a quick but risky solution. They pushed six tractors over the slope to the floor of the valley below, assuming that at least one would land

Supplies pile up on Massacre Bay. Tractors wait on a streambed to be loaded for another trip up an Attu valley. *(U.S. Signal Corps, Alaska State Library)*

intact. All six survived the tumble. A tractor and cable system was soon in operation across the valley. Supplies were moved forward, and wounded soldiers were taken to the rear on the return trips.

By 28 May, Colonel Yamasaki had his back to the wall. He could stand and die, surrender, or retreat to the hills of

Khlebnikof Point. Surrender was unacceptable, and a suicide stand in Chichagof Harbor would only delay the end a short time. The withdrawal into Khlebnikof would give him a few more days, but his supply situation there would be hopeless. Yamasaki thought of a daring gamble that could return his troops to the offensive. His plan was to capture the high ground and American artillery emplaced behind Engineer Hill. He would turn the artillery against the American supply dumps in Massacre Valley, destroying the depots and disorganizing the American forces. The assault forces could be isolated and attacked.

At 0300 on 29 May, 800 to 1,000 Japanese rushed up Chichagof Valley and through a temporary gap at Lake Cories. They overran two command posts, killing the occupants, including Lieutenant Colonel James Fish. The main counterattack then hit the medical collecting station at the mouth of Chichagof Valley. The patients and staff received no warning. Many were shot or bayoneted in their sleeping bags.

Once the collecting station had been destroyed, the main Japanese force struck Engineer Hill. Lieutenant Colonel Womeldorff of the 50th Engineers had issued extra grenades and ammunition the previous day and warned his engineers to be alert. Their main concern, however, was not defense but the construction of a road to Prendergast Ridge.

First Sergeant Jessie H. Clouts, Jr., of Company D, 50th Engineers, was exhausted. "We had worked all night and up until noon of the 27th," he later wrote, "carrying supplies up to the front, then we slept four hours and worked almost all night again. We were so tired when we finally did get into our sacks that I didn't think anything could wake us up, but the 37-mm. shell that smacked through the tent did it." The attack came as a complete surprise. "The shell was the first indication we had that the Japs had broken through. We had just gotten up before they hit us and things really began to pop."

The morning was foggy and dark, Clouts recalled, so it was nearly impossible to tell friend from foe. According to Clouts, one of the company officers saw a man walking out ahead of him and ordered him to "get the hell down in a hole." The soldier turned out to be Japanese. He replied, "Me do,

Me do," but didn't get down fast enough to escape the officer's bullet. "They were right in with us," Clouts said.

Lieutenant Jack J. Dillon and Clouts tried to set up a line and found that their best protection was to walk up straight. They decided to risk stray bullets, "both of us being over six feet tall was pretty good identification for us so our own boys wouldn't shoot us." All morning his company commander shouted directions and pep talks that could be heard, even above the racket of the fight, all over the hill. The unit's two Browning automatic rifles, one on each flank of the line, "got in some good licks with tracer ammunition which marked our own line for our men, and also pointed out targets."

The line held, and few Japanese got through it. At daylight the Americans discovered "a whole bunch" of enemy soldiers trapped in a ditch in front of the road along which they had been fighting. The engineers kept firing to keep the foe down, while several others crawled up the bank and threw grenades into them. "Helmets, rifles, and Japs," Clouts remembered, "flew out of the ditch. We were astonished at the mess of them. They had been lying three deep in the ditch trying to hide."

Company A, 13th Engineers, was on the west side of Engineer Hill below some of the American guns, the main goal of the Japanese counterattack. Lieutenant Robert H. MacArthur of Company A had prepared a defensive plan that went into effect when a guard alerted the company. The engineers moved into a defensive line, but the overpowering Japanese force drove the defenders higher up the slope. Company A finally held firm in a line on top of Engineer Hill and halted the attack.

The action on Engineer Hill was marked by considerable confusion and some panic as the surprised engineers stumbled out of their tents. Company officers and noncommissioned officers hastily organized small groups into makeshift defensive lines. The men fought back as well as they could, lobbing grenades into the darkness from behind tractors and crates or firing their carbines and rifles from piles of earth and rock which they had excavated in the course of road construction. The 13th's machine guns proved highly effective. By noon the routed enemy fled to the gorges on the far side of Sarana Valley. When wounded or cornered, many

of the Japanese killed themselves with their own grenades. By nightfall they had been practically wiped out. Over 250 bodies, many armed only with bayonets tied to sticks, were found around Engineer Hill where the engineers had borne the brunt of the attack.

This deadly charge was the end of organized resistance. On 30 May, the Japanese announced the loss of Attu. For the Americans, the campaign had been costly: losses were about 550 killed, about 1,200 wounded, and approximately 2,100 nonbattle casualties from a ground force that had reached 15,000. The most common nonbattle injuries were exposure and trench foot. Of the Japanese defenders, 2,350 were counted dead and 28 or 29 were taken prisoner.

With Attu secured, full attention turned to the construction program for its use in the neutralization of Kiska and attacks on the Kurile Islands. The first priority was completion of an airfield. The decision had been made not to complete the Japanese runway in Holtz Bay. This runway, which had been started in February 1943, was only half done and not the best airfield site. Lieutenant Colonel Whitesell of the 807th was one of a number of American engineers who inspected the Holtz Bay runway. His judgment, supported by others, was that it would be better to start over than complete this one.

The runway, on the east arm of Holtz Bay, was too close to the ridgeline. A place in the middle of the valley would have been better, but the hillside location was nearer the source of fill material. The center of the valley had a firm gravel base that could have been quickly converted into a runway, but the Japanese did not have heavy equipment to transport fill. They had to build at the source. The work that had taken months could have been completed in five days with the ordinary equipment in an American aviation unit.

Talley and Whitesell judged a site at Alexai Point to be superior to Holtz Bay. The approach to this site was safer and there was more room. Even before Attu was secured, construction started on the airfield. Womeldorff headed this project, with construction accomplished by the 50th and 13th Engineers, Company A of the 807th Engineer Battalion (Aviation), and a detachment of the 349th General Service Regiment.

During the battle for Attu, another airfield site on the nearby island of Shemya was investigated. Colonel Talley led a two-day reconnaissance of this island on 28 and 29 May. Talley sketched out the layout for a bomber runway and hardstands. Shemya later contributed to the missions against the Kurile Islands.

An Attu Island American defense garrison with facilities for 5,956 officers and enlisted men and 2,360 officers and men in the Army Air Force was built by engineer troops and the West Construction Company. The garrison and airfields were done in July 1944. Facilities were built at Massacre Bay, Massacre Valley, Engineer Hill, and Holtz Bay. The combined base area was named Camp Earle in memory of Colonel Edward P. Earle, the commander of the 17th Infantry Regiment, who was killed in action during the 7th Division's assault.

At Attu today, the unfinished Japanese airfield in Holtz Bay is still visible. A few pieces of Japanese construction equipment sit rusting on the runway, and one of the Japanese 75-mm. guns remains as well. So does the abandoned American airfield at Alexai Point. On both sides, the flotsam of war still recalls the hard fought battle of Attu.

Sources for Further Reading

Brian Garfield's dramatic account of the war in the north, *The Thousand-Mile War: World War II in Alaska and the Aleutians* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), provides a vivid narrative of the battle for Attu.

Also useful for material on the context and on the battle itself are two volumes in the Army's official history of the war. These are Karl C. Dod, *The Corps of Engineers: The War Against Japan* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1966), and Stetson Conn, Rose C. Engelman, and Byron Fairchild, *Guarding the United States and its Outposts* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1964).