



---

---

## IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

---

---

### THE PERSONAL WAR

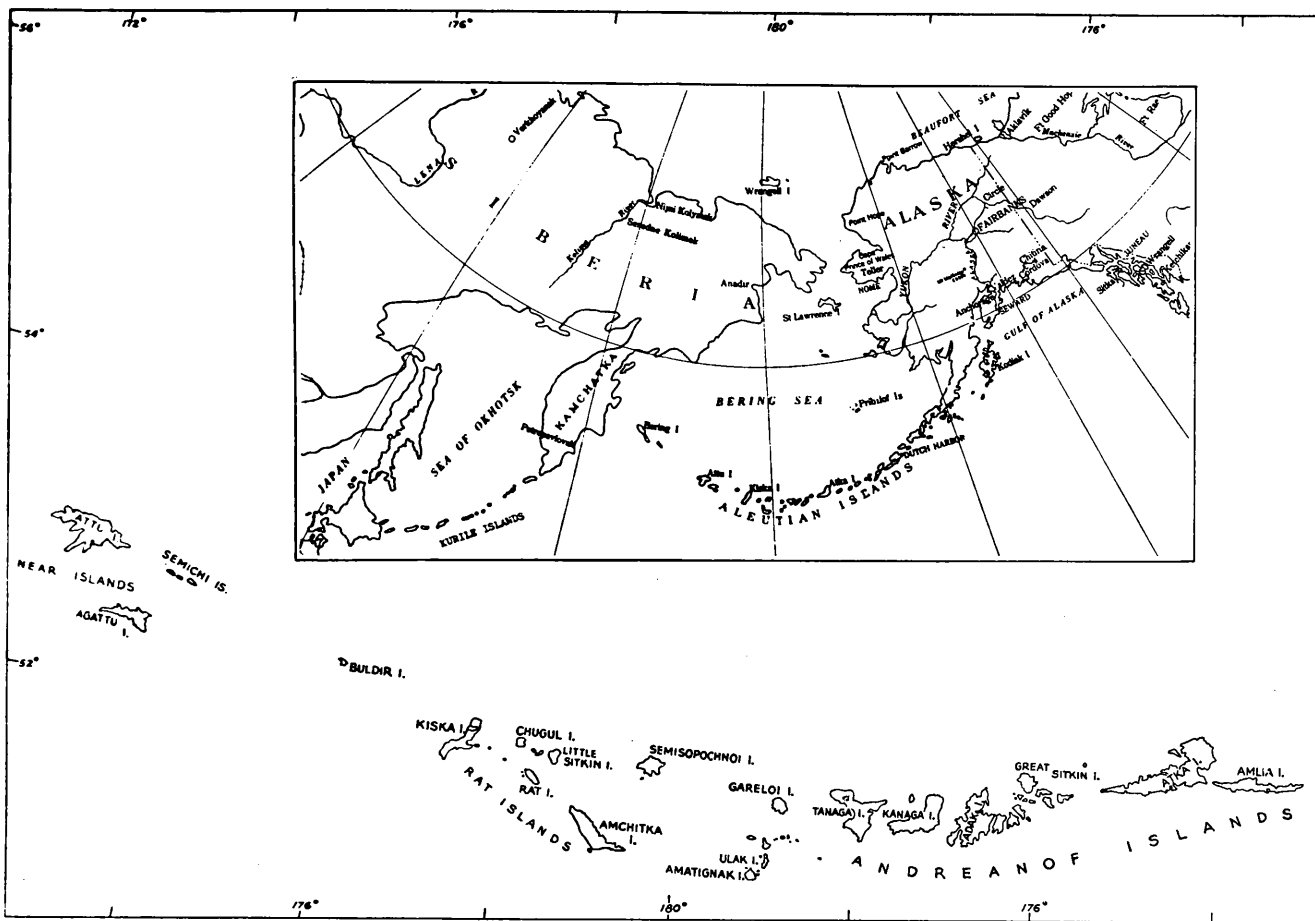
“**T**he war in Alaska,” Talley recalled, “was a personal war. It was directed by men who knew each other. And most of them had known each other for years. And a lot of them were warm friends.”<sup>1</sup> He thought especially highly of Colonel James Bush, whom he praised for the foresight demonstrated in fortifying his camp at Attu, which the Japanese later attacked. Talley admired Bush, a former co-captain of a football team, for engaging in hand-to-hand combat and capturing a Japanese civilian.<sup>2</sup>

Talley also remembered Colonel William Eareckson with fondness. Eareckson, in Talley’s estimation, was a “tremendous leader.” He served in the infantry during World War I, and had developed the “reputation of flying anything.” When leading bombing raids over the Aleutians with “young green pilots just out of flight school,” Eareckson “would sing to them, over the air, some fighting song” to “keep their minds on that and they would follow him.” Talley also recalled seeing him sleep on the ground under his plane, without a tent to shield him from bad weather. Some military personnel referred to him as “Wild Bill Eareckson” or simply as “Colonel E.” For all his hardiness, he remained “quiet and retiring.” Others agreed with Talley’s high assessment of Eareckson, who was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal, Navy Cross, Legion of Merit, and Combat Ribbon.<sup>3</sup> Talley’s descriptions of the Army’s offensive in the Aleutian Islands reveal the camaraderie of the men, and they provide dramatic examples of the engineers’ attempts to cope with the threat of attack, while battling the isolation and the fierce weather of the Far North.

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

### THE FIRST LINE OF ALASKA DEFENSE

Before the 1930s, the possibility of military action in or near Alaska appeared remote. Accordingly, the Army and Navy devoted little attention to the Far North, and the War Department looked to the Navy to defend Alaska.<sup>4</sup> In 1890, President Benjamin Harrison, by executive order, reserved 25 sites in Alaska for Navy use — including Cold Bay, Kodiak, Sitka, and Dutch Harbor — and allowed the Navy to establish additional defense facilities and bases as needed. Confident of their security, Americans had not felt compelled to develop these sites and, in 1921, signed the Limitations of Armament Treaty restricting American construction of fortifications on the Aleutian Islands and Japan's construction of fortifications on islands adjacent to its homeland.



Aleutian Islands.



#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

---

The 1930s marked a turning point in Alaska's history. In 1934, Anthony J. Dimond introduced legislation for an air base in Alaska, and the Japanese announced their intention to withdraw from the Limitations of Armament Treaty. Initially, however, American isolationism and indifference persisted, and Congress refused to authorize construction of military facilities on the Aleutians, fearing that such action would give the appearance of U.S. intervention in the affairs of the Far East.<sup>7</sup>

Release of the Navy's 1938 Hepburn Report, written in response to Japan's military expansion in the 1930s, signalled a change in attitudes toward Alaska's military significance. In light of Japan's military buildup and the proximity of the Aleutian Islands to Japan's northern territories, the Hepburn Report urged that the Navy construct seaplane and submarine bases at Sitka, Kodiak Island, and Dutch Harbor. The military planners feared that Japan might occupy some of the Aleutian Islands and establish bases, which could service submarines that preyed on shipping along the Alaska Coast. Also, long-range bombers could strike the Alaska mainland from those potential bases. The proposed Navy bases at Sitka, Kodiak, and Dutch Harbor would create a first line of defense against Japanese aggression. In response to deteriorating Japanese-American relations in 1939, the Navy built the seaplane and submarine bases at Sitka, Kodiak Island, and Dutch Harbor.<sup>8</sup>

To defend these Navy bases, the War Department authorized the Army to establish garrisons on Unalaska Island, Kodiak Island, Umnak Island, and at Cold Bay and Port Heiden on the Alaska Peninsula. The Army located the posts at sites where port facilities could be developed and where airfields to handle pursuit planes could be constructed.

The Corps joined Navy Seabees and private contractors in building the naval bases, airfields, and Army posts in southwest Alaska. Army Engineers identified and surveyed potential sites for bases, managed the shipment of supplies and equipment to the base sites, and oversaw the construction of the airfields, harbor defenses, and garrisons. Between 1939 and May

Dashiell Hammett, author of *The Maltese Falcon*, recorded the remarkable story of the Aleutian campaign. "Modern armies had never fought before on *any* field that was like the Aleutians," he observed. "We could borrow no knowledge from the past. We would have to learn as we went along, how to live and fight and win in this new land, the least-known part of our America."

... Dashiell Hammett, "The Battle of the Aleutians, 1942-1943," in *The Capture of Attu: Tales of World War II in Alaska* (Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing), p. 9.

---

1942, they steadily increased their activities in southwest Alaska as they joined in the establishment of Alaska's first line of defense.

### ***Fort Greely (Kodiak Island) and Fort Mears***

In October 1940, the Army authorized the construction of Fort Greely on Kodiak Island and Fort Mears on Amaknak Island for the protection of the Kodiak and Dutch Harbor Navy bases. The Fort Greely Project included fixed-harbor defenses.<sup>9</sup> The Army Engineers played only a minor role in the construction of the two forts. The Navy Contractor, Siems Drake Puget Sound, built both Army and Navy infrastructure. At Cape Chiniak on Kodiak Island, a civilian Army Engineer construction force installed the aircraft warning system and four Panama mounts for the 155 mm gun battery.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Fort Glenn (Umnak Island)***

During the fall of 1941, Japanese military operations in the Pacific convinced the War Department to provide additional air protection for Alaska's Navy bases. In order to determine how best to provide such protection and to locate a site for a forward operating base in the Aleutian Islands, Majors B. B. Talley and Everett Davis led a reconnaissance of sites in the Dutch Harbor area. Earlier surveys by naval and civilian groups had not located a favorable airfield site. Talley and Davis, however, identified a potential site at Pustoi Point on Umnak Island, approximately 80 miles southwest of Dutch Harbor and 800 miles from the Alaska mainland.<sup>11</sup>

Civilian engineers under William Muldrow, Associate Engineer, U. S. Engineer Office, Anchorage, investigated the Pustoi Point site. On December 7, 1941, Muldrow recommended constructing an airfield at the site, and Talley presented the project to the District Engineer in Seattle. Upon recommendation by the Seattle District and the Commanding General, WDC, the Chief of Engineers approved the construction of a base, to be called Fort Glenn. The War Department authorized construction on December 9, 1941.<sup>12</sup>

Under the command of Resident Engineer Captain (later Lieutenant Colonel) Carlin H. Whitesell, Jr., the 802d and the 807th Engineer Aviation Battalions, augmented by civilians, immediately commenced construction. The original plans called for a small hospital, shops and technical facilities, a three-runway airfield, fuel and munitions storage, and facilities for over 2,500 officers and enlisted men, including Air Corps bomber and fighter squadrons, anti aircraft squadrons, field

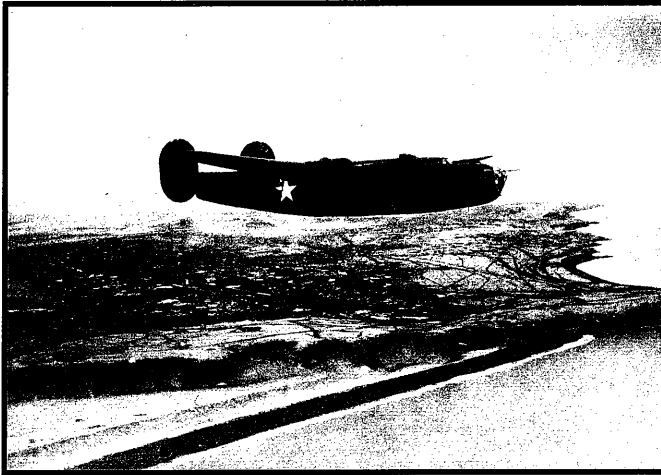
#### ***IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS***

---

artillery troops, infantry, and engineer troops. A civilian construction camp was also constructed.

Talley had bet a case of champagne with Navy personnel stationed on Kodiak that the airfield at Umnak would be available for service by April 1, 1942. On March 31, Talley sent a radio message to the commander on Kodiak: "Make mine Moet. Talley." While duty officers struggled to decode the message, the commander — once he was awakened — recognized it immediately to mean that Umnak was operational.<sup>13</sup>

Some work remained, however. On May 19, 1942, Talley sent orders to the resident engineer at Fort Glenn to construct 25 hard standings for bomber aircraft by the end of that month. When Talley visited Fort Glenn the following day, he found the work going well. He feared though that the hard standings would be needed earlier than he had anticipated. Revetments were therefore



An aerial view of Umnak, 1943.

moved closer to the runway to decrease the construction time for the taxiways. Talley also ordered the resident engineer to expedite work on the refrigeration plant, hospital, and gasoline pumping facilities.<sup>14</sup> The Japanese military buildup in the Pacific was growing more threatening to the Alaska bases each day, and crews worked rapidly under the threat of imminent military confrontation.

#### ***Fort Randall (Cold Bay)***

While Fort Greely, Fort Mears, and Fort Glenn would protect the bases at Kodiak and Dutch Harbor, the area between Dutch Harbor and the Alaska mainland remained undefended. As a part of the Corps' investigation of potential garrison sites in the fall of 1941, the U. S. Engineer Office in Anchorage assigned survey parties, under Norman E. Sylar, Associate Engineer, to examine sites for intermediate fields to secure this unprotected area. Sylar, in a report filed on November 21, 1941, recommended construction at Cold Bay, a protected bay at the western end of the Alaska Peninsula from which planes could patrol the Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea.<sup>15</sup>



---

**“Landing Operation”**  
by William F. Draper.

---

Under the authority of the Defense Appropriations Act of July 2, 1940, the CAA selected Morrison-Knudsen Company to construct an airfield and a 5,000-foot runway.<sup>16</sup> Storms during the fall and winter of 1940-1941 prevented the timely delivery of supplies and equipment to the site, delaying construction; the airfield was not completed when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.<sup>17</sup>

The attack on Pearl Harbor ended all doubt as to Japan’s willingness to strike at the American possessions in the Pacific. The War Department responded by expanding its military installations in southwest Alaska. As part of that expansion, the War Department ordered construction of an Army post at Cold Bay, including facilities for more than 2,100 officers and enlisted men, a staging field to accommodate all types of aircraft, cantonment buildings, a 5,000-foot runway with revetments and taxiways, Air Corps fueling and fuel storage facilities, warehouses, three Kodiak T-hangers, and a dock. The new post was named Fort Randall, in honor of Brigadier General George M. Randall, the first commander of the Army’s Department of Alaska.

#### ***IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS***

---

Fort Randall was officially activated January 29, 1942. The 42d Engineer Regiment and the 151st Engineers (Combat), an Alabama National Guard regiment, were the first Army units to arrive at Fort Randall. Resident Engineer Brigadier General W. W. Jones assumed responsibility for all construction in February 1942. Operating under the cover of fictitious corporations to maintain secrecy, the Army sent bulldozers, scrapers, graders, and other construction equipment to Cold Bay.<sup>18</sup>

#### ***Fort Morrow (Port Heiden)***

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor also inspired construction of an additional intermediate airfield on the Alaska Peninsula. The Army authorized construction of the airfield through the "Program for Additional Construction in Alaska," on December 31, 1941.<sup>19</sup> In March and April 1942, personnel of the U.S. Engineer Office in Anchorage, under the direction of Associate Engineer James Huston investigated the Port Heiden area, 200 miles northeast of Cold Bay on the Bristol Bay side of the Alaska Peninsula. At this location, the investigators found a site suitable for the proposed airfield and 450-man garrison. When completed, the post, named Fort Morrow, included a staging field, cantonment buildings, docking facilities, fuel storage, housing, a hospital, warehouses, and hangars. The originally planned 5,000-foot runway was extended to 7,000 feet, and a second 5,000-foot runway was constructed.<sup>20</sup>

Between September 1941 and June 1942, the Corps oversaw the construction of a network of airfields and posts designed to protect and support the Navy bases at Kodiak and Dutch Harbor. The Army Engineers worked cooperatively with Navy Seabees, Navy contractors, and CAA contractors who were already working on projects in the area. Although the several projects were not completed prior to Japan's June, 1942 bombing of Dutch Harbor, runways, revetments, and hard standings had been finished. The Air Corps was prepared to respond to enemy intrusions into the Dutch Harbor and Kodiak areas.

#### **THE JAPANESE INVASION OF ALASKA**

The Japanese tested the first line of the Alaska defense network on June 3, 1942 when they bombed Dutch Harbor by air. Before fighter aircraft from Fort Randall on Cold Bay reached the scene, however, the attackers had disappeared. The Japanese struck Dutch Harbor a second time on the following day, but they were repelled by fighters from Umnak Island's Fort Glenn. Like Fort Randall,



---

Fort Glenn had been constructed in secrecy, using a fictitious cannery as the cover. When the Japanese attacked Dutch Harbor they were not expecting land-based planes to intercept them from the west.<sup>21</sup>

Later that day, an American search plane radioed that it had spotted the Japanese carrier fleet. A flight of five B-26 bombers from Umnak and a similar flight from Cold Bay were ordered aloft to intercept the fleet before it escaped in the fog. Only one plane, piloted by Captain George W. Thornbrough from the Cold Bay flight, found the enemy force. Thornbrough made an unsuccessful attempt to torpedo the Japanese carrier, *Ryujo*. The Japanese fleet, which had been located about 160 miles south of Dutch Harbor, then moved to safer waters.<sup>22</sup>

The Japanese retreated west from Dutch Harbor to the Aleutian Islands of Kiska and Attu. There, as anticipated in the Hepburn Report, they began construction of military bases. These bases protected the Japanese homeland, and from the two islands the Japanese could also service submarines used against American ships.



Aerial view of Dutch Harbor Area.

The United States responded with bombing attacks on Kiska. These raids, hampered by intense anti-aircraft fire, fog, storms, and the great distance between Fort Glenn and Kodiak, were ineffective. The Japanese could not be driven from Kiska and Attu by air power alone. The Americans would be able to retake the islands only through an assault by ground troops supported by air and naval forces. Once regained, the islands would serve as staging grounds for a U.S. offensive against the Japanese Kurile Islands.

While preparing for an offensive against the Japanese in the Aleutian Islands, the War Department continued to reinforce the defense capabilities in southwest Alaska. Immediately following the attack on Dutch Harbor, the WDC authorized the construction of six- and eight-inch batteries at Fort Mears, and the Army

#### ***IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS***

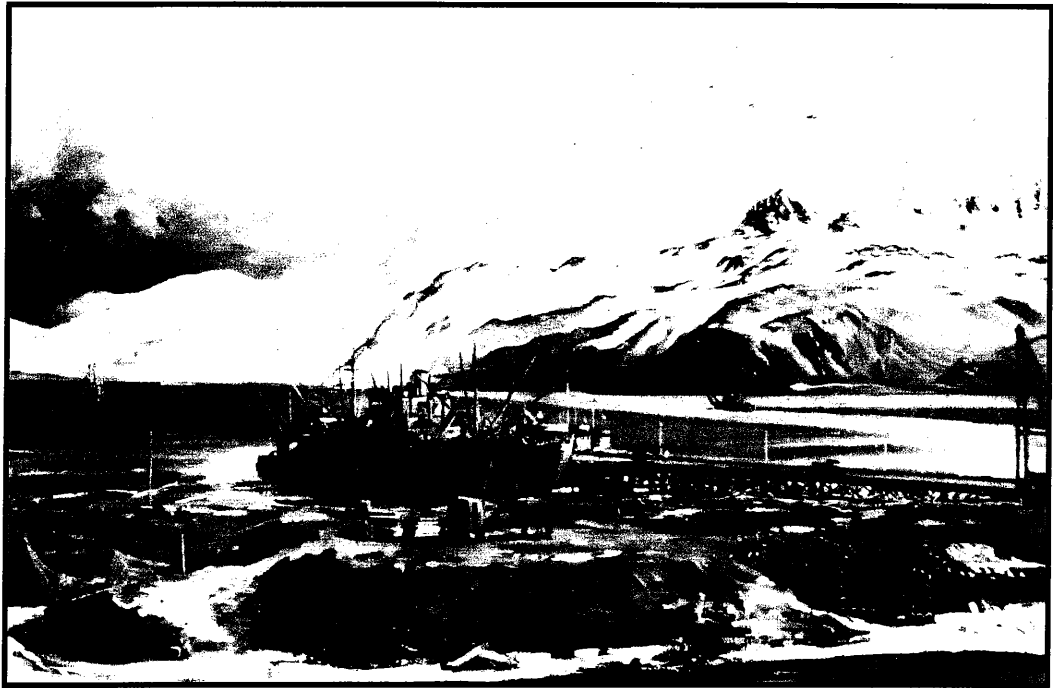
---

moved additional troops to the fort. The Navy contractor, Siems Drake Puget Sound, accomplished both the Navy and Army construction at Fort Mears, until February 18, 1943, when construction battalions replaced the contractor's crews. In addition, a company of the 151st Combat Engineers was assigned to road construction. The Army completed work at Fort Mears in 1943.<sup>23</sup>

At Kodiak Island, the WDC authorized construction of harbor defenses (including a six-inch battery at Long Island, and two eight-inch batteries at Miller Point, St. Peter's Head, and Chiniak); supporting searchlight installations and fire control facilities; four 360-degree Panama mounts for 155 mm guns at Cape Chiniak, Buskin Hill and Long Island; and seacoast radar at Long Island, Piedmont Point, and Cape Chiniak. Housing facilities, emplacements, and magazines were provided for the two 90 mm anti-motor torpedo boat batteries located at Puffin Island and Spruce Cape. The Army also planned housing and facilities for a permanent garrison of 6,000 officers and enlisted men at neighboring Fort Greely. Also at Kodiak, the Navy built three concrete runways for joint use by the Army and the Navy. Several companies of the 151st Combat Engineers constructed roads and various field fortifications and extended the Army dock to accommodate two Liberty ships.<sup>24</sup>

In the spring of 1942, Fort Glenn, on Umnak Island, remained the closest base to the occupied islands of Kiska and Attu. The base was therefore important not only as a key in the first line of Alaska defense but also as the primary field for offensive missions against the Japanese. During the summer of 1942, the Army began a massive buildup of forces at Fort Glenn in preparation for an offensive strike in the western Aleutian Islands.

Troops from the 802d, 807th, and 813th Engineer Aviation Battalions, joined by one battalion of the 93d General Service Regiment and approximately 100 civilians, accomplished the work at Umnak Island. The size of the garrison at Fort Glenn had increased threefold since the original plans were made in early 1942, and new housing was built on a rapid schedule.<sup>25</sup> By December 1942, Fort Glenn had housed nearly 11,000 officers and enlisted men, a medical detachment, and civilian construction employees. Additional infrastructure included storage for over 3 million gallons of gasoline and 1,680,000 gallons of diesel oil, as well as warehouses with over 200,000 square feet of storage. The men soon began working on two recently authorized satellite airfields with three 6,000-foot runways.



“Adak Harbor” by William F. Draper.

In 1943, various contingents of troops began construction of additional warehouses and cold storage units, a barge dock, tanker moorage, two runways at the main field, an extension of the north satellite field runway, an electrical distribution system, and a gravity water supply. By September 1943, at the peak of construction, the Fort Glenn Project was employing over 1,300 troops and civilians.<sup>26</sup>

Transporting equipment and construction material to Fort Glenn constituted a major problem for the engineers. Because Pustoi Bay, the port on Umnak Island, was exposed to severe weather, most of the equipment and materials destined for Fort Glenn had to be barged 12 miles, from Chernofski Harbor on Unalaska Island to Fort Glenn on Umnak Island. The harbor facilities at Chernofski initially consisted only of a ship's dock and two barge docks. Warehousing and cold storage, a second ship's dock, a barge dock, and a water supply were added in conjunction with accelerated development at Fort Glenn.

Transferring cargo from the ocean-going vessels to the construction site at Fort Glenn required five separate handlings by cable slings and cranes, which dramatically increased the chance of breakage. For example, breakage of one-inch

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

construction lumber ran as high as 45 percent. During storms, loaded barges broke free and were lost. At Pustoi Bay on Umnak Island, storms wrecked two barge docks and a ship's dock in September 1942.<sup>27</sup> In spite of the difficulties, the construction program at Fort Glenn was finished ahead of schedule. Following Lieutenant Colonel Whitesell as resident engineer in turn were Lieutenant Colonel A. A. Dessler, Colonel Roy W. Leibsle, Major Edward H. Dillon, and Major Karl T. Klock.<sup>28</sup>

In response to the Japanese attack on Dutch Harbor, the Army also strengthened the two garrisons on the Alaska Peninsula, Fort Randall and Fort Morrow. At Fort Randall, they increased the troop strength to nearly 9,000 and constructed a 400-bed hospital. The Corps added a second runway, lengthened and paved existing runways, constructed a satellite field, and enlarged the harbor facilities at Cold Bay to allow for simultaneous docking of three ships. Troops and hired labor built warehouses containing over 150,000 square feet of floor space, cold storage units with 44,800 cubic feet, three Kodiak T-hangars, and a Link Trainer building.<sup>29</sup> Work during the winter of 1942 was frequently suspended as a result of adverse weather conditions, delayed shipment of supplies — due in large part to the winter closure of most Alaska ports — and



“Williwaw” by E.J. Hughes.

---

an insufficient labor force.<sup>30</sup> Despite these difficulties, the project was completed by December 30, 1943.

The Army planned Fort Morrow at Port Heiden as a vital link in the air defense of Dutch Harbor and of mainland Alaska. Although the Army had completed two runways at Fort Morrow, the construction of other facilities had yet to begin when the Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor. The Army immediately initiated an enlarged construction program at Fort Morrow. The revised project called for housing and hospital facilities, cantonment buildings, warehouse space, and cold storage.<sup>31</sup> To prepare the area as a staging field, the crews extended the east/west runway from 5,000 to 7,500 feet and enlarged the north/south runway to 5,000 feet, built a Kodiak T-hangar, and added Air Corps operation and maintenance facilities. Since the harbor was shallow, the engineers built a 45-foot by 210-foot barge dock to handle the barge traffic. The construction was carried out by troop and hired labor under the successive direction of Resident Engineers Captain John W. Baum, Lieutenant A. L. Donaldson, and Lieutenant Carl B. Dold.<sup>32</sup>

As at Fort Randall, severe weather conditions impeded the Fort Morrow operation. Runway construction was delayed when the ground froze to a depth of 30 inches. High winds and low temperatures affected lighterage operations, as cargo from transport ships was unloaded to barges 4 miles offshore. Waterborne freight could be delivered only six months out of the year, and at times the transports that arrived in the fall could not be unloaded until the spring thaw of Heiden Bay. The winds also blew floating ice from Bristol Bay into the harbor, destroying one dock.<sup>33</sup>

When Dutch Harbor was bombed, the Navy evacuated the base and partially destroyed the equipment it operated at St. Paul, one of the Pribilof Islands, 250 miles to the north. St. Paul Island was located within fighter range of Aleutian stations and some mainland CAA fields and thus provided protection for the Bristol Bay Coast. Following the Navy's withdrawal, the ADC immediately sent a detachment of 12 soldiers to St. Paul to garrison the Pribilof Islands and to operate a weather and radio station.<sup>34</sup> Housing and warehouses previously used by fishermen and Bureau of Fisheries personnel were available at the village of St. Paul. To provide for rapid dispersion, however, one third of the troops lived in winterized tents adjacent to the runway site.<sup>35</sup>

Weather conditions in the Pribilof Islands area were so severe that ADC abandoned the St. Paul Project in June, 1943. Daily blizzards, storms, "rough

#### ***IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS***

---

seas, and ice floes" closed the roads, destroyed structures, froze water lines and damaged or destroyed "virtually every barge and boat in use at the Island." In July 1943, troops placed demolition charges under the runway and radio tower and dismantled portable buildings for shipment to other sites. By the end of August, a ten-man caretaker force still inhabited the site.<sup>36</sup>

#### **SHIPPING TO THE WAR ZONE: PORT OF JUNEAU AND EXCURSION INLET TERMINAL**

As the War Department increased its operations on the Alaska Peninsula and in the Aleutian Islands, the WDC attempted to expedite the shipment of material, munitions, and equipment to the area. Ocean-going vessels carried a large amount of the cargo destined for the western bases directly to the bases from ports in the States. The WDC reasoned that the shipments could be expedited if cargo were hauled by barge to an Alaska terminal, then transported to the various bases; on April 12, 1942, they requested that Talley organize a survey of sites in Icy Straits, west of Juneau, for a proposed Alaska barge terminal for the transshipment of cargo.<sup>37</sup> On the basis of these surveys, the WDC prepared preliminary plans to construct a transshipping barge terminal at Excursion Inlet large enough to accommodate nine ocean vessels.

While waiting for the final approval of the Excursion Inlet Terminal, a temporary terminal was established at the Port of Juneau, allowing for an immediate increase in the flow of supplies and equipment to Kodiak, Dutch Harbor, Fort Glenn and support garrison sites. In early July of 1942, Resident Engineer James Huston commenced expansion of the existing government dock at Juneau. When Talley visited Juneau on July 9, he advised Huston to continue rebuilding the government dock, to purchase and rebuild the privately owned Fenner dock, and to secure additional buildings for use as warehouses. The WDC and Seattle District concurred with these recommendations and agreed that it was not feasible to increase the facilities at Juneau beyond that point. Rapid successful supply of western bases remained contingent upon completion of the Excursion Inlet Terminal.<sup>38</sup>

On July 26, 1942, the Commanding General, WDC, authorized the construction of additional shipping facilities at Juneau including extension of the government dock and the Fenner dock, construction of a barge grid and a warehouse, placing fill for 15 acres of open storage, installation of a 30-ton stiffleg derrick, and renovation of existing buildings.<sup>39</sup> The project, with a total

---

of over 100,000 square feet of warehouse storage, dock space, and office space, was completed in early April of 1943 and transferred to the Commanding Officer, Juneau Sub-port of Embarkation.<sup>40</sup>

The WDC authorized the Excursion Inlet Terminal Project on July 31, 1942. Only three days later, the District Engineer concluded a contract with the Guy F. Atkinson Company of San Francisco for the construction of the terminal for an estimated \$18,059,000. The facilities were to include three separate docks with adjacent barge docks, eight transit sheds, six cold storage buildings, an ordnance dock with four warehouses, two oil docks, a fuel farm with a capacity of 1,500,000 gallons, a 70-ton stiffleg derrick, mobile cranes, housing for port-operating personnel, and facilities for 2,500 officers and men. Later the WDC authorized the addition of a marine repair facility and housing for a garrison of 210 officers and 3,520 enlisted men.<sup>41</sup>

The Guy F. Atkinson Company began work on the terminal in August 1942, under the direction of Resident Engineer Major K. T. Klock. In response to the wartime emergency, the ship and barge docks were constructed first. Fortunately, the contractor was able to procure a large percentage of the building materials in southeast Alaska, and the work progressed rapidly. Following the example of the Astoria-Puget Sound Canning Company, which had used untreated piling in its dock for over sixteen years, Atkinson used untreated piling for the Excursion Inlet docks and terminal buildings, further speeding the construction effort. In addition, Engineer troops operated a large mill and planer and a small sawmill nearby that furnished considerable lumber for the project.<sup>42</sup> The 331st Engineer General Service Regiment, under the command of Colonel Roy W. Leibsle, built most of the garrison housing, the hospital, utilities, roads, and bridges at Excursion Inlet. At the peak of construction, the project employed a crew of 2,760 contractor forces and 850 officers and enlisted men.<sup>43</sup>

At the end of January 1943, Talley notified ADC that the main dock of Unit No. 1 of the Excursion Inlet or "Alaska Barge" Terminal would be completed by February 1, and that it could be turned over to the operating forces on March 1. He requested that Quartermaster Port troops be sent to Excursion Inlet during February so that they could begin operating the terminal as soon as it was turned over.<sup>44</sup> When Talley visited Excursion Inlet on March 3, two ships were already discharging cargo for shipment to the west.<sup>45</sup>

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

##### TANAGA RECONNAISSANCE, JUNE 27, 1942

"We made a rather hard landing, which had it been much worse would have been considered bad. We opened a few seams in the bottom of the plane, but it was kept afloat ... by means of a power bilge pump. ... This sort of thing is not particularly unusual."

"We inflated the large rubber boat, and Colonel Davis, Major Whitesell, and Captain Lenau who accompanied me on this trip went ashore. We carried with us arms and packs and subsistence for 2 or 3 days, since there was the possibility that we might become separated from the airplane. The island is seldom visited by man, and the animal and bird life ... showed no fear of human beings. ... The weather was bad in the sense that there was a heavy downpour of rain and a low ceiling which, however, was to our satisfaction as it reduced the visibility to transient aircraft. ... The PBV which flew over Kiska on the day before ... suffered one man killed and two wounded. ... We saw the site which Colonel Davis had preferred for a dispersal field and also saw that there was a wide pass through the mountains from Fort Glenn to the site and it is possible to drive over this pass in a jeep. However, it is my opinion that a separate defensive garrison will be required if a field is built at this place."

##### ALEUTIAN ISLANDS – OCTOBER 29, 1942

"Together with General Buckner, I flew to Tanaga in a B-17, where I pointed out the several features of military interest, and thence to Amchitka, the south end of which island we circled several times and studied the terrain, following which we flew west all the way around the Island of Kiska. However, we played a dirty trick on the Japs. We stayed outside the range of their small arms and flew at 50 feet which was below their anti-aircraft and we were safe from the fire of their long-range guns because of their inability to suitably depress them, thus I have made my second trip to Kiska without being fired upon."

... from Talley, "Logs"

#### ENGINEERS UNDER FIRE

As the western garrisons, airfields, and supply routes neared completion, Engineer troops began preparations to move west into the Aleutian Islands as part of the offensive against the Japanese at Kiska and Attu. In addition to struggling against storms, wind, fog, rain, and muskeg, they entered a combat zone, traveling and working under the threat of submarine and air attack. In moving into the Aleutian Islands, the Corps accomplished its mission under fire.

The Corps was charged with the location and construction of airfields from which American fighter planes could attack Kiska and Attu, where long-distance bombers could later launch bombing raids on Japanese bases in the Kurile Islands. To accomplish that mission, the engineers identified potential runway sites and useable harbors, transported troops and equipment to the sites, and built runways and other facilities.



---

## **Adak Offensive Base**

In June 1942, Talley began the search for airfield sites in the Aleutian Islands. Traveling on board a weather plane as far as Kiska, he attempted to view a site for a future airfield. "We approached Kiska at 11,000 feet," he noted,

and could clearly see the Japanese camp and garrison, Japanese destroyer, other small boats in the harbor, and the bow of the transport recently sunk which showed above the water. ... We could see all of the garrison but could not see the high ground just above the garrison whereon is located the Japanese anti-aircraft artillery and the other construction on what is reported in the "Naval Air Pilot" as a potential landing site. ... As we approached Kiska there was no nervousness aboard the plane, although the crew became very much on the alert and just a little tense since they sometimes encountered anti-aircraft fire and usually one or more Japanese airplanes.<sup>46</sup>

### **ADAK**

**August 25, 1942**

"Colonel DeLong and Major Whitesell and I boarded the destroyer CHASE and met Commander Craig who is the convoy officer for the move to Adak. ... He stated this was the dirtiest job he had ever been assigned and that upon the completion of it, he thought that he would deserve a medal of honor. I told him that as far as we were concerned we had done much more difficult jobs but if he desired a medal of honor we would assist him to get it. We explained to him that the equipment was excellent and the men were experienced, and we had no fear as to its outcome ..."

... from Talley, "Logs"

Following the reconnaissance of Kiska, the plane flew over the islands of Tanaga and Adak. While Talley was impressed with Tanaga's potential as a field site, he believed that Adak sites identified as potential fields by the "Naval Air Pilot" were unsuitable for Army operation.<sup>47</sup> Talley returned to Tanaga on June 27. On the basis of his reconnaissance, he submitted a report to General Buckner, Commanding General, ADC, affirming the feasibility of a major offensive base within striking distance of Kiska and recommended that the base be constructed at Tanaga. On July 13, Talley discussed the plan with General DeWitt, Commanding General, WDC, in San Francisco, and the General approved the plan.<sup>48</sup> Back in Anchorage, Talley reviewed the plan with General Buckner, who saw "the necessity of quick and positive action." However, Buckner indicated that the Navy preferred the Adak site.<sup>49</sup>

Colonel Talley, General Buckner, Admiral Reeves, and Captain Perry made another reconnaissance of Tanaga and Adak on July 28. On August 2, Buckner, Talley, Admiral Theobald, and Admiral Reeves discussed their conclusions. The Army continued to recommend Tanaga for its airfield sites, and the Navy continued to recommend Adak for its harbor facilities. When they were unable to agree, the matter was presented to the combined Army and Navy staffs in

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

---

Washington. The combined staffs agreed that the site for the base for the westward movement into the Aleutians would be "Adak or nothing." Buckner and Talley "decided that it would be Adak, even though Adak was a second best site. Nevertheless, it is better than nothing and it will permit us to attack Kiska with fighter planes."<sup>50</sup>

Talley immediately began preparations for the move to Adak Island. In requesting additional troops from General Sommerville on August 18, Talley stated that despite his disappointment at the selection of the Adak site, the engineers "would do everything within our power to construct the field quicker than we had originally estimated. Our original estimate was a fighter strip in 3 weeks and a permanent landing field within about 2 months."<sup>51</sup>

Adak Island is located 400 miles west of Fort Glenn and 200 miles east of Kiska Island. A massive supply of material, equipment, and men had to be transported rapidly to the remote island. To move that cargo quickly, Talley scouted all of the Alaskan ports for vessels that could transport supplies. Since Adak was located in hostile territory, many of the crews were reluctant to join Talley's "Engineers' Navy."

**September 1, 1942**

"The Engineer equipment was engaged on the construction of a road about 4 miles long between Sweeper Cove and the head of Kuluk Bay. This is rightly the first priority because the ammunition was unloaded at the head of Kuluk Bay and the guns at Sweeper Cove. It is estimated that it will take about 3 days to build this road. The dike around the field should be constructed about the 7 or 8 and I estimate that the field will be in operation about the 10th of September."

... from Talley, "Logs"

Occasionally Talley met with resistance. During one noteworthy incident on August 20, 1942, the crew of the tug *Retriever* refused to take their ship any farther west than Seward. When he learned of this development, Talley promptly contacted the tug's owners in Seattle, the Puget Sound Tug and Barge Company, and obtained permission to "take whatever action was necessary." After arriving in Seward, he then explained to the tug's captain that "the *Retriever* was going west whether they [the crew] took her or not." Talley made it clear that he was there "merely to discuss whether or not they wanted to go with the boat," not "to discuss whether or not the boat was going." The crew agreed to stay with the boat.<sup>52</sup>

By August 26, Talley had gathered the tugs and barges at Chernofski Harbor, on Unalaska Island. Early that afternoon, the fleet sailed for Adak in a convoy protected by the Navy. The fleet reached Adak on August 29, having lost one

---

barge carrying gasoline, aviation fuel, and a steel runway. The sea was so rough near Adak that the barges were grounded in Kuluk Bay.

Unloading them proved to be a difficult task. The engineers grounded a 90-ton fish scow and a 600-ton steel barge to form a dock from which to secure the 1000-ton barges and power scows. To unload the gasoline, they threw 1,500 to 2,000 drums of fuel into the water and let the wind carry them to the shore.<sup>53</sup> Talley was pleased with his "Engineers' Navy," praising the convoy to Adak as "one of the smoothest operations" he had encountered. "The Staff functioned well," he noted, "and the organizations moved with efficiency and dispatch." Talley found the maneuver much less difficult than the move to Umnak Island a year earlier. "However, from a Staff point of view," he observed, "and from the standpoint of a maneuver, if a basic critique were held, it would be possible to tear the operation to pieces and to accumulate enough data to show that it couldn't have happened."<sup>54</sup>

**September 4, 1942**

"We started in fair weather, although a 25-mile wind dissolved into clouds before we reached Umnak. ... It should be stated, however, that our opinions of what is fair weather has changed. We consider in the Aleutians anything fair that will enable us to get into the air or get down again. We passed Atka Island and hit the customary high wind and rough air adjacent to a high mountain at sea."

... from Talley, "Logs"

Talley had arrived at Adak on board the *Elliott* soon after the barges had landed. He immediately began a search for an airfield site. After exploring the island for two days, Talley and the surveyors decided to build the airfield at Sweeper Cove, which remained dry and firm at low tide, but was covered with six inches to two feet of water at high tide.

Talley and his associates determined that by diking the area to keep the high tide out, they could complete a useable steel mat runway in a week.<sup>55</sup>

Through a plan conceived by Lieutenant Colonel Leon B. DeLong, and Lieutenant Colonel James D. Bush, Jr., the engineers built a dike and canal around the edge of the lagoon in Sweeper Cove. The tidal gates at the mouth of Sweeper Creek successfully drained the flat area. The first mass attack on the Japanese at Kiska was launched from the new field at Adak on September 14, 1942.<sup>56</sup>

Initially, the Adak construction program included only one 5,000-foot fighter-bomber strip and housing for 15,000 air and ground forces. However, the WDC quickly expanded the construction program, and Adak became the largest Aleutian project. The expanded program included two steel-mat runways, associated

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

taxiways and revetments, eight Kodiak T-hangers, two Yakutat portable steel hangars, housing for approximately 35,000 officers and men, a 500-bed hospital, 100 miles of road, marine barge ways, storage facilities for 1,500,000 gallons of gasoline and 2,000 barrels of fuel oil, a water system, and an electric distribution system. To receive



Men prepare for combat, Dutch Harbor.

shipments of construction material and equipment, the troops built two ships docks, and two lighterage docks with adjacent sorting sheds and water supply.<sup>57</sup>

The Adak Project employed more engineer troops than any other Alaska station. The 807th Engineer Aviation Battalion commenced construction under the direction of Resident Engineer Lieutenant Colonel Carlin Whitesell two days after the initial barge landing. Additional construction troops included one engineer general service regiment, two engineer general service battalions, one engineer aviation battalion, and two engineer companies. Colonel Lloyd C. Cross succeeded Colonel Whitesell.

Following the American occupation of Kiska, subsequent plans envisioned establishing a troop staging and supply depot at Adak large enough to support an expeditionary force of 100,000 with supplies for six months.<sup>58</sup> In mid-October of 1943, the Secretary of War authorized a more limited construction program: facilities for 50,000 troops and storage space for three months' supplies. Berthing space for six ships was included with the proviso that these could be expanded if required at a later date. The construction program included a 1,500-foot breakwater, a 2,900-foot retaining wall, three finger docks, one oil dock, more than 40 warehouses, a port operations office building, port personnel housing, Pacific-hut housing for 4,500 men, shops, utilities, and roads.<sup>59</sup>

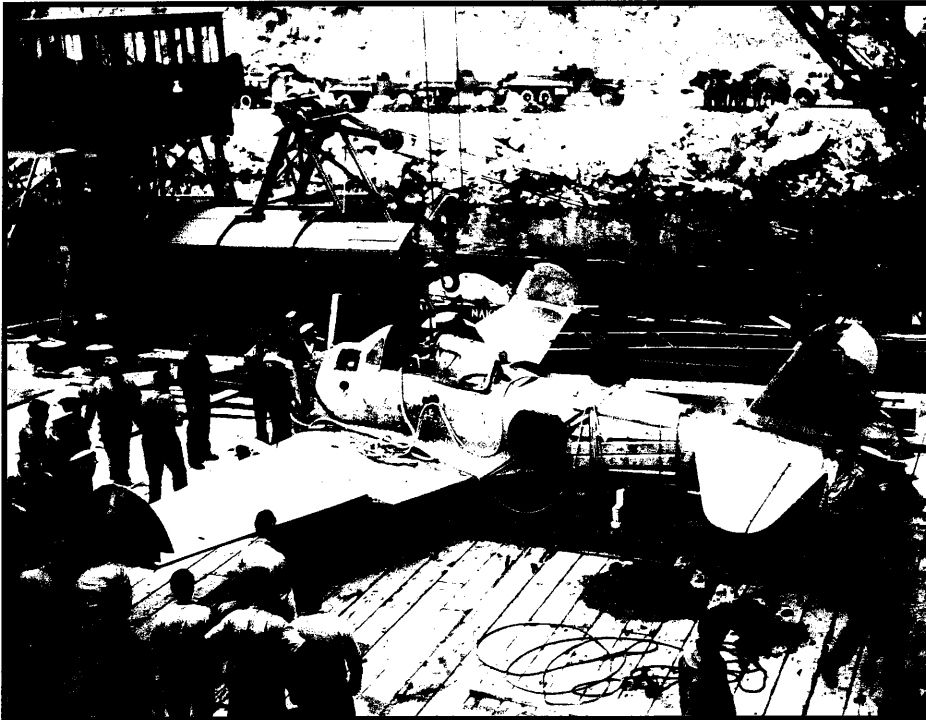
Under the command of Resident Engineer Lieutenant Colonel Leon DeLong, a variety of workers constructed this project. The Guy F. Atkinson Company completed the buildings, utilities, concrete work, and civilian mess. West

Construction Company built the rock work, breakwater, dike, fuel storage, and operation of shops. Puget Sound Bridge and Dredging Company dredged the harbor, and Birch and Sons paved the roads and runways. Three battalions of Engineer troops constructed housing, utilities, and roads.



**IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS**

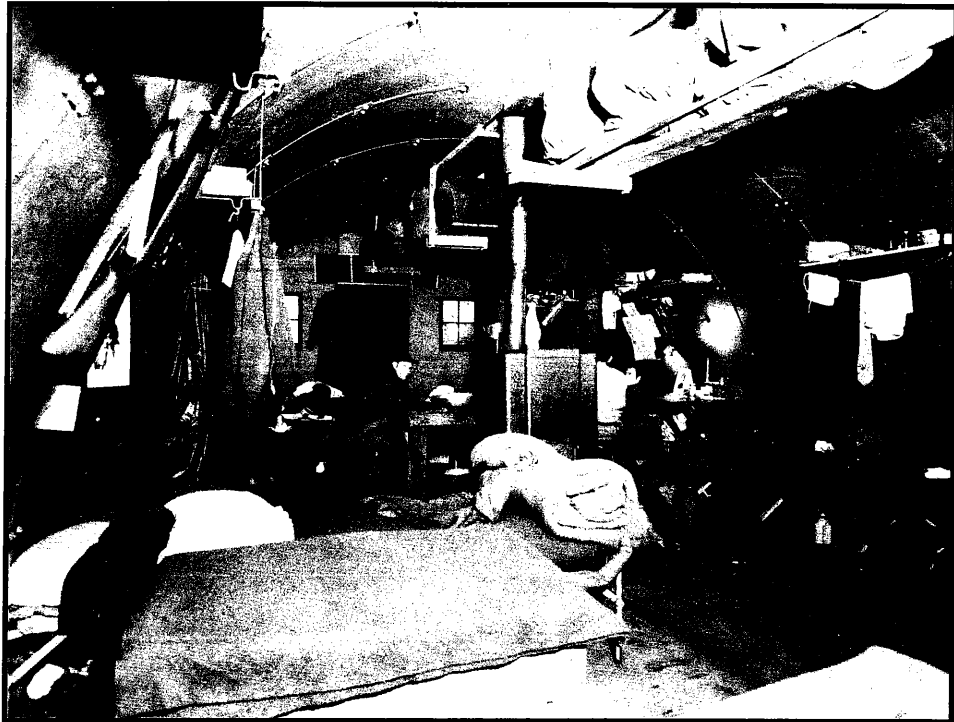
---



**This Japanese plane crashed on Akutan Island, June 4, 1942.**



**Camp at Adak.**



Housing at Adak, 1944.



Airstrip on Adak, late 1942, showing water on the runway.

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

---

##### *Atka*

On August 28, 1942, two days after the "Engineers' Navy" departed from Chernofski Harbor, WDC informed Talley that, in addition to the base at Adak, the engineers were to build a field and garrison at Atka. Talley received instructions to make an immediate reconnaissance of the island to locate a site for the various facilities.

Talley inspected the island by air and found that the location suggested for an airfield was a poor site, for high mountains in the area caused severe air turbulence. He then proceeded to Kuluk Bay on Adak Island. Since the area west of Dutch Harbor was patrolled by Japanese planes, Talley regarded the trip with apprehension. "We jumped each time we saw our own shadow," he recalled.<sup>60</sup>

Kuluk Bay was too rough to make a landing, and they returned to Nazan Bay at Atka where they landed, also in extremely rough water. After riding out the storm for two hours, the men transferred by rubber boat to the *Casco*, which was at anchor in the bay. Again, the high surf prevented Talley and his surveyors from going ashore to make a ground reconnaissance. Talley remained for a formal dinner on the *Casco*: "I was 'impressed' aboard the *Casco* that she was a Naval vessel with all the spit and polish and the fine traditions, rank and everything else that goes with it," he wrote. "One would never dream, while aboard the *Casco* that we were in the midst of the war, and even as we sat at dinner a Jap submarine was moving into position to launch a torpedo into her side. In the discussion at dinner, I stated in my opinion, before we won the war, we would have to get down into the mud and into the dirt and be as hard as the Japs who opposed us, we could not expect to win the war with creases in our trousers."<sup>61</sup>

Shortly after this dinner, however, Talley and the crew of the *Casco* experienced the war firsthand. As soon as he transferred to the *Elliott*, another ship that had anchored in Nazan Bay, a Japanese submarine torpedoed the *Casco*. Later, Talley reflected on his close call. "The torpedo hit the staterooms immediately aft of where I was quartered," he observed, "and had done considerable damage to the room I would have occupied, crushing the bunk where I had been lying."<sup>62</sup>

The WDC planned the base at Atka, located approximately 300 miles southwest of Fort Glenn, for long-range fighter and medium-range bomber operations against the Japanese at Kiska. On September 10, 1942 the War



---

Department authorized construction.<sup>63</sup> The original program included a 3,000-foot landing strip with a steel-mat surface, taxiways and hard standings, a 50-bed hospital, a lighterage dock, access roads, and housing facilities for 950 officers and men.

During the winter of 1942-1943, the "A" Company of the 802d Engineer Aviation Battalion, under the command of Resident Engineer Major Walter A. Faiks, and assisted by a civilian crew, constructed the lighterage dock and the 3,000-foot runway. Following the successful development at Adak, the WDC decided to reduce the Atka garrison to a 32-man caretaker detachment. Further construction included only the completion of the dock facility, one T-hangar, and prefabricated housing for the construction personnel and caretaker unit. The 521st Engineer Company joined the other construction forces at Atka in early July, 1943, to assist in this final construction. Although the terrain at Atka presented no special challenges, crews were continually hampered by insufficient amounts of personnel, tools, and supplies.<sup>64</sup>



A crew inspects a crash site in December, 1942.

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

##### Amchitka

As soon as operations were underway at Adak, Talley met with General Buckner to plan the next move west in the Aleutians. Talley recommended that a base be built at Amchitka, 69 miles and "a single jump" from the Japanese base at Kiska. The proposed airfield would provide an advance base to launch offensive strikes against the islands of Kiska and Attu, and long-range bombing missions against the Japanese Archipelago. Amchitka was also an excellent location for AWS installations to monitor Japanese movements around Kiska. Buckner agreed, and Talley requested permission to go to Amchitka to locate sites for landing operations and an airfield.<sup>65</sup>

When Talley requested transportation from the Navy, however, he was informed that Admiral Theobald saw no need for the reconnaissance and did not have available the two submarines that would be required. Talley was unable to proceed without naval support and the mission was postponed, thus commencing "a struggle with the Navy to obtain their cooperation, or at least their assistance if not cooperation in our move to the west." In October 1942, however, the ADC again authorized the Amchitka Project. Talley planned to go to Adak, Amulet, and Amchitka. He also hoped to fly with a bomber mission over Kiska.<sup>66</sup>

In November, after additional delays owing to bad weather and lack of planes, Talley reported that he was ready to be landed on Amchitka by submarine. He believed that the reconnaissance needed to be made immediately before the Japanese occupied the island.<sup>67</sup> Again, he was unable to make the necessary arrangements. By mid-December Talley had finally secured the plane and equipment necessary for the reconnaissance. "I well knew what we were going up against but it was a job that had to be done," Talley explained, "and, while I might comment on the increased hazards due to postponement, nevertheless that was

##### AMCHITKA

###### Reconnaissance, November 1942

"Drew from the Alaska Scouts equipment for a reconnaissance to the westward. This equipment was to replace previous unsatisfactory equipment, particularly the issue rucksack which is not suitable for carrying the quantity of rations and supplies required for several days' camping, and in which there is inadequate provision for carrying a bedding roll. I also drew a week's rations of dehydrated food consisting of eggs, potatoes, smoked salmon, milk, flour, supplemented by bacon, oatmeal and raisins, also a quart of kerosene.

... The week's supply of rations .. weighed about 12 pounds. The new pack weighed 62 pounds to which was added 27 pounds for sleeping bag and tent and 5 additional pounds of extra ammunition. I drew a Garand rifle and with the motion picture camera, the total equipment weighed 111 pounds, which is about the weight of equipment of the last hike."

... from Talley, "Logs"

---

all water under the bridge and the more quickly the mission was performed, the better." On December 17, two and a half months after receiving his original orders, Talley, Colonel Verbeck, and members of the Alaska Scouts finally departed for Amchitka. Their landing "was covered by a heavy bomber and 4 P-38's," two of which proceeded to Kiska to distract the Japanese.<sup>68</sup>

At Amchitka, Talley experienced another close call. Once safely ashore, the party established camp at a deserted fishing village. Each man had a two-hour watch. On his watch Talley braved "the biting north wind," observing "everything that took place within sight and hearing." As he returned to bed, he noted "the glow of the night lighting at Kiska." Had the Japanese been aware of their presence, Talley mused, "doubtless much would have taken place within sight and hearing."<sup>69</sup> During their reconnaissance the following day, a Japanese plane flew low over the island several times. "Fortunately, the PBY's did not come," Talley reported, "for if they had met their appointment they would have been on the water when the Jap came over, which would have been the end ... We were very thankful they did not come for us and set about to spend the second night on the island." Stranded in a war zone, the party salvaged food from a wrecked American submarine, opening the unlabeled cans of soups, spinach, vienna sausage, and cranberry sauce "like children on Christmas morning, full of anticipation." The PBYs arrived the following day, and the party was flown from the island without incident.<sup>70</sup>



"Chow Line" by Ogden Pleissner.

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

Talley reported that the island's flat terrain was ideal for the location of airfields for all types and sizes of planes. When the ADC began preparations for construction of a base on the island, Talley immediately began a search for boats and barges for a mass movement of men, supplies, and equipment to Amchitka. "We have stripped every port as far east as Excursion Inlet of all available plant," he reported. "All of the equipment in connection with the Amchitka move, with the exception of one tug and one barge was procured by the engineers."<sup>71</sup>



Royal Canadian Airforce personnel preparing for takeoff from Kodiak, 1943.

*Moonlight Maid* reached Constantine Harbor. The *Paula* lost its barge and cargo at sea, and the *Cudahy* went onto the rocks as a result of having fouled her propeller in the tow line. The two power barges became lost and straggled back to Adak after a week at sea.

A second barge convoy, including the *Kliyaham*, the *Moonlight Maid*, the two power barges, and the *Paula* with a barge, regrouped at Adak and proceeded under new orders and firm instructions that all the vessels proceed together. The convoy reached its destination safely, landing at Constantine Harbor on January 15, 1943. Construction of a fighter field in a protected valley adjacent to the harbor was initiated two days later.<sup>72</sup>

The original program called for the construction of a fighter strip, two lighterage docks, access roads, a ships dock, a bomber runway, and housing for a garrison of 8,000 officers and men. Since the Japanese constantly patrolled the area with float planes, it was imperative that the fighter strip be completed

The Amchitka landing was not as successful as the "Engineers' Navy's" landing at Adak. Initially, the planners intended to take empty barges to Constantine Harbor on Amchitka Island, where they would be used for unloading large transports. These plans were altered, however, and the *Paula* with a steel barge, and the *Cudahy* with two barges, two power barges, and the *Moonlight Maid* with a tow embarked from Adak for Amchitka. Only the

immediately. Lighterage docks, needed to facilitate the landing of supplies and equipment, were also a high priority.

The construction program was rapidly expanded to include a bomber runway and a cross runway, both with steel-mat surfacing. It also included Kodiak T-hangars, storage for 1,500,000 gallons of gasoline, a 2,800-foot rock jetty and wharf, ordnance overhaul facilities, and two 500-bed hospital units. The bomber runway, begun in March, was built on muskeg two to eight feet deep. Sand was used for the main fill, which varied in depth from two to twelve feet. During favorable weather, the troops moved an average of 20,000 cubic yards of fill a day to the runway.<sup>73</sup>

Under Resident Engineer Colonel Fisher S. Blinn and assistant Major Frank Brock, several engineer units participated in the construction at Amchitka. The 151st Engineer Combat Regiment, commanded by Colonel Louis H. Foote, constructed the buildings; the 813th Engineer Aviation Battalion, under Colonel Blinn, constructed the airfield; and the 177th Engineer General Service Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John J. Sullivan, built the gasoline storage



“Fighter Strip” by Ogden Pleissner.

#### ***IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS***

---

systems. The engineers imported a large amount of heavy equipment to the island to carry out their work. Using their experience at Adak, they dug drainage ditches and constructed a tide gate to protect the fighter strip, which was located in a tidal marsh. Even after most of their work was finished, and they had shipped much of the heavy equipment to other projects, the Amchitka engineers retained 18 D-8 tractors, 48 Euclid trucks, and 10 power shovels. By November 1943, the authorized strength of the Amchitka force had been increased to 14,500 officers and men.<sup>74</sup>

At the mouth of Constantine Harbor, the West Construction Company built a 2,800-foot jetty, one of the outstanding construction features of the Amchitka Project. West began the job in April 1943, using rock quarried approximately one quarter of a mile from the jetty at Kirilof Point. Although it suffered several washouts, the jetty was completed by the end of July, and West then built a 70-foot by 800-foot wharf, the largest one in the Aleutian Chain. These structures, however, proved unsatisfactory. Heavy seas during the severe Bering Sea storms broke up 300 feet of the jetty and washed the fill from behind the wharf. The jetty was repaired, and additional construction put the facilities back in operation.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to suffering from the inclement Aleutian weather, the engineers at Amchitka came under enemy air attacks. The Japanese mounted six raids on the construction site. The raids left large bomb craters in the runway area and resulted in several casualties. However, on February 16, 1943, when U.S. pursuit planes were able to land on the new runway, enemy aerial activity decreased. When completed, the field was able to accommodate up to 39 planes. On a busy day, there were over 200 takeoffs and landings.<sup>76</sup>

#### ***Attu***

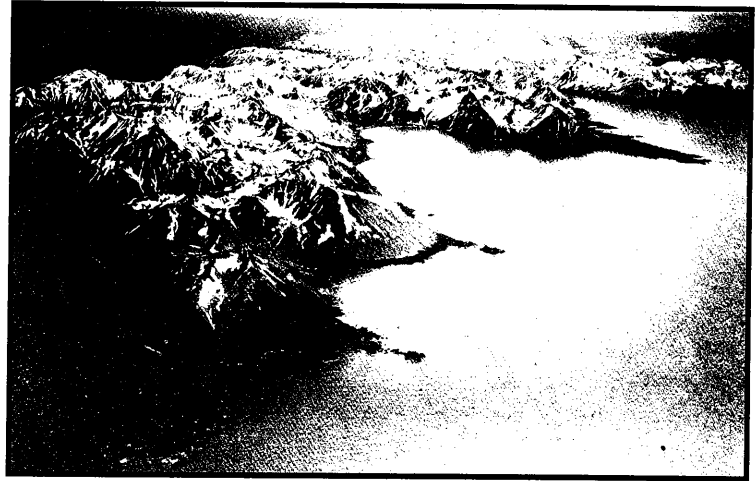
In May 1943, the WDC initiated the American invasion of Attu — the weaker of the Japanese bases in the Aleutians and a critical supply line to the stronger base at Kiska. Following the invading force, Talley and his crew were to inspect the Japanese airfield under construction at Attu and determine its feasibility for completion as an airfield for American planes. Talley was also instructed to inspect the harbors at Attu and make recommendations regarding their suitable development.<sup>77</sup>

---

Aerial view of Attu Island.

“Attu proved to be a tragic chapter in the history of the Army in Alaska.”

---



Talley traveled from Adak to Attu on board the *Casco*, which had been repaired and returned to service.<sup>78</sup> The *Casco* joined the convoy of cruisers, transports, and destroyers that were headed for Attu. The forces were originally scheduled to land at Attu on May 7, but thick fog made it impossible to proceed. On May 11, the weather finally cleared sufficiently to allow the troops to land, unopposed. Soon after, however, the Japanese launched a stubborn resistance to the American advance inland.

The invading force, divided into two landing forces, included seven companies of engineers responsible for the movement of supplies and equipment from the landing beaches. With little time and limited heavy equipment for road construction, the 13th Engineer Combat Battalion improved a streambed for a



Attu village.

road to move the supplies from Massacre Bay inland. Where it was not possible to use the streambed or build a road, cableways were constructed to carry supplies.

At times, the engineers devised dramatic solutions to construction problems. When building a cableway, for example, the engineers found that they needed a tractor at the base of a

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

steep hill — soon christened “Engineer Hill” — to winch supply sleds down the steep slope. The tundra-covered slope was far too steep to drive a tractor across. To solve the problem, the engineers pushed six tractors over the slope, allowing them to tumble to the bottom. They hoped that at least one tractor would remain operable. They were fortunate. All six tractors remained intact, and the engineers were able to complete their cable system across the valley.<sup>79</sup>

Attu proved to be a tragic chapter in the history of the Army in Alaska. The men from the 7th Division were especially ill-prepared for work in the Aleutians. They trained for the African campaign, and had received inadequate gear, such as leather boots that did not protect them from wet weather. “I can only say that that was a result of lack of knowledge on conditions in Alaska,” Talley later reflected. As a result, many men suffered frostbite. “Some of those poor fellows couldn’t walk,” Talley recalled. They were forced to crawl “on their hands and



Captured film shows Japanese soldiers at Attu.

knees through the snow banks.” By the end of the campaign, 600 men at Attu had received purple hearts for enduring gangrene and frozen feet. More than 300 men suffered from self-inflicted wounds, accidents, and “psychiatric breakdowns.” Talley further recalled that “many of our hospital men were bayoneted in their sleeping bags because they couldn’t get out of the bag.” This horror resulted in use of a new design of sleeping bag that allowed quick release.<sup>80</sup>

The American forces slowly overcame the Japanese resistance. On May 30, 1943, the Japanese made a last desperate effort to drive the Americans back to the beaches. After breaking through American lines, they attacked the 50th Engineers. In fierce and costly combat, the Japanese were repulsed.<sup>81</sup> “We heard during the day that quite a battle had taken place that morning at Attu,” Talley reported, “and it was later confirmed that just before daylight, the Japs had broken through in one last mad attack. They overran the Infantry outposts and into the main camps of the 13th and the 50th Engineers. We lost approximately 140 officers and men in this attack. ... I attribute the outstanding performance of



---

the engineers to the fact that they had 5 officers whom I know to be superior and all of whom had extensive Alaskan experience.”<sup>82</sup>

The casualties on Attu attest to the intensity of the fighting there. More than 2,000 Japanese were killed, and 29 prisoners were taken. More than 500 Americans died, while more than 2,000 men suffered from non-combat injuries. Inadequate training accounted for much of the loss at Attu. Lieutenant Colonel Virgil M. Womeldorff, commander of the 50th Engineers, observed that “realistic training in combat tactics, night patrolling, outpost duty and uses of terrain features would have saved many of the casualties ....”<sup>83</sup>

Once the American troops had moved inland, Talley went ashore to begin his investigations. While inspecting the Japanese facilities, he discovered a variety of personal articles, including an opium pipe, silk handkerchiefs, tooth powder, post cards, a song book, and a pair of glasses. In 1978, he turned these articles over to the assistant attache of the Japanese Embassy in Washington.<sup>84</sup>

Talley noted that the Japanese had constructed very few facilities on the island and had placed their airfield at what he considered to be an inferior site at Holtz Bay. Although Talley thought that eventually the Japanese field would be reconstructed, he and the other officers recommended constructing the American main field at Alexai Point.<sup>85</sup> He also selected Massacre Bay as the principal harbor for development.

WDC immediately authorized a project to build an offensive base on the reclaimed island.<sup>86</sup> Resident Engineer Lieutenant Colonel Womeldorff and survey crews of the 50th and 13th Engineers surveyed Attu and planned the work. The original program called for the construction of an airfield and garrison for housing nearly 6,000 officers and men in the ground forces and 2,360 officers and men in the air forces. The proposed facilities included a 400-bed hospital, 2 runways, taxiways and hard standings, a satellite field with one 150-foot by 5,000-foot runway, 6 Kodiak T-hangars, one portable steel combat hangar, and a shop and storage space. Harbor improvements included two ships docks, one barge dock, one LST ramp, one marine bargeway, and extensive fuel storage facilities. The West Construction Company built the road from Massacre Bay to Holtz Bay — “probably the most outstanding piece of road construction in the Aleutians” — and excavated tunnels in the island’s solid rock to provide protection for half of the dry and cold storage.<sup>87</sup>

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

##### ATTU

May 13, 1943

"We entered the draw and on the right banks of a creek we saw a hut about 6 by 6 feet and 6 feet high. The roof was a tarpaulin and one side and one end was of blankets. The back and the other end was the natural hillside which was vertical at that place. This was the engineering shack of a hydrographic survey party. Drawing boards in waterproof cases, high grade drawing paper and miscellaneous drafting supplies were scattered about the area where they had been thrown by the party which preceded us.

... About 10 yards upstream beyond the latrine was a tent which had been the living quarters of this party... Out front were two suitcases in which remained civilian clothing of excellent quality -- other civilian clothing was scattered about. There were two civilian suits of good material and tailoring but of distinctly Japanese cut. There were brightly colored silk shirts, new neckties and silk socks and the outfit was complete even to elastic sleeve holders. In the pocket of one of the coats I found the identification card of the owner and his glasses were lying by... We carefully searched for all writing matter and found lots of letters and post cards. We found an opium pipe, silk handkerchiefs, tooth powder, perfume and even a sachet bag of perfume. One of the post cards showed a bunch of Geisha girls with their kimonos and parasols on the face of which was Japanese writing which I interpreted to mean, 'Oh, boy. Look what you are missing.'

On some of the post cards were pastoral scenes. One was of a woman milking a cow with a small child standing by. Others were of draft horses grazing in a peaceful meadow, of Japanese flower gardens, of a reaper drawn by many horses, a kodak picture of a civilian... There were bags of coal and a string of fish by the kitchen door...

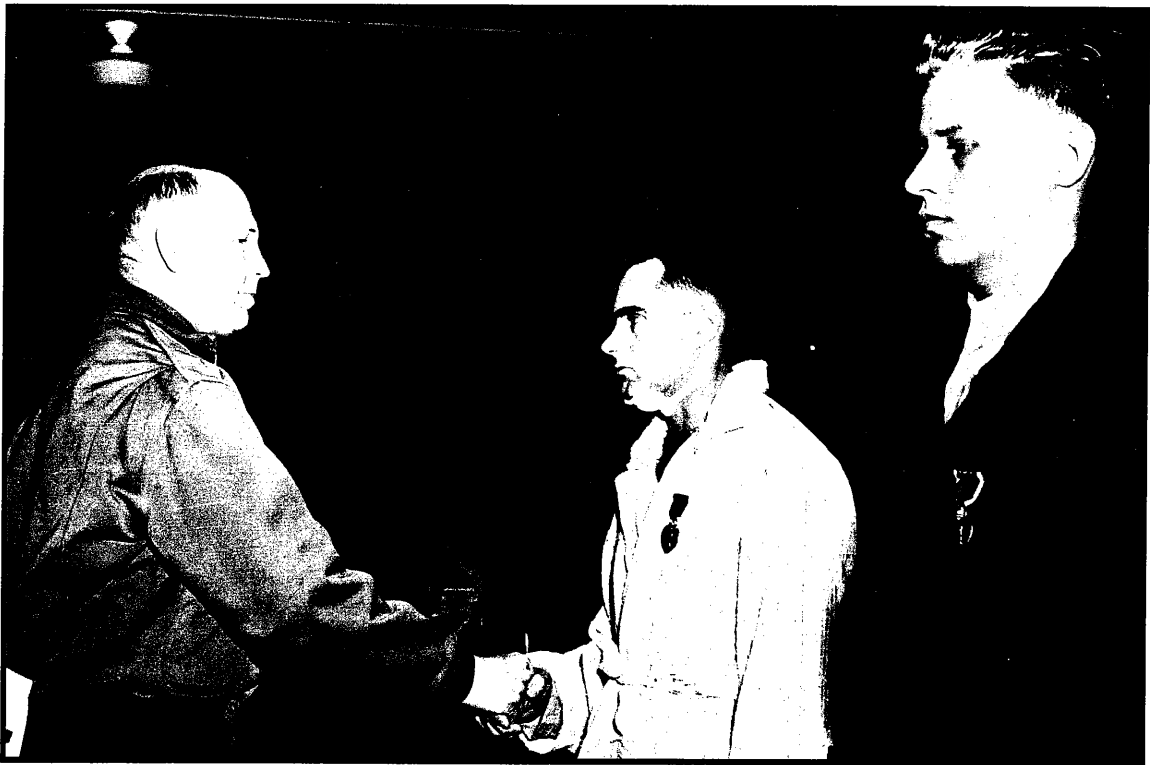
We returned to the scene where I spent a couple of hours sorting the data. I had maps and pamphlets of Burma, of India and of Palestine. Maps of Japan, Kamchatka, the Komanderskis and in the Aleutians, a pamphlet on Kiska, a map of Attu showing the disposition of the Japanese forces, a map of Adak showing the routes across the island, the harbors, and channels, in the bay of Waterfalls, a map of Amchitka, a general map of the Aleutians showing our military dispositions (which when translated into English told us of the location of most of our airfields -- that the field at Adak was also called "Longview" -- that on April 30 we were concentrating our forces in Kuluk Bay, that a submarine had seen our planes going to Amchitka and had counted them, and they believed something was in the air). There was a pamphlet of Atka with a sketch of Atka village, of Nazan Bay and Nazan harbor, a map of Dutch Harbor and Unalaska Island. Charts showing the tactical disposition of a Japanese Task Force at sea and of the maneuvers to protect a vessel that was attacked. Engineering, medical and infantry handbooks... We found reports of previous attacks elsewhere in the world and of military operations of the Japanese, of their attack formations and of the formations of their landing boats. There was a guide book to Thailand. There were diaries, a leather notebook containing the advertisements of motion pictures in Hollywood and of one of the dancing schools there... There was a song book -- the songs in Japanese, and, of course, the civilian's glasses...

It was a gold mine."

... from Talley, "Logs"



**Medical Corps personnel practice transporting a wounded man over the snow, 1944.**



**Brigadier General L.A. Daugherty awarded two men the purple heart at the 183rd Station Hospital. They were wounded during the invasion of Attu.**

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

---

In July 1944, the engineers and the West Construction Company completed the project at Attu, and the base area was renamed Camp Earle in honor of Colonel Edward P. Earle, killed early in the assault on Attu. From Camp Earle, located only 730 miles from the large Japanese base at Paramushiro in the Kurile Islands, the Air Corps could launch offensive strikes directly against the Japanese homeland.<sup>88</sup>

#### *Shemya*

On April 25, 1943, Talley received a radio message from General Buckner ordering him to make a reconnaissance of Voluble — the code name for Shemya — a small, flat, island located just east of Attu. “You have pioneered and constructed the airfields that have made the defense of Alaska possible,” Buckner informed Talley, and “it is now my desire that you personally select the site for the field that will form the spearhead of our attack against Japan.”<sup>89</sup> With these instructions in hand, Talley made plans for landing the 18th Engineers, supplies, and equipment on Shemya Island, as soon as the Japanese were removed from Attu.

Talley completed his reconnaissance for the Attu airfields and harbor by May 27. He then went to Shemya to make a ground investigation of that island. He had flown over Shemya on March 18, and on the basis of that reconnaissance,



400th Base Headquarters, Shemya. Attu is visible in the distance.

plans for construction at Shemya had been drawn up. His ground investigation confirmed his earlier decision on the placement of the Shemya airfields.<sup>90</sup> Talley had no detailed surveys on Shemya to guide him. As he explained, “It was just by guess and by God.” Later, he viewed his accomplishment with modesty.

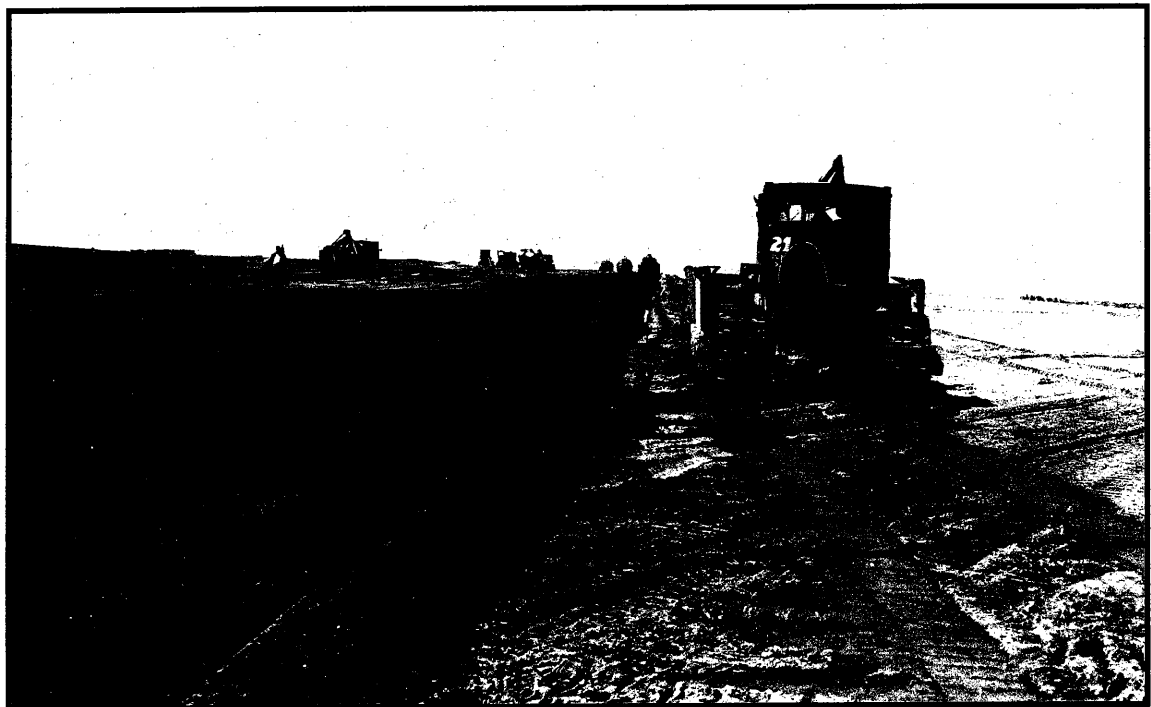
“I picked [the position of the runway] out,” he noted. “But then anyone could have picked it. There’s nothing, no magic about it at all.”

WDC authorized the Shemya Project on June 23, 1943.<sup>91</sup> The program included facilities for nearly 10,000 officers and men in ground and air forces, and a 450-

---

bed hospital. The central feature of the project was a 150-foot by 10,000-foot heavy bomber runway. A runway, taxiways and hard standings, 6 Kodiak T-hangars, two portable steel combat hangars, several steel warehouses and fuel storage facilities were also included in the original plans.<sup>92</sup> Subsequent authorizations provided for paving the runways, taxiways, and hard standings with asphaltic concrete.

Under the command of Resident Engineer Colonel C. M. S. Johnson, a regiment of engineer construction troops and a small detachment of engineer maintenance troops, with some assistance from civilian technical employees, completed the construction work at Shemya. The project was carried out under difficult conditions, as stormy weather and rough water in the harbor hampered the unloading of cargo. Continuous high winds eroded the runways and produced blowing and drifting sand. The crews attempted to control blowing sand by covering the exposed areas with burlap and transplanting native grasses to eroded areas. The Shemya field joined the Attu field as an advance base for offensive strikes against the Kurile Islands.<sup>93</sup>



Runway reinforcement, Shemya.

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

---

##### **Kiska**

The American actions on Attu and Shemya in 1943 isolated the Japanese at Kiska. By August of that year, three months after the loss of Attu, the Japanese were unable to sustain their troops in the Aleutian Islands, and they abandoned Kiska to the Americans. WDC made immediate plans for the construction of an airfield and housing for 15,000 troops at Kiska. The program was subsequently reduced to 400 troops with no Air Corps units. The final authorization included one ships dock, a barge dock, a 225-bed hospital with a staff of 288 officers and men, a runway, and fuel storage facilities. One battalion of engineer troops, under Resident Engineer Colonel William R. Schuler carried out the construction. Work progressed rapidly, and the project was completed by the summer of 1944.<sup>94</sup>



Japanese pilots at Kiska.

The Corps played a significant role in the American-Japanese conflict in the Aleutian Islands. Engineers located sites for airfields, harbors, and bases, sometimes under enemy fire. They built housing for the men, hangars and hard standings for the planes, and docks for the ships that took part in the conflict. To keep supply lines open, the Corps constructed port facilities, located and operated boats and barges, and served as stevedores. Throughout the conflict, the Corps provided consistent, immediate, and dependable support to the Alaska defense effort.



---

While Colonel Benjamin Talley prepared for the assault on Attu in early May 1943, he received orders relieving him of his duties as Officer in Charge of Alaska Construction. When Talley left Alaska for the European Theater in June, the United States had regained Attu and planned to reclaim Kiska. "I can't stay in Alaska and sit out the rest of the war, he explained. "I just can't do it. I want to go on." Talley retired as a brigadier general in April 1956, and eight years later, he returned to Alaska to assist in the Corps' recovery efforts after the earthquake in 1964.<sup>95</sup>

By the end of 1943, the major Corps military projects in Alaska had been completed or were well underway. While the war in the Pacific was far from over, the War Department turned its attention away from defending Alaska toward making offensive strikes against Japan. The urgency with which Talley had driven the resident engineers, railroad officials, CAA personnel, and himself to complete the facilities for the defense of Alaska had abated.

Following Talley's reassignment, the Alaska Area Engineer Office was reorganized as the Construction Division under the Engineer, ADC. In November 1943, the Army reorganized the ADC into the Alaska Department, and the offices of the engineer of the new department and the Officer in Charge of Alaska



"Panorama, Kiska Harbour" by E.J. Hughes.

#### *IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS*

---

Construction were consolidated. For the next three years, the Engineer, Alaska Department, remained responsible for military construction.

World War II made the Far North visible to Americans in the Lower 48. "We have bought Alaska twice," noted one observer in 1943, "first in dollars, now in blood."<sup>96</sup> The Japanese bombing of Dutch Harbor and their occupation of Kiska and Attu confirmed Alaska's strategic location. As the war came to a close, the nation's planners determined to retain a military presence in Alaska. The military facilities that had been so rapidly constructed during the war would be maintained, replaced, or expanded. Alaska would not again be left unprepared for any military threat.

Between 1939 and 1946, the Corps not only built the military structures that helped defend Alaska but also constructed facilities that provided support for Alaska's future development. These included the tunnel and terminal at Whittier; improvements at the Port of Anchorage and the Port of Seward; the Alaska Highway; and improvements at numerous airfields around the Territory.

The military presence in Alaska generated an increase in the overall Alaska population, and spurred economic development. The vast expansion in numbers of military personnel and contractor employees created a large market for a variety of services.<sup>97</sup> Thousands of civilians followed the military to Alaska, and in turn began to invest in developing the Territory's resources. Because the enduring military establishment required the continued presence of the Corps, the War Department created a new Engineer District in Alaska in 1946. And as the Alaska population grew and relations between the United States and Russia cooled, the Corps' work in Alaska during World War II proved to be only an intimation of the military and civil projects that the engineers would be called upon to undertake during the 1950s and 1960s.





**"Rest in Peace" by William F. Draper.**

**IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS**

---

**PERSONALITIES**



**General Simon Bolivar Buckner.**



**Lt. Col. Jack Chennault, right, congratulates Lt. Kenneth Ambrose, left, following an aerial victory over two "Mavis" flying Scouts, August 4, 1942.**



ENGINEERS

A T T U 1945



CAPT. E. F. BURDIN



MAJ. ARNOLD MAZZUCCO



CAPT. JOHN W. CARR



CWO JERRY SPITZER



LT. COL. IVAN M. CUNNINGHAM



LT. RALPH E. SULLIVAN JR.



#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

---



The 11th Fighter Squadron painted a tiger's head on the noses of their P-40Es.

"... (Claire) Chenault's son was there, Lt. John Chenault. He had his planes made like tigers (while) his father out in China had them looking like sharks."

... William F. Draper, combat artist, quoted in *Drawing the Lines of Battle: Military Art of World War II Alaska*, (Anchorage: Anchorage Museum of Art and History, 1989), p. 26.

### AWAY FROM THE FIGHTING



**American pilots between missions in the Aleutian Islands.**



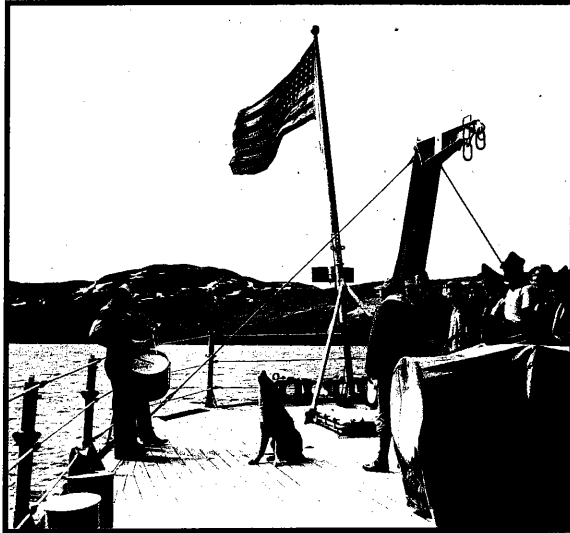
*IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS*

---



**Between missions in the Aleutians.**





A dog accompanied this drum player aboard the gunboat *Charleston*.



"Flipper," the pet seal adopted at Shemya.



Lonely men stationed at Shemya fashioned this sign.



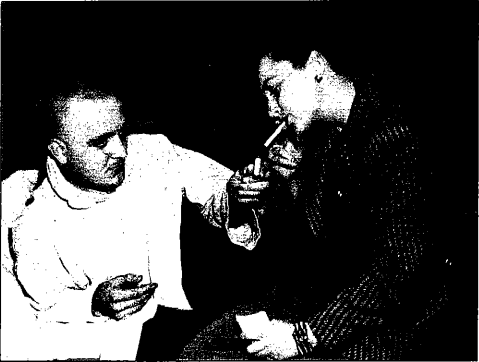
An American soldier fishing at a trout stream on Kiska.

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS



### HOLLYWOOD COMES TO THE ALEUTIANS

Olivia de Havilland, acclaimed for her performances in films such as *Gone With the Wind* (1939), visited the Aleutian Islands during World War II to boost the morale of the troops. Here she arrives at Shemya. The actress visited wounded men in the hospital during her visit.



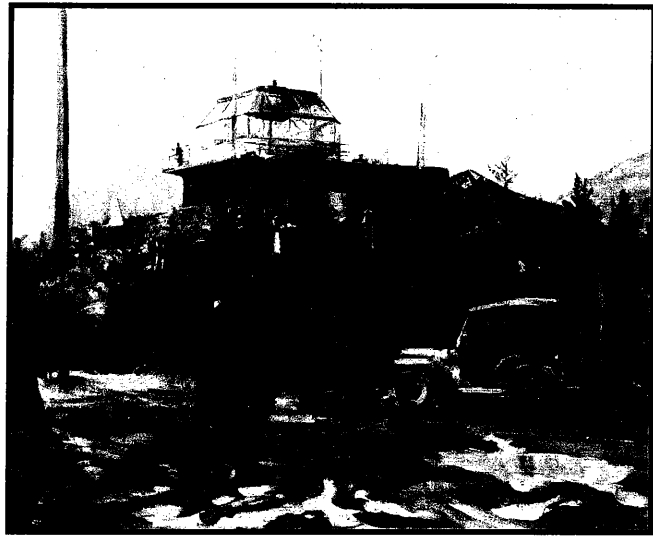


---

## WORLD WAR II ARTISTS

The use of photography to document the activities of soldiers became popular during the Civil War. In World War II, the Chief of Engineers assembled artists to record military campaigns in Alaska. In 1942, Navy Lieutenant William F. Draper landed in the Aleutians, where he painted scenes of Kodiak, Dutch Harbor, Umnak, Adak, and Amchitka. Similarly, Captain Ogden Pleissner produced hundreds of sketches and watercolors of the events he witnessed in the Aleutians. The Canadian government also sent artists, including Lieutenant Edward John Hughes, posted to Kiska.

... Anchorage Museum of History and Art, *Drawing the Lines of Battle: Military Art of the World War II in Alaska*, pp. 10-16.



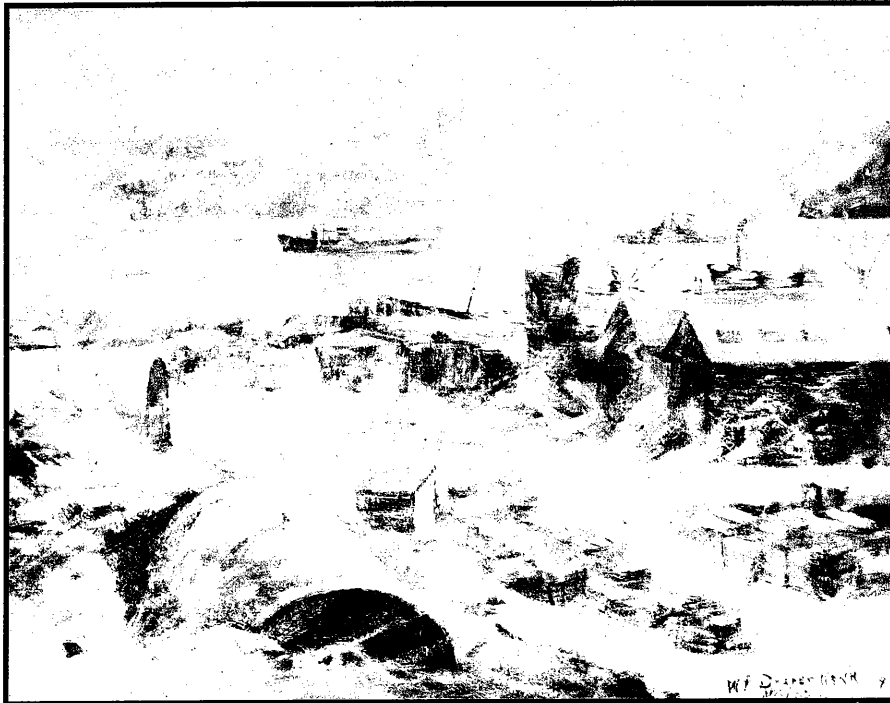
“Nerve Center – Aleutian Base” by William F. Draper.



“Crash Landing” by Ogden Pleissner.

#### IV. THE OFFENSIVE IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

---



“Blizzard” by William F. Draper.

“The williwaws were terrible. I was out sketching one day and my canvas suddenly took off and blew away about a hundred yards. I finally got it; it wasn’t ripped. It was covered with sand and was a mess. The paint was all smeared, but I found that if I smeared more paint on it it really got the feeling of the williwaw and the storm. It turned out to be one of the best paintings of the storm that I’ve done in the Aleutians.”

“... The landing at Amchitka was...very amazing. I was trying to paint – I was on the *Arthur Middleton* ... There were a lot of troops going to land on Amchitka. We didn’t know if there were any Japs there or not. We arrived in time for D-day, the boats started going in, but there was a terrible storm. My God, a destroyer broke apart to my right on these rocks – it broke in half. All these men were overboard. This was January 12th in the Bering Sea. Well, they didn’t last five minutes. They died. And then our landing boats broke up on the beach. They threw over some wood from the *Arthur Middleton* to float ashore, and floated out to sea.”

“The *Arthur Middleton* went aground so we all had to abandon ship, except for those...who were in charge of the guns because we were stuck on the ground. All the motors were flooded so we couldn’t even unload. Finally they brought up a sub-chaser to get us in power. We all had to climb down these cargo nets to get in the boats to go ashore. I was on the deck with (my) paint box, and this captain in the Army came up and said, ‘What’s that you’re carrying?’ and I said ‘It’s a paint box. I’m painting for the historical record.’ He said ‘Oh my God, what next?’ and went down the decks...tearing at his hair.”

... William F. Draper quoted in Anchorage Museum of History and Art, *Drawing the Lines of Battle: Military Art of the World War II in Alaska*, pp. 26, 27.