



Remembering the “Forgotten War”

The Joint Operations Flaws of the Aleutian Campaign

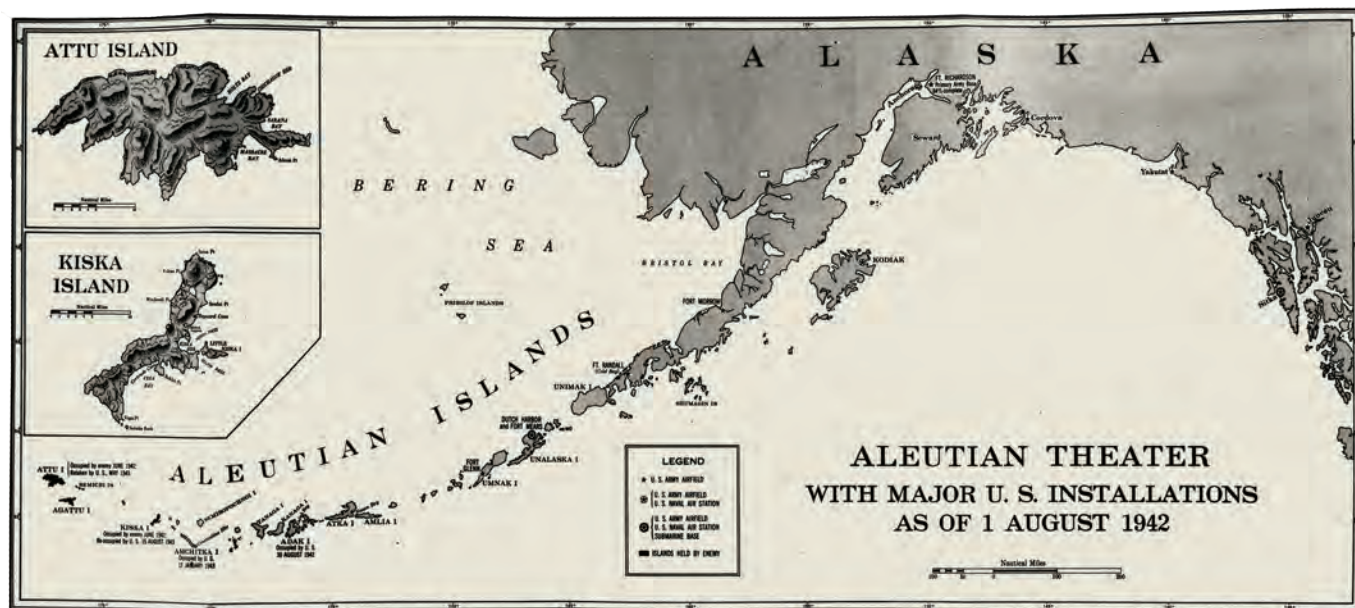
By Jessica D. Pisano

The lessons that can be gleaned from the Aleutian campaign of 1942–1943 may seem outdated, but they remain significant in today’s global environment. The 2019 Depart-

ment of Defense Arctic Strategy underscores the importance of deterring and defeating Great Power aggression in the Arctic, specifically addressing challenges in understanding the operational environment, joint training proficiency, lack of a robust logistics infrastructure, and communications and technology complexity, all of which are further compli-

cated by the Arctic’s rapidly changing physical environment.¹ In the past 2 years, the Army, Navy, and Air Force have all released their own Service-specific Arctic strategies that echo the importance of the Arctic. Diminishing sea ice is making Arctic waters more accessible and navigable, increasing both commercial traffic and military pres-

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U.S. installations in Aleutian Theater as of August 1, 1942, prepared for U.S. Navy Office of Naval Intelligence Combat Narrative Report (U.S. Navy)

ence.² Furthermore, thawing permafrost is destabilizing the already inadequate infrastructure and complicating land accessibility in the Arctic region.

In addition to the Arctic's transforming physical environment, Great Power competitors are asserting their dominance in the region. Russia has focused on increasing its power projection capabilities by modernizing Cold War-era military facilities and building new infrastructure there. With the advent of the Belt and Road Initiative, China is extending its economic reach and increasing its fleet of icebreaking vessels, posturing itself as a major player in the region. The United States will be woefully unprepared to deter and defeat these emerging threats in the Arctic if it does not invest in addressing the challenges and inadequacies depicted in the 2019 Department of Defense Arctic Strategy.

The Air Force's Arctic strategy fittingly states, "The environment is often cited as the greatest adversary to Arctic operations."³ Communications capabilities, the use of global positioning systems, and domain awareness are complicated in the Arctic due to the atmospheric interference that occurs above 65° north latitude and the harsh weather conditions, which include repeated freezing and thawing cycles in

addition to temperatures below minus 60° Fahrenheit.⁴ Additionally, the ability of U.S. forces to survive and operate in these extreme temperatures requires specialized training, increased and specialized infrastructure, and a robust logistics network that does not exist today. Although the United States may have made some progress in overcoming some of the flaws exposed in the Aleutian campaign almost 80 years ago, the recently released Arctic strategies make clear that, although joint planners may acknowledge the challenges in the Arctic, the United States still has a long way to go in overcoming these obstacles and being prepared to deter and defeat adversaries in the Arctic battlespace.

Background

The Aleutians theater of the Pacific war might well be called the Theater of Military Frustration. . . . Sailors, soldiers and aviators alike regarded the assignment to this region of almost perpetual mist and snow as little better than penal servitude.

—Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. 7, Aleutians, Gilberts, and Marshalls: June 1942–April 1944*

Set in arguably the most desolate location in the North Pacific, the Aleutians are a practically uninhabited volcanic island chain shrouded in nearly year-round dense fog and characterized by jagged mountains and meager vegetation. Extending 1,000 miles from the Alaskan mainland, the island of Attu on the chain's westernmost point is less than 700 miles from Japan's Kurile Islands and only 6 miles from Siberia. The isolated terrain and seemingly demonic weather of the Aleutians still give pause to modern pilots and sailors.

Almost a half million members of the U.S. military were stationed in the North Pacific during World War II—five times the Japanese force strength.⁵ At the height of the campaign, U.S. forces reached 400,000, more than five times the total Alaskan population of 75,000.⁶

The Japanese aerial attack on Dutch Harbor on June 3, 1942, signified the official start of the Aleutian campaign. Japanese strategy included four objectives in the Aleutians: preventing military collaboration between the United States and the Soviet Union, which had not yet entered the war; interdicting the Lend-Lease supply route; protecting the northern flank of the Japanese homeland from U.S. attack, since the Japanese were still convinced the Doolittle Raid had

launched from the Aleutians; and occupying strategic points along the chain of islands that the enemy could use to launch operations in the North Pacific to threaten either the United States or the Soviet Union.⁷

Initially, the Japanese objective of the Dutch Harbor attack, which was scheduled to begin 1 day prior to the Battle of Midway, was a diversionary tactic to mask the attack on the Midway Islands and to draw the U.S. fleet out of Hawaii. After their utter defeat in the Battle of Midway, however, the Japanese looked to the Aleutians to salvage a victory, utilizing successful operations there as a propaganda initiative to boost morale and cloak the Midway mess.⁸ Before the sun crested the horizon on June 7, the Japanese forces, undetected and unopposed, invaded and occupied the islands of Kiska and Attu.⁹

The Allied response to the invasion of the Aleutians began on June 11 with an aerial bombardment against Attu and Kiska that did not cease until the conclusion of the campaign on August 24, 1943.¹⁰ U.S. strategic objectives in the Aleutian campaign included evicting the Japanese from U.S. soil, protecting sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for the Lend-Lease route with the Soviet Union, and safeguarding the U.S. homeland by preventing the Japanese from using the Aleutians as a base of operations and staging ground.¹¹ The United States had its own operational objectives in the Aleutians of building infrastructure by establishing bases and airfields along the island chain.¹²

The Battle of the Komandorski Islands in March 1943 was the turning point in the Aleutian campaign as the U.S. naval blockade effectively severed the Japanese SLOCs for resupply to Kiska and Attu for the remainder of the campaign. Although U.S. naval forces were severely outnumbered by the Japanese imperial fleet, Japanese forces feared the intervention of U.S. bombers and retreated when they held the obvious advantage. The Battle of the Komandorski Islands, “the longest and last classic daylight surface battle in naval history,” proved to be the culminating point for

the Japanese, effectively isolating their Aleutian garrisons.¹³

The recapture of Attu, named Operation *Landcrab*, commenced on May 11, 1943. Ultimately, 15,000 U.S. troops needed almost 3 weeks, instead of the projected 3 days, to defeat a force of fewer than 3,000 Japanese, and scores of lives were lost due to profuse failures in joint operations.¹⁴ The invasion of Attu was the U.S. infantry’s first amphibious island assault landing and proved to be the second most costly battle in the Pacific theater, exceeded only by Iwo Jima, in proportion to the number of troops engaged.¹⁵

Although “the oddest battle of the Aleutian campaign,” the mysterious Battle of the Pips, offered no tactical victory to the campaign, the expenditure of fuel and ammunition required the U.S. fleet to abandon its station and return east for resupply, enabling the Japanese evacuation force to reach Kiska undetected.¹⁶ The Battle of the Pips refers to an incident that occurred on the night of July 27, 1943, when a series of unknown radar contacts, or “pips,” was picked up by U.S. naval forces west of the island of Kiska. Believing it was the imperial navy, U.S. forces opened fire, but hits were never confirmed, and the Navy could not determine what had been on the radar. According to author Brian Garfield, “Japan had no known surface ships in those waters. [Its] evacuation fleet was hundreds of miles away to the south.”¹⁷ Garfield also surmises, based on analysis by modern Aleutian fishing boat captains, that the pips were flocks of short-tailed shearwaters, a species of migratory albatross that pass through the Aleutians every July. These birds fly close together in huge flocks, which would have appeared as a single mass on radar screens of the time period. Furthermore, the flocks zigzag when searching for food, not unlike the path of a ship under fire.¹⁸

Operation *Cottage*, the Allied invasion of Kiska that comprised 34,400 U.S. and Canadian troops and nearly 100 ships, occurred on August 15.¹⁹ Although some joint lessons in supplies and equipment learned in Operation *Landcrab* were implemented for Operation *Cottage*, other

aspects of joint training and intelligence collection were largely ignored by planners. The result was the Allied invasion of an island that the Japanese had deserted almost 3 weeks prior. Despite the absence of an opposing force, the Allies still sustained 306 casualties during the invasion. Seventeen Americans and 4 Canadians died, and a further 50 personnel were wounded by friendly fire or Japanese booby traps. Trench foot claimed 130 troops, and 71 Sailors were killed and 34 injured when the destroyer USS *Abner Read* struck a Japanese mine off the coast of Kiska.²⁰ By August 24, Kiska was declared devoid of Japanese invaders, and after 439 days, the Aleutian campaign officially ended.

Command and Control Fiasco

Buckner and Theobald would never achieve anything like mutual cooperation. . . . Their bristling rivalry became such a vital issue that it all but superseded the conflict between American and Japanese forces in the Aleutians.

—Brian Garfield

The first lesson from the Aleutian campaign relevant to current joint operations is the absolute requirement to obtain unity of command and ensure authorities are transparent and explicit in any joint operation. The dual chain of command structure in the Aleutian campaign resulted in Rear Admiral Robert Theobald in command of all air and naval forces, reporting directly to Admiral Chester Nimitz in Hawaii, and Major General Simon Buckner retaining authority over ground forces under the immediate supervision of Lieutenant General John DeWitt, headquartered in San Francisco.²¹ Under this structure, senior leaders were far removed from the operational theater, making judgments affecting a campaign about which they were ignorant, effectively removing the decisionmaking authority from those in theater with the operational expertise. Because there was no common commander in either chain of command, any differences that could

not be resolved by Nimitz and DeWitt were transferred to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington for dispute resolution.²² Furthermore, while Buckner's and Theobald's headquarters were in Alaska, neither was physically stationed in the Aleutian Islands, nor were they collocated, which caused further issues for coordinating joint operations.

To further complicate matters, the command roles of Theobald and Buckner were weakly delineated as command

through "mutual cooperation."²³ Unfortunately, mutual cooperation never existed. Instead, the personal aversion between Buckner and Theobald manifested in persistent inter-Service bickering, poor command and control, conflicting orders, absent communications, and lack of unity of effort, ultimately costing time, resources, and American lives.²⁴

As codified in joint doctrine, "Unity of command must be maintained through an unambiguous chain of

command, well-defined command relationships, and clear delineation of responsibilities and authorities."²⁵ The Aleutian campaign offers a shining example of flawed operational leadership in which unified command authority was doomed from the outset due to the convoluted operational command structure in the North Pacific. Failed command and control in the Aleutians illustrates the importance of achieving unity of command as well as the



Soldiers hurl mortar shells over ridge onto Japanese position, Attu Island, Aleutian Islands, June 4, 1943 (U.S. Navy/Library of Congress)

influence of personalities and building relationships on leadership and joint operations. Joint force commanders must take every opportunity to foster cooperation with partner nations and strive for unity of effort for operations. Being able to focus resources on mutual goals augments the strategic and operational effects of the forces.

Deplorable Preparation for an Unknown Harsh Operating Environment

The forces of nature in the Aleutians could always call the turns. No general or admiral was as powerful as the weather. . . . Men would expend most of their bravery and strength in search, not in battle. Everyone had to look for everyone else, and no one was ever easy to find.

—Brian Garfield

Allied forces were sorely unprepared for the ruthless climate and unique topography of the “mysterious Aleutians,” distinguished by craggy mountains, scant vegetation, stark terrain, glacial temperatures, unexpected violent winds called williwaws, and “icy rain that fell sideways and sometimes upside-down.”²⁶ A williwaw is a sudden vicious squall of extremely cold, dense air that occurs in near-polar latitudes descending from a mountainous coast toward the sea, accelerated by the force of gravity. In the Aleutian region, winds have been known to hit hurricane forces of over 140 miles per hour and to capsize or destroy vessels on reefs. The harsh conditions in the North Pacific theater caused overwhelming numbers of casualties that U.S. military leaders could have mitigated with adequate planning and understanding of the operational environment (OE). Savage williwaws smashed aircraft into mountains, and substantial underground mineral deposits repelled magnetic compasses, causing even experienced pilots to become utterly lost with empty fuel tanks.²⁷ Maneuvering forces presented colossal challenges for both equipment and personnel. This was vividly

portrayed when the Army’s 7th Infantry Division was employed for Operation *Landcrab* with mechanized vehicles that could not be moved through the muskeg, a bog consisting of a soupy mixture of water, decaying vegetation, and dark volcanic ash. This quicksand-like substance caused many casualties during the Aleutians campaign due to trench foot and exposure. It also severely retarded the movement of personnel, vehicles, and practically anything else that tried to cross it, thus relegating the 7th Infantry Division’s mechanized vehicles to permanent fixtures along the barren backdrop of Attu.

As Garfield aptly noted in his book, “Attu . . . was no place for human beings.”²⁸ The inappropriate equipment and ignorance of the weather and terrain by leadership not only extended the invasion of Attu to almost 3 weeks but also resulted in staggering casualties. Of the 3,829 casualties suffered during Operation *Landcrab*, only 1,697 were from combat. The remaining 2,132 casualties resulted from exposure, disease, accidents, and drownings, with the majority comprising severe cold injuries including trench foot, frostbite, and gangrene.²⁹ The malevolent weather also seized its share of aircraft, leaving them battered in the desolate terrain and waters of the North Pacific. During the Aleutian campaign, the Allied air services lost 471 aircraft, but only 56 were attributable to combat. The remaining losses were due to weather, mechanical failures, and fatigue. In fact, six aircraft were lost to weather for every one lost in combat, while the remainder of the aircraft loss rates in the Pacific theater were three noncombat to one combat.³⁰ The cause of some losses will forever remain unknown because the pilots simply did not return.³¹

In contrast to the Allies, the imperial forces were suitably prepared for the OE, having spent a significant amount of time and resources on reconnaissance excursions in the Aleutians.³² Whereas the U.S. forces were ignorant of the austere environment, the Japanese gained a tactical advantage by using the terrain and weather as a force multiplier, including using the leaden fog, which caused

“visibility in the Aleutians [to be] measured not in miles, but in feet,” to mask their naval movements.³³ The competence of the Japanese in the OE was evidenced by the fact that there were fewer Japanese losses from the 18-month U.S. aerial bombing campaign on Kiska than there were coalition losses due to fratricide in Operation *Cottage*. Twenty-five U.S. and Canadian soldiers were killed invading the uninhabited island of Kiska, while only 15 Japanese soldiers perished.³⁴

The consequences, both positive and negative, underscore the critical importance that joint officers have a thorough understanding of their OE. As joint doctrine reminds us, “Understanding the operational environment is fundamental to joint operations.”³⁵ It is still probable in modern joint operations that the United States and our partners will deploy to austere or underdeveloped locations for missions across the range of military operations. If leaders are not aware of the environmental hazards and geographic challenges their forces might face and subsequently are unprepared for those threats, they assume the unnecessary risk of their troops sustaining preventable casualties due to their ignorance.

Bungled Synchronization of Forces

No single campaign plan was ever made or executed.

—Margaret M. Hodas-Walsh

To effectively generate combat power and enhance the adaptability of the force, commanders must ensure an adequate integration of all joint force capabilities and harmonize the expertise of each component.³⁶ No single commander’s intent or mission statement was ever developed for the Aleutian campaign; thus, there was no singular combined list of priorities to focus the employment of operations to achieve maximum advantage.³⁷ In the absence of unifying guidance, the North Pacific theater suffered from a truly uncoordinated air campaign.

The lack of synchronization of forces was evident in the Battle of the Komandorski Islands. U.S. naval forces focused on exploiting a vulnerable Japanese center of gravity, the long SLOCs, by establishing a blockade to prevent the resupply of the imperial forces. Unfortunately, Army Air Force leadership had its own conflicting priority of proving “the effectiveness of attrition bombardment as a strategic weapon,” with the 11th Air Force waging its own independent bombing operation on the enemy at Kiska.³⁸ As a result, the bombers were loaded with antipersonnel ordnance for their attack on Kiska, not the armor-piercing bombs they would need to engage the Japanese fleet. This ordnance configuration change caused the 11th Air Force to miss the Battle of the Komandorski Islands, leaving the U.S. fleet as the lone defenders against a much larger Japanese force.³⁹ Fortunately, the battle resulted in a victory for the Allies, but it could have been much more catastrophic for the Japanese if the bombers had arrived in time to bolster the Allied naval forces. If synchronization of naval and air assets had occurred, a catastrophic blow could have been dealt to the Japanese and the Battle of the Komandorski Islands could have had decisive strategic implications, instead of being a mere operational victory for the Allied force.⁴⁰

The Forgotten War was drawn out much longer than it should have been, with coalition casualties in numbers disproportionate to the number of adversaries. These casualties could have been mitigated with proper synchronization. The Aleutian campaign offers myriad other examples of ineffective coordination and nonexistent synchronization of forces, including several instances of strafing of ground forces by friendly aircraft during the invasion of Attu.⁴¹ These failures illustrate the importance of current joint doctrine’s emphasis on establishing joint force land, maritime, and air component commanders. Not integrating and synchronizing forces to mass combat power in today’s resource-constrained environment with reduced force manning levels is not a prudent option. Commanders must fully utilize the

collective strength of all Service components to exponentially increase strategic, operational, and tactical effects.

Flawed and Neglected Intelligence

Most of darkest Africa has been charted more accurately [than the Aleutians]. Much of Alaska, and all the Aleutian Islands, had never been mapped in any detail.

—Brian Garfield

Accurate and timely intelligence is fundamental to identify capabilities, centers of gravity, and the possible courses of action of both Allied forces and their adversaries.⁴² The information provided by intelligence helps commanders visualize the preparation of the battlespace to plan and execute effective joint operations. Unfortunately, Allied forces in the Aleutian campaign suffered adverse complications from both flawed operational intelligence as well as accurate intelligence that was neglected by leadership. Barely any written information existed on this enigmatic chain of islands, and the sole source of gathering new intelligence was aerial reconnaissance, which the brutal Aleutian weather consistently thwarted.

The Allies vastly underestimated the Japanese force strength and defenses on Attu due to the lack of accurate intelligence information. Allied intelligence originally estimated the enemy force strength on Attu at 500, then later revised that number to 1,600. The actual force strength on Attu was in excess of 2,600 Japanese troops with robust defensive fortification.⁴³ The miscalculation and the lack of an Allied contingency plan caused the conflict to extend well beyond the 3 days predicted. A consequential leak warned Japanese leadership about the planned invasion of Attu and allowed them ample time to prepare and reinforce their defenses before the Allied amphibious landings.⁴⁴ Outdated maps of Attu used by U.S. ground troops during the assault and unfamiliarity with the terrain

severely limited their effectiveness and left them vulnerable to enemy forces.⁴⁵

While many lessons were learned and heeded by operational commanders after the invasion to retake Attu, lessons in intelligence were disregarded in the planning of Operation *Cottage*, which resulted in one of the largest embarrassments of World War II. Allied leadership planned an amphibious assault with 34,000 coalition troops and 100 ships to surprise the Japanese garrisons on Kiska. However, intelligence reports showed the possibility that the enemy forces had already evacuated the island, and a scout mission was proposed to validate the intelligence. In the rare case that the intelligence staff recognized its shortcomings or identified inconsistencies in its information, it recommended reconnaissance missions to the commander to validate the information. The arrogance of Admiral Thomas Kinkaid, Theobald’s successor, led to his refusal to send a reconnaissance unit ashore to verify the intelligence reports. He instead ordered the full-scale invasion to proceed as planned.⁴⁶

As author George MacGarrigle noted regarding Operation *Cottage*, “Surprise was achieved, but it was not the Japanese who were surprised.”⁴⁷ The 5,183 Japanese troops had evacuated Kiska undetected on July 28, almost 3 weeks prior to the operation. Consequently, much to the embarrassment of U.S. senior leaders, the substantial coalition force invaded an uninhabited island.⁴⁸

Without valid and timely intelligence, commanders cannot thoroughly or accurately plan and execute joint operations. Joint leaders must emphasize the importance of a thorough intelligence preparation of the battlespace and ensure that intelligence staff provides continual assessments to assist the commander in timely decisionmaking. Joint commanders do not want to suffer the same predicament as the operational leaders in the Aleutian campaign, where failures in operational intelligence and neglected intelligence invalidated operations plans, resulted in weak intelligence preparation of the battlespace, and, in the case of Attu, had devastating effects for Allied forces.



Advance reconnaissance patrol cautiously approaches mouth of tunnel dug by Japanese on Lazy Creek near Gertrude Cove, Kiska Island, Aleutian Islands, August 15, 1943 (U.S. Army/George Meyers/Naval History and Heritage Command)

Inadequate Joint Training

Our people have got to be trained how to fly up there. How to start an engine when it's 40 degrees below zero. How to keep the oil from congealing before you get it into the engine. What happens to a metal plane when you bring it from minus-40 degrees and suddenly put it in a warm hangar. We have every reason to believe the rivets will just fall out.

—Henry “Hap” Arnold

A lack of sufficient and comprehensive joint training in the North Pacific theater caused more than its share of casualties throughout the Aleutian

campaign. Training was pitiful and unrealistic when it was conducted at all, and it usually failed to account for the unique conditions in the Aleutians. Allied forces were inexperienced and woefully unprepared for the dangers and conditions they faced during the invasion of Attu, which caused rampant fear and confusion.⁴⁹

The 7th Infantry Division, based out of California, was trained in mechanized desert operations to support war efforts in North Africa. However, in January 1943, this unit was chosen to augment the undermanned operations in the Aleutians, leaving its members a mere 90 days to plan and retrain for this

completely different theater in addition to now preparing to execute amphibious operations.⁵⁰ This amphibious assault was “only the third amphibious operation of the Second World War, and the first one in the history of the U.S. Infantry.”⁵¹ Unfortunately, the faulty training that the 7th Infantry Division received prepared it for neither the battle ahead nor the terrain. Not only was the training conducted in sunny California, the furthest possible environmental condition from the Aleutians, but most of the training was also simulated, leaving forces at a crippling disadvantage. Additionally, the location to which the 7th Infantry Division was being deployed

Soldiers load shell into small mortar on Chicagof Ridge overlooking Chicagof Harbor, Attu Island, Aleutian Islands, May 11, 1943, during battle with last Japanese stronghold on Attu Island (U.S. Navy/Library of Congress/Naval History and Heritage Command)





was kept a secret from all but a few members of senior leadership. Troops were given training and information for a tropical climate and were outfitted with warm-weather uniforms, preparing them physically and mentally for a combat environment that they never saw. Equipment and clothing, in insufficient amounts, were loaded in sealed crates onto the transport ships that took the 7th Infantry Division to war. Information on their actual assigned location was not disclosed to the troops until they were en route to the Aleutians; they set out for war convinced they were heading to the Solomon Islands.⁵²

Further inhibiting the readiness of the 7th Infantry Division, its joint training was not really “joint” because the Army Air Forces were already in theater prosecuting air operations against the Japanese garrisons and therefore did not participate in the training.⁵³ This joint training deficiency and lack of advance coordination resulted in diminished effectiveness of close air support, and in some cases, strafing of Allied forces by 11th Air Force aircraft.⁵⁴ In the end, this trained desert warfare mechanized tank unit proved deplorably ineffective as an Arctic amphibious assault force on Attu.⁵⁵

Ineffective training was not limited to the Army force. The naval and air forces experienced their own deficiencies in this arena. In several instances, U.S. Navy ships and bombers shot at each other due to their inability to identify friendly and enemy assets. Moreover, there were even several occasions throughout the campaign when “pilots went back to base to find someone who could [distinguish] friendly ships from enemy ones.”⁵⁶

Realistic joint training needs to be a cardinal principle for joint commanders. To maximize effectiveness, leaders must ensure their forces are physically and psychologically prepared for the environment in which they will operate. Troops that are not sufficiently prepared will act in much the same way as those in the Aleutian campaign—with unbridled fear and confusion. Joint leaders must strive to ensure that training follows as closely as possible with the adage, “We train as we fight.”

Botched Logistics

The officer who doesn't know his communications and supply as well as his tactics is totally useless.

—George S. Patton

Logistics sustainment planning failures in the Aleutians detracted from available combat power and the ability of commanders to employ the joint force effectively. The Allied invasion of Attu exemplifies the repercussions of botched logistics, where the dire situation for the coalition forces was caused not by the Japanese but by the lack of accessible supplies, ammunition, and food. Weather and terrain stalled supplies on the shores of Attu, leaving troops for days without needed cold-weather gear and even food, which contributed to the immense number of noncombat injuries sustained in Operation *Landcrab*.⁵⁷ Artillery was stranded at the beachheads, claimed by the swampy muskeg, proving useless to the forward troops who were bogged down by the entrenched defense positions of the opposing forces. Leadership failed to account for the challenges of maneuvering both vehicles and personnel through the Aleutian terrain. Ammunition, food, and other provisions had to be moved by foot on the backs of Soldiers, which disengaged them from combat operations and diluted the effectiveness of the invading force.⁵⁸ The logistics bottlenecks were a serious flaw in the supply system that had grave detrimental effects on the ground tactical battle.

Breakdowns in communications capabilities and flawed communications infrastructure added to the plethora of challenges in the Forgotten War. Communications failures plagued joint leadership throughout the campaign; slow relay times and delayed responses caused many tactical and operational advantages to elapse unexploited. During the attack on Dutch Harbor, U.S. fighters from Cold Bay, Alaska, futilely rushed to traverse the 180 miles to intercept the Japanese planes and back up the U.S.

fighters from Umnak, but they did not arrive in time. Unknown to them, a failure in the antiquated communications system left pilots on alert at nearby Umnak ignorant of the attack, having never received the radio call. These communications failures caused Japanese planes to fly uncontested at Dutch Harbor.⁵⁹

There are many other illustrations of the unique logistics and communications failures that joint leadership had to contend with in Alaska. In July 1942, an alert and call-to-arms drill was issued in Western Defense Command from Panama to Alaska. Panama and California stood to arms within minutes, but it took a shocking 4 days for the alert to reach all Alaskan stations. Airplanes, runners, and dogsled teams had to be employed to relay the alert due to the sparse and undermanned radio stations in Alaska, demonstrating massive communications vulnerabilities.⁶⁰ Additionally, U.S. senior leaders were naïve to logistics challenges at the commencement of military operations in the Aleutians, claiming that if more air assets were needed, they would rush aircraft to Alaska from the continental United States. In January 1942, however, when it took 6 weeks to deliver the first combat squadron, senior leaders learned that planes could not be “rushed to Alaska.”⁶¹

Wars can be won or lost based on logistics support. A campaign's operational reach is established by its ability to sustain logistics. Without the supplies to fuel operations, combat forces cannot be successful. Joint doctrine teaches that “joint logistics spans all levels of war. It is, however, at the tactical level where the principal outcome . . . of joint logistics must be measured.”⁶² Many troops in the Forgotten War died from exposure to the elements, while hunger left Servicemembers distracted from fighting their adversaries. Joint officers must recognize that it is not enough to be brilliant tacticians; if they are not also talented logisticians, their operations are doomed to fail.

Conclusion

*A soldier stood at the Pearly Gate;
His face was wan and old.*



Marines on alert during Japanese attack on Dutch Harbor, Amaknak Island, Aleutian Islands, June 3, 1942
(U.S. Navy/National Archives and Records Administration)

*He gently asked the man of fate
Admission to the fold.
“What have you done,” St. Peter asked,
“To gain admission here?”
“I’ve been in the Aleutians
For nigh unto a year.”
Then the gates swung open sharply
As St. Peter tolled the bell.
“Come in,” said he, “and take a harp.
You’ve had your share of hell.”*
—Boswell Boomhower

Although the Forgotten War ended almost 80 years ago in the North Pacific theater, it still offers relevant lessons for today’s joint operations in command and control, in under-

standing the importance of the OE, synchronization of forces, intelligence preparation of the battlespace, training, and logistics. In the Forgotten War, the ignorance of senior U.S. leaders and inexperience within the unique OE led to the inability to establish operational conditions necessary for tactical victory. At times, flawed joint operations practically paralyzed the Aleutian campaign. Lack of Japanese air assets, vulnerable Japanese SLOCs, and the sheer number of coalition forces involved in the attrition tactics all contributed to the Allied success in the North Pacific. Luck, chance, and courageous tactical Servicemembers are due the credit for the ultimate victory.

Victory in the Aleutians was not due to proper joint warfighting execution, and it offers an excellent depiction of how not to conduct a joint campaign. Not attaining unity of command or unity of effort in joint or coalition operations can affect unit morale and constrain operational effectiveness. Additionally, without synchronization of forces, leaders cannot mass effects to achieve operational and strategic objectives. The Aleutian campaign struggled with many of the same challenges in manpower and resources that leaders face today, constantly battling to do more with less. U.S. forces are spread throughout the globe with increasing demands and a shrinking budget. Joint leaders cannot

afford to be inefficient in the employment of their combat power and must capitalize on the exponential effects achieved through synchronization.

Without sound intelligence, commanders are unable to make the best possible decisions for employment of the joint force and are essentially sending their troops into battle blindfolded. As the casualties sustained at Attu show, U.S. forces that are deployed to unfamiliar and remote locations must be prepared for the OE both physically and mentally, and with the proper equipment and logistics support.

Leaders must recognize the relevance of the Forgotten War to today's joint commander who is operating in an austere environment in an underdeveloped and remote area against an unconventional and creative adversary, trying to integrate coalition forces with insufficient resources, support, and manpower. The overwhelming casualties from the Aleutian campaign emphasize the catastrophic consequences that can occur if joint leaders do not abide by the lessons learned by our predecessors through sweat, blood, and lives lost. JFQ

Notes

¹ Department of Defense Arctic Strategy (Washington, DC: Department of Defense [DOD], June 2019), 1–18.

² *A Blue Arctic: A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the U.S. Navy, January 5, 2021), 6.

³ *The Department of the Air Force Arctic Strategy* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the U.S. Air Force, July 21, 2020), 6.

⁴ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, *Report to Congress: Department of Defense Arctic Strategy* (Washington, DC: DOD, June 2019), 10.

⁵ John A. Polhamus, *The Aleutian Campaign in World War II: A Strategic Perspective* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2005), 64.

⁶ Robert L. Johnson, Jr., “Aleutian Campaign, World War II: Historical Study and Current Perspective” (master’s thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1992), 195.

⁷ The Lend-Lease program allowed the

U.S. President to sell, transfer, exchange, and lend equipment, including airplanes and other weaponry, to any country that would help defend against the aggression of the Axis powers in World War II. The Arctic route through the Aleutians was the shortest route to deliver wartime aid to the Soviet Union and was a U.S. strategic priority during the war. While considerable physical damage was not caused, the psychological damage to the Japanese because of the Doolittle Raid was significant because they had felt safe from aerial attack in their position in the Pacific. On April 19, 1942, 16 American B-25 bombers led by Lieutenant Colonel James “Jimmy” Doolittle launched from the aircraft carrier USS *Hornet* off the coast of Japan in what was the first attack of the imperial homeland in World War II. The Doolittle Raid on Tokyo served as retaliation for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and was also a much-needed morale boost for the Americans.

⁸ Charles B. Breslin, *World War II in the Aleutians: The Fundamentals of Joint Campaigns* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, June 18, 1994), 3–4.

⁹ Brian Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War: World War II in Alaska and the Aleutians* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1969), 54.

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