

Introduction

In the year 2000 a series of network television news items drew attention to a distant dot on the globe that few Americans knew even existed. That dot was the barren and windswept island of Shemya in the north Pacific, one of the westernmost portions of the elongated Aleutian archipelago. Home already to a top secret military listening post, Shemya briefly came to public prominence because it was chosen as the site for an advanced radar facility that would form part of a national anti-ballistic missile system. However, once President Bill Clinton decided to postpone the development of that complex and controversial system in late 2000, Shemya and the remainder of the Aleutians fell back into well-accustomed obscurity. It was not the first time that the Aleutians chain, in whole or in part, had received attention for its purported strategic military value. In the following pages, we shall see how a variety of Americans, some renowned, others obscure, viewed the Aleutian Islands as a potential strategic asset from the moment they were acquired in 1867, only to see those hopes fade into the strategic mists for over sixty years before their dramatic re-emergence in the Second World War.

Stretching westward from the rugged Alaskan mainland like a dagger stabbing at the distant vastness of northeast Asia, the nearly 300 islands in the bleak archipelago are devoid of trees but boast a surfeit of mountains and several dozen active volcanoes. The Aleutians rarely experience prolonged periods of sub-zero arctic temperatures but the chain's position between the volatile north Pacific Ocean to the south and the frigid Bering Sea to the north renders it vulnerable to some of the world's most extreme weather changes. Rain or snow falls more than 200 days a year, dense fog and thick mists are all too common, and severe gale-force winds, known locally as "williwaws," occur frequently.

The Aleutian Islands might seem to be an exceedingly unlikely battlefield. Yet on 11 May 1943, thousands of heavily armed American soldiers stormed the Aleutian island of Attu. Determined to wrest the isolated place from the Japanese troops who had seized it in June 1942, the Americans became embroiled in a bitter struggle that ended three weeks later – once they had completely exterminated the obdurate and impossibly brave Japanese garrison. Confronted, then, with what they believed to be a much larger enemy force on Kiska Island, the Americans assembled a massive army and naval task force of 35,000 men (including 5,000 Canadians) for an assault.

But when that vast armada invaded Kiska on 15 August, it discovered that the Japanese had slipped away covertly several weeks earlier. Having suffered heavy casualties on Attu, the heavily laden soldiers were relieved to have met no opposition on Kiska. C.P. Stacey, Canada's official army historian, labels the attack a "fiasco" and a "ridiculous anti-climax," while Walter A. McDougall describes the retaking of a deserted Kiska by a "bloated" force as a "farce." Similarly, Jonathan M. Nielson argues that, while Attu "had been a grim soldiers' battle fought with courage, albeit poor-to-dismal strategic insight and tactical direction," Kiska "had been a tragic mistake that tied down enormous resources that could have been better used elsewhere." Finally, in his sweeping and definitive study of the Second World War, Gerhard Weinberg avers that "the United States insistence on retaking Kiska and Attu was almost as unwise as the Japanese insistence on trying to hold on to these indefensible outposts which led to nowhere for either side."¹

Such harsh retrospective critiques have tended to apply to the Aleutian campaign as a whole. Describing the Aleutians as a theatre of military frustration, renowned naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison avers that "no operations in this region of almost perpetual mist and snow accomplished anything of great importance or had any appreciable effect on the outcome of the war." British strategist Basil H. Liddell Hart's opinionated, but immensely readable, history of the Second World War contends that employing over 100,000 servicemen "in this trivial task" in the north Pacific was "a flagrant example of bad economy of force, *and* a good example of the distraction that can be caused by a diversionary initiative with slight expenditure."² Few familiar with Japan's unhappy role in the bitter Aleutian campaign would disagree with such negative assertions. Historian Takahashi Hisashi states unequivocally that Japan's invasion of the Aleutians in 1942 "was a sheer waste of ships, men, and vital supplies that could have been better used elsewhere than in this near-arctic wasteland." Vice Admiral Takijiro Onishi complains that Japan's military "took a foolish liking to the place and poured in too much material and unnecessary personnel, making it impossible to leave."³

Blessed by the powers of hindsight, these critical assessments are mostly valid. The recapture, first of Attu and then of Kiska, had come in a decisive year of combat that had witnessed the brutal jungle and naval battles of attrition for Guadalcanal in the south Pacific, the loss of over 300,000 German soldiers in Stalingrad's desolate frozen ruins, the surrender of the tattered

remnants of General Erwin Rommel's fabled Afrika Korps in Tunisia, and history's largest tank battle on the vast Russian steppe at Kursk. But while a significant body of literature discusses the Aleutian campaign in some manner or another, many analyses start with Japan's occupation of the western Aleutians in 1942 and end with the triumphant American return to those islands fifteen months later. That is not so say that many of these works lack merit. Indeed, John Haile Cloe's detailed description of the Aleutian air war and Brian Garfield's gripping popular history of the entire campaign are particularly engaging accounts of the very real hardships faced by brave warriors fighting and dying in an unforgiving and harsh combat environment.⁴

Yet most Aleutian discussions miss the point. The Aleutian campaign certainly did little to ensure Japan's ultimate defeat – the awful battles for the Philippines, Saipan, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa in 1943-5 loom far larger in that regard. Far more interesting is the fact that the campaign for the Aleutians was the culmination of decades of debate about the potential strategic value – or lack thereof – of that isolated and windswept archipelago. From the time Alaska was controversially acquired by an expanding United States from a declining Russian empire in 1867, a fair number of Americans, many of whom held prominent political and military positions, believed fervently that the Aleutians were the strategic key in a long-term and potentially bitter struggle to dominate the north Pacific. Wartime commanders General Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr. and General John L. DeWitt, for example, were ardent advocates of an offensive across the north Pacific towards Japan itself, and they represented a persistent strand of American strategic thought dating back decades to noted luminaries such as Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan and General William (Billy) Mitchell. Furthermore, like Mahan and Mitchell, Buckner and DeWitt faced determined opponents who maintained that the Aleutians could not support major operations and that the supporters of a northern route to Japan failed to recognize that the targets of any real strategic significance lay in the central Pacific.

Unfortunately, even among studies that focus on the pre-war strategic situation confronting the United States in the Pacific, the Aleutians are rarely given the attention they deserve. In his very detailed official army history of pre-war plans and preparation, Mark S. Watson, maintaining that the “defense of the extreme north Pacific was not a major anxiety of the War Department in 1939,” devotes just four pages to Alaskan defence prior to the Second World War.⁵ In his exceptional analysis of the US Army's role in the

Pacific from 1902 to 1940, Brian McAllister Linn argues that army attempts to defend the territory against Japanese aggression were limited not so much by its strategic ineptitude but by the American leadership's failure to take sensible precautions and to discern the nation's true strategic interests.⁶ Not surprisingly, his analysis focuses on Hawaii and the Philippines. Alaska is mentioned only very briefly in the context of its role as the mostly forgotten northern anchor of the Alaska-Hawaii-Panama strategic triangle concept that emerged during attempts to revise the United States Navy's (USN) "Orange" battle plan for Japan. On the other hand, Edward S. Miller's impressive study of Plan Orange includes an extensive discussion of the Aleutians prior to the Second World War but sums up their wartime role in paragraph.⁷

I hope that this book will rectify the most glaring omission – the absence of a comprehensive work that explains just how the Aleutian Islands became "a lodestone for strategists who had never been there"⁸ and for some who had. It is a story of strong personalities seeking to up-end or disregard the unbending dictates of geography and climate, the vagaries of domestic and international politics, the often acrimonious arguments over strategic principles, intense inter-service rivalry and personal animosities, and the development of a Canadian-American military alliance. My approach to this case study is threefold. First, I examine military politics, focusing on the ways in which the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS), and their various attendant advisory bodies dealt with north Pacific strategy during the Second World War. I identify the persistent problems that plagued the formulation of a grand strategy intended to satisfy fully each American service and its political masters, as well as public opinion and America's most important allies, namely Britain, the Soviet Union, and Canada. In a sense, I hope to expose the nature of campaign making, revealing the lengthy and sometimes virulent debates, the unforeseen wrong turns, the strategic blind alleys, the mistaken assumptions, and dangerous misperceptions. The American military often had great difficulty setting its strategic priorities, a problem due to pre-war battles over resources, the nature of the Pacific theatre, as well as inter-service rivalry. Such problems were exacerbated by the very nature of the American federal system of governance, insofar as competing centres of power were deliberately built into it. Perhaps such a system ensured a more democratic political process but it rendered war-making problematic, at best.

Second, I extensively analyze proposals to follow up America's victory in the Aleutians with major offensives against the Kurile Islands and, possibly, the Japanese home islands themselves. Those proposals have generally received short shrift from historians for the simple reason that American forces never tried to occupy the Kuriles, preferring instead to operate in the more temperate and more accommodating central Pacific. Had that northern attack gone forward, however, America's postwar relations with the Soviet Union may have become more confrontational. Unfortunately, many of the strongest advocates of a drive across the north Pacific, most notably generals John DeWitt and Simon Buckner, wholly failed to comprehend the potentially vast implications of their grand schemes. Beyond the situation with the Soviets, a major American offensive against the Kuriles would have substantially altered the thrust of the Pacific conflict, if not the entire global Allied war effort. Moreover, as in the Aleutian campaign, advocates for a Kurile attack tended to ignore considerations of weather and logistics, as well as the capabilities of the various services and the complex organizational dynamics at work in American strategy making in the Second World War.

Finally, I discuss the intermittent presence of Canada in north Pacific and Aleutian military affairs from the 1920s to 1943. For Billy Mitchell, Canada seemed a natural ally against a potentially hostile and alien Japan. And, while Canadian forces played an important role in rolling back the Japanese presence in the Aleutians in the Second World War, that role was not inevitable. Many senior Canadian officers in the interwar period feared being dragged into a conflict involving the United States and Japan, and saw a belligerent and politically aggressive America as the greatest threat to Canadian sovereignty. Once war came, Canada's intensively Eurocentric military, fixated on Germany's destruction, initially opposed any contribution to the Pacific that might damage its effort in Europe. In the end, however, Canadian domestic political concerns and worries about declining ties with America would drive Canada's military contribution to the Aleutians.

A word of warning to some readers. In recent years, it has become quite fashionable in some historical and academic circles to pooh-pooh the value of "top-down" history, with its "great man" at the top of the social or political pyramid, in favour of a focus on the masses below. I do not wish to disparage broad-based social history, which has much of value to contribute on a variety of topics, both societal and military. However, my particular interest and expertise lie with those men at the top of the political/military

hierarchy, men who had the power (or wished that they had) to make key strategic decisions about the Aleutians and the north Pacific. Certainly some will argue, perhaps with justification, that I have glossed over the harsh realities faced by the men who actually fought and died in the Aleutians in the Second World War. For those who crave such experiences, I heartily recommend the books of Cloe and Garfield; they provide a real flavour of the daily struggle in the Aleutians. The battle for the Aleutians is truly the stuff of history, and I embarked upon this quest for answers with the humbling words of a nineteenth-century *Times* editorialist ringing in my ears. Historians, he argued, “know about as much of real cause and consequence as postmen, porters and footmen do of their masters’ private affairs.”⁹ Let us hope that I can do a little better than postmen, porters, and footmen in discussing Aleutian affairs.