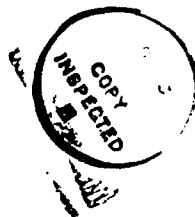


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INFANTRY OPERATIONS IN THE ALEUTIANS:
THE BATTLE FOR ATTU

An Individual Study Project
Intended for publication

by

Colonel Lamar Tooke, FA

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U. S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013
16 March 1990

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During the early stages of World War II, as strategic planners grappled with how to defeat the forces of Nazi Germany, another group of strategists was deliberating on the best way to conquer the Pacific Ocean area. The Imperial Japanese Staff, following the British model for colonialism, began the initial moves in a strategic offensive that would lead to the invasion of U.S. territory. While the Aleutian Islands were U.S. territory, very little was known about the region and Alaska was low on the priority list for defense. The Doolittle raid from the carrier Hornet, on April 18, 1942, placed the Aleutians very high on the Japanese priority list for attack. Their conclusion was that the long island chain, only a few hundred miles away, had been the base area for the Doolittle raid.¹⁻

As part of the offensive operation against Midway, the Japanese launched an attack on Dutch Harbor and invaded the islands of Kiska and Attu, placing Japanese troops on U.S. territory in June 1942.²⁻ This is a description of the only ground offensive battle executed to recapture the Aleutian Islands. It took almost a year for U.S. forces to land on Attu and commence offensive operations that would annihilate the 2,400 man Japanese force defending the jagged mountains of the island. Predicted to be a three day operation the recapture of Attu turned into a three week bloody ordeal that could have gone either way.³⁻

Information was gathered by historical review of a variety of reference materials and through analysis of maps, photos and personal notes of those who served at Attu. The lessons of Attu, related to the preliminary stages of the battle and combat operations, can be applied today in the same area of operations and others.

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As part of the offensive operation against Midway, the Japanese launched an attack on Dutch Harbor and invaded the islands of Kiska and Attu, placing Japanese troops on U.S. territory in June 1942.² This is a description of the only ground offensive battle executed to recapture the Aleutian Islands. It took almost a year for U.S. forces to land on Attu and commence offensive operations that would annihilate the 2,400 man Japanese force defending the jagged mountains of the island. Predicted to be a three day operation the recapture of Attu turned into a three week bloody ordeal that could have gone either way.³

Information was gathered by historical review of a variety of reference materials and through analysis of maps, photos and personal notes of those who served at Attu. The lessons of Attu, related to the preliminary stages of the battle and combat operations, can be applied today in the same area of operations and others. (S)

INTRODUCTION

In 1939, as war broke out in Europe, strategic planners could not have known, and probably would not have believed that U.S. territory would be occupied by an invading enemy force within three years. Until the attack on Pearl Harbor, Alaska, the site of this invasion, was low on the priority list for defense resources. And within Alaska, the little known Aleutian Islands were even lower in priority for defensive efforts and resources.⁴ At the time of the Nazi invasion of Poland, there were only 300 military personnel in all of Alaska. The Navy had small detachments at Sitka, Kodiak, Kiska and Dutch Harbor. These were weather or navigational stations of little significance in a global war.⁵ Strategic planners had identified Japan as a likely enemy in the Pacific years before the Pearl Harbor attack. Some took the threat seriously. Among them was General Billy Mitchell, who summarized his assessment by this quotation from 1923:

I am thinking of Alaska. In an air war, if we were unprepared Japan could take it away from us, first by dominating the sky and creeping up the Aleutians . . . Japan might well seize enough of Alaska to creep down the western coast of Canada. Then we would be in for it.⁶

His assessment of the Aleutian chain, however, was not shared by those with the resources it would take to build a

defensive system that could cover the 1,100 miles from the Alaskan Peninsula to Attu Island. Even though it was an area where the national interests of the U.S., Russia and Japan came together, the Alaska area struggled to obtain war time support.⁷

The Japanese, however, had not overlooked the Aleutian Island chain. During the early years of war in Europe, they had conducted surveys and mapped many of the larger and more strategically important islands. Special attention was given to those that could support an airfield. The Aleutians were to find a higher priority in Japanese planning, particularly after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Japanese had hoped to destroy the U.S. Navy in one decisive attack in 1941. Failing to do so initiated planning for the offensive at Midway. The Aleutians came to the forefront of Japanese planning efforts in the AO Plan.⁸

The Japanese wanted to draw the U.S. fleet into battle at a place of their choosing - Midway. Admiral Yamamoto's operations officer, Capt Kameto Kuroshima developed a plan for the "M I Operation." The details of the plan were outlined in Naval Order #18, which called for the Northern Area Force to attack and destroy Dutch Harbor at Adak Island due north of Honolulu, and occupy Adak, Kiska and Attu, as a diversion to draw the U.S. fleet to the North Pacific. The Japanese would then attack the U.S. fleet at Midway to annihilate them, thereby preventing their interference in future operations.⁹

Fortunately, the U.S. had broken the "Purple Code" of the Japanese and knew of the Aleutian deception. Admiral Nimitz was now left with the difficult choice of allowing occupation of U.S. territory or surprising the enemy at Midway. The battle at Midway is historical evidence of his decision. Japanese attack of the Aleutians on or after June 1, 1942 was expected, but few forces could be spared to counter the invasion and fight at Midway.^{1a}

The Second Carrier Striking Force, consisting of two carriers (Ryujo and Junyo), three heavy cruisers, three destroyers and five submarines attacked Dutch Harbor on June 3 with thirty six bombers and twenty nine Zeros. Some of these were recalled due to the weather and never engaged on June 3. Dutch Harbor was struck again on June 4 by one wave of fifteen fighters, eleven bombers and six torpedo planes. Casualties were seventy eight KIA and fourteen planes lost on the U.S. side and fifteen KIA with twelve planes lost by Japan. It was not a successful attack and the Japanese were totally surprised by the newly constructed bases in the area, particularly at Adak. The base there, completed only weeks before, allowed attack aircraft to prevent the destruction of Dutch Harbor and landings on Adak. The Japanese landing force sailed westward to deliver the invasion forces on Kiska and Attu as planned. The Aleutians now rushed to the forefront of the U.S. priority list. Attu Island became the focal point for a host of war planners from all services and for U.S. senate discussions. U.S. military forces,

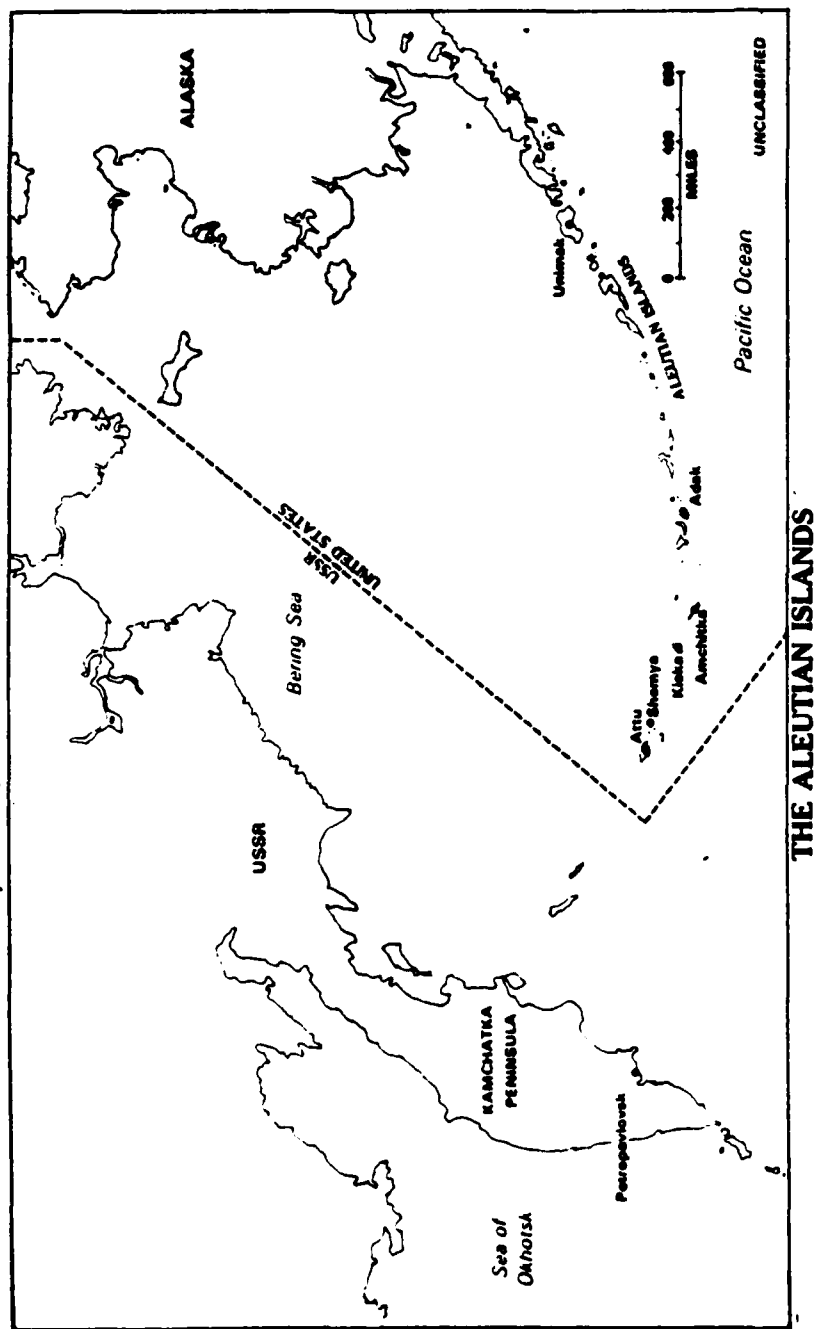
having defeated the Japanese Navy at Midway, now faced a very difficult situation in the North Pacific Area of Operations. They immediately began a series of preliminary operations which set the strategic stage for the battle of Attu. Before describing the preliminary operations and the battle for Attu, an understanding of the Area of Operations is necessary.¹¹

Geographical Description

The Aleutian Islands, discovered in 1741 by Vitus Bering, a Danish navigator employed by Russia, were acquired by the United States in 1867 as a part of the Alaska Purchase. The island chain extends over 1,100 miles west from the Alaskan Peninsula (FIG. 1) and mainland Alaska ending with Attu, which is 600 miles from Siberia, 650 miles from the Kurile Islands, 300 miles west of the Komandorski islands and 600 miles from Petropavlovsk in Russia.¹²

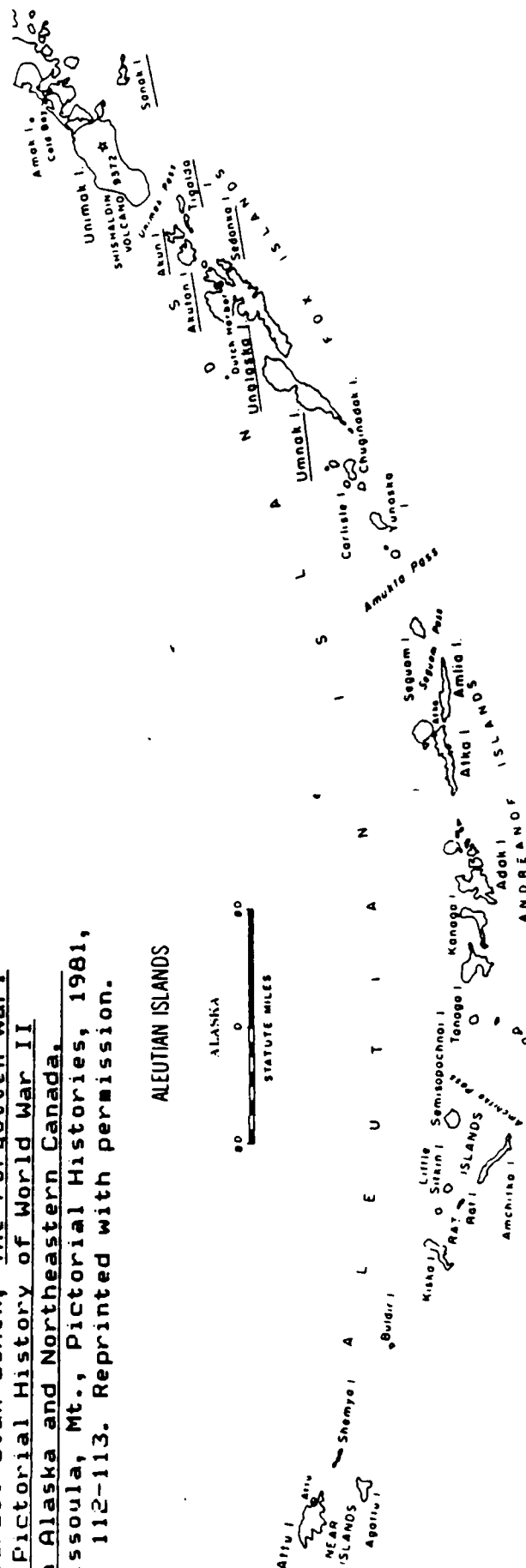
The sweeping arc of the chain contains 279 islands ranging in size from Unimak (70 x 20 miles) to dozens of mere rocks above the water line (FIG. 2). The islands are organized into the six distinct regions of Fox, Dearlof, Andreanof, Rat, Near and Four Mountains. The terrain throughout the islands is extremely rugged due to the geological action of the forty six volcanoes found along the chain. Glacier like fields and permanent snow fields exist at the higher elevations. The snow line begins at approximately 300 feet elevation on Attu and fog generally hangs close to the snow line. Numerous mountains and knife like ridges exist on most of the larger islands with a maximum elevation of

**Source: Technical Services Division,
Intelligence Center Pacific (IPAC),
The Soviet Threat to the Aleutians,
PACOM, 1988, p. 3.**



Source: Stan Cohen, The Forgotten War:

A Pictorial History of World War II
in Alaska and Northeastern Canada,
Missoula, Mt., Pictorial Histories, 1981,
p. 112-113. Reprinted with permission.



9,372 feet. Attu has some of the most rugged terrain found in the chain with elevations between 2,000 and 3,000 feet, accompanied by frequent cliffs and fifty to sixty degree slopes. Nearly all the beaches have steep shorelines with islets and rocks that present obstacles to landings and breakers are often heavy through the rocky approaches. Sand beaches are rare and usually found at the head of natural coves. Most extend no more than fifty yards inland. The islands are harsh and treeless, with little vegetation except the profuse tundra, which is very delicate and turns to mud when repeatedly walked or driven over.^{13.}

Though the temperature throughout the islands rarely attains arctic severity, they are beset most of the year by a cold, damp fog, frequently accompanied by icy rain or snow. Measurable precipitation falls on the islands an average of 250 days per year and snow accumulation is often one to two feet with drifts up to six feet deep in winter months. The climate throughout the Aleutian Islands is among the harshest on earth and probably the most dangerous. The maritime climate is characterized by frequent, often violent, cyclonic storms and high winds (up to 85 knots) with dense fog sitting on the ocean most of the year. An unfavorable feature for military operations is the constant low cloud cover. Entire days of sunshine are rare and even today Adak Naval Air Station gives everyone the day off when the sun shows itself for the entire day. Locally this is known as "sunshine liberty." Dense cloud cover hovers over the Aleutians ninety percent of the time in summer and fifty percent in winter.

Sixty to seventy percent of the time the ceiling is below 1,000 feet with only two to four clear days per month during June to August. In the winter months rain, sleet and snow, often in combination, make the islands one of the most uncomfortable regions of the world. Gale force winds, known as "williwaws," frequently occur throughout the islands because of the intense storms in the area. The warm currents of the Pacific ocean meet the icy waters of the Bering sea at the Aleutian chain, causing many of the unique weather conditions in this region. Average temperatures for the summer can range from 40 to 60 degrees (F), with 20 to 40 degree (F) temperatures in the winter. The wind chill factor, however, can be a major casualty producer any time of year.¹⁴ Figure 3 provides a summary of weather factors as they relate to military operations in the area of Attu. This table was extracted from what appeared to be staff notes made during preparation for the invasion.

Figure 3

Summary of Weather Conditions in the Aleutian Islands												
elements	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Fog	x	o	x	x	x	o	o	u	o	x	x	x
Cloudiness	o	o	o	o	u	u	u	u	x	x	x	o
Ceilings	x	x	x	o	u	u	u	u	o	x	x	o
Visibility	x	o	x	x	o	u	u	u	x	o	x	o
Gale winds	u	u	u	o	x	x	x	x	x	o	u	u
Icing	u	u	o	o	x	x	x	x	o	u	u	u
Precip	u	u	o	o	o	o	x	x	o	u	u	u
Harbor ice	u	o	o	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	o
Favorable air ops	u	u	o	o	o	u	u	u	x	x	o	u
Favorable sea ops	u	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	x	x	u	u
Legend	x favorable o possible u unfavorable											

15.

Strategic Importance

The Aleutian Islands can be described as a chain of unsinkable aircraft carriers stretching across the Northern Pacific from the shores of the Alaskan Peninsula to the threshold of Russia and Japan (FIG. 4). There are at least sixteen islands that are of strategic importance because of their capability to support large air bases. Beyond this feature, the chain offers an approach into Russia or Japan and controls the entry or exit corridors between the Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea. From the Aleutians the Circle Routes across the Arctic can be controlled and early warning stations and reconnaissance units based on the islands could provide strategic warning for Alaska and North America. These strategic possibilities existed in WW II and remain a potential advantage for the U.S. today.¹²

Strategic Situation Leading to Attu

Japanese strategic objectives at the onset of hostilities included the destruction of the U.S. Navy during 1942, as quickly as possible. Within weeks after the Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese had invaded Guam, Indochina and Thailand. By Christmas they were occupying Wake and Hong Kong. Within two months Manila, Singapore and Malaya also fell into Japanese hands. By March 1942 Java and Burma had been occupied and Japan invaded New Guinea. The Japanese swept the British fleet from the Pacific and Indian Ocean with the loss of nothing larger than a destroyer. In May 1942 the Philippines fell and the Japanese

Arctic Region



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FIG. 4.

Source: Central Intelligence Agency, The World Fact Book, Washington, 1989, Map XI, following p. 367. Reprinted with permission.

began an invasion of the Solomon Islands. Japanese Imperial Forces appeared to be unstoppable as summer of 1942 approached.¹⁷

The Japanese assumed the U.S. would hold a defensive line from New Guinea through the Solomons and Midway/Hawaii to Dutch Harbor in Alaska. On April 18, 1942, the Doolittle raid struck Tokyo with sixteen B25s flying from the deck of the USS Hornet 700 miles offshore. Final analysis by the Japanese staff concluded the twin engine bombers came from bases in the Aleutians. Thus, the islands became a primary concern of the Japanese and were included in the AO Plan for the Midway invasion.¹⁸

Japanese Northern Army Commander, General Higuda, outlined the three operational objectives of the Aleutians campaign as follows:

- 1-Prevent U.S. offensive use of the Aleutian chain.
- 2-Drive a wedge between the U.S. and Russia to prevent or delay Russian entry into the war against Japan.
- 3-Establish air bases for future offensive operations against the U.S. in Alaska or the west coast.¹⁹

The Second Carrier Striking Force of the Combined Fleet supported the Aleutian invasion with two carriers (Ryujo and Junyo), three heavy cruisers, three destroyers and five submarines as earlier described. Meeting with defeat at Midway and surprised by U.S. air strength at Dutch Harbor, as well as the new bases in the Aleutians, the Japanese fell back to occupy

Kiska and Attu. The main force occupied Attu with 500 Marines and later reinforced to 7,800 men from all services.²²

Attu was initially occupied with elements of the 301st Independent Infantry Battalion at 0010 hrs June 8, 1942. Initial positions were established at Holtz Bay, Chichagof Harbor, Sarana Bay and Massacre Bay. These positions would prove to be the key locations for the future defense of the island. Fearing a counterattack at Kiska, the 301st Ind Inf Bn evacuated Attu to assist in the defense of Kiska Island. During late October 1942 the 301st reoccupied Attu and began a series of reinforcements to the level described below. Their mission was to defend Attu and construct an airfield for future operations.²¹

The first reinforcements arrived October 29, 1942 when the Yonegawa Independent Infantry Battalion sailed from Parakushira and landed at Holtz bay. The mission given Ltc Yonegawa was to establish beach defenses, prepare dual purpose antiaircraft positions and assist with construction of an airfield. The survey for the airstrip was finished by December 1942, but the project, requiring the use of hand tools, was never completed.²²

From November 4 through 12, reinforcements included the 24th Independent Anti Aircraft (AA) Company, 302d Independent Engineer Company (reinforced with an Amphibious Engineer Platoon), 35th Independent AA Company and the 6th Mountain Artillery Battery. In January 1943 the 303rd Independent Infantry Battalion (Maj Watanabe) landed at Chichagof harbor. The Japanese continued to

reinforce with smaller detachments until May 1943. In March 1943, the naval battle of the Komandorskis prevented further reinforcements to Attu or Kiska.²³ The final organization opposing U.S. forces is outlined here, as well as available information will allow:

Final garrison, approximately 2,400 men²⁴.

- HQ Second Sector Unit (40 men)
- Yonegawa Ind Inf Bn (1st and 3d Cos, 200 men)
- 303rd Ind Inf Bn (660 men)
- 33rd Ind AA Bn (540 men)
- 6th Mountain Gun Btry (110 men)
- 302d Eng Co (179 men)
- 6th Shipping Eng (1 Co, 270 men)
- Airfield Construction Det (21 men)
- Naval Anchorage Det (960 men)
- Field Hospital Sec (183 men)
- Machinegun Cannon Co (136 men)

Tactical Defense

The Japanese defense was to be conducted in two sectors; Holtz Bay and Chichagof Harbor. At Holtz Bay, four successive defensive positions were well prepared with a fifth final position at the valley head. Beach defenses were also built in the Holtz Bay area to counter an U.S. assault on the harbor. The Yonegawa Ind Inf Bn and the Aota (33rd) AA Bn totaling about 1,700 men would initially defend the Holtz Bay area. Each arm of Holtz Bay was defended by a four gun AA battery of the 33rd AA Bn. Jarmin Pass leading into Massacre Valley was covered by a mountain artillery battery.²⁵

Chichagof Harbor had substantial beach defenses to include a four gun AA battery, but the key defensive effort for the harbor was based on well prepared defensive positions in Massacre Valley

on Cold and Black Mountains and the Holtz-Massacre Pass (later to be named Jarmin Pass). Sarana Valley defenses were established on Gilbert Ridge, Point A, Sarana Nose and Buffalo Ridge. A major final defensive position was emplaced on Prendergast and Fish Hook Ridges. These were built on some of the most rugged terrain to be found on Attu and the camouflage of all positions was outstanding.²⁶

The Japanese tactical design was to draw U.S. forces in from the beach, away from their supplies and engage them from the high ground surrounding the valley to annihilate them or force their withdrawal.²⁷ The Japanese assumed a Massacre Bay landing, thus the successive defense of Holtz Bay throughout the valley and in Sarana Valley, which is constricted by Lake Nicholas. Japanese tactical planners knew vehicles, supplies and artillery wouldn't get off the beaches in large numbers because of the tundra and mountainous terrain.²⁸

It was a defense based on daring, deception and excellent use of terrain to tempt a landing on the south side of the island. U.S. aerial photo reconnaissance showed no positions on the south side of the island. Numerous dummy positions were constructed to deter landings other than on the south side of Attu. Within Massacre Valley a weak yielding defensive center would allow a U.S. force build-up and lure them into a fire trap at Jarmin Pass. The 303rd Ind Inf Bn initially defended the Massacre-Sarana Pass and Gilbert Ridge with 2d Company (Lt Honna), reinforced by 4th Company (Lt Goto). Massacre-Holtz Pass

was defended by 1st company commanded by Cpt Hiyashi. The 1st Co employed a single platoon on the floor of Massacre Valley to delay and confuse advancing U.S. forces.²⁹

Tactically the Japanese plan was very sound. It had been preceded by outstanding deception and fixed on shrewdly chosen terrain. Weapons, ammunition and equipment were available in ample quantities and to prevent reliance on tenuous supply lines across the mountains and tundra, many supply caches were systematically established. This system was designed to support the primary defensive positions for each battalion. If the Japanese defense had any flaw, it was to be found in their technique of defensive fire. Their positions, built around the machineguns, were often scattered and loosely tied together, lacking the ability to interlock the fires from several machineguns. Machineguns were not linked to a main line of resistance and no concept of final protective fires was employed. A greater deficiency, however, was the complete absence of obstacles, even though ample stocks of mines and other barrier materials were available. Perhaps this was due to Japanese thinking that Kiska would be the main target, therefore such preparations were not completed.³⁰

Preliminary Operations

The Japanese had been identified by strategic planners as a likely enemy in the Pacific years before war came to Pearl Harbor. Members of Western Defense Command and Alaska Defense Command began to bolster defense efforts, wherever possible, as

early as 1940. Twenty seven months after the war began in Europe Japanese aircraft were attacking Pearl Harbor, but the defensive posture in Alaska had grown from 300 to 35,000 troops stationed throughout Alaska. By June 1, 1942, Army strength in Alaska was at 45,000 men. Major airfields were under construction at Anchorage, Fairbanks and Seward. Naval bases were operating at Kodiak, Sitka and Dutch Harbor. The footholds were tenuous, but growing with each passing day. One month before the Japanese attacked Dutch Harbor Army engineers landed and began construction of the airfield. In three short weeks an airstrip, with buildings, a road network and antiaircraft emplacements, was in use by the 11th Air Force. Similar facilities were under construction at Cold Bay, but west from there lay 1,000 miles of undefended islands. It would become a race to occupy those with strategic usefulness during the next three months. At times, all that stood between the Japanese and U.S. territory was a squad of infantry.²¹

The secret establishment of these bases was one of the deception success stories of WW II. Men and materials had been shipped from Washington to Alaska through two fish packing companies that did not exist. Blair Packing and Saxton & Company were pseudo cannery companies to cover the transport of millions of short tons of equipment and supplies to Alaska and the Aleutians. When the Japanese attacked Dutch Harbor June 3, 1942, they were totally surprised by the offensive air power counter attacking from bases at Dutch Harbor and Unalakleet.²²

Immediate U.S. operational concerns were the bases at Kodiak, Dutch Harbor airfield, Cold bay and Unnak. The 35th DIV, consisting of National Guard units from Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska was given responsibility for west coast defense as a result of the attack on Pearl Harbor. One of its' units, the 138th Infantry Regiment, was patrolling the ocean front from their headquarters at the Cow Palace in San Francisco. As the 35th DIV reorganized from four regiments to three, the 138th Inf Regt transferred to Camp Murray, Washington for shipment to Alaska Defense Command. Their initial garrison was at Cold Bay with other locations in southeast Alaska from Juneau and Cordova to Unnak. The 1st Bn occupied Adak in May 1943 and later 3d Bn occupied Atka in the race for possession of those islands suitable for land based air.²²

Their primary mission was defense of the air fields used by 11th Air Force and establishing a defense of Adak, Atka, and later Anchitka. The 138th Regt built quarters, lookout towers and supply trails and conducted amphibious training with the Coast Guard at Anka Bay and Lynn Canal. The regiment was supported by the 161st FA, 203d Coast Arty Regt, 53d Eng Regt and the 201st Station Hospital. The 138th was also called upon to unload ships and run warehouses for supplies and equipment destined for the combat zone of Kiska and Attu.²⁴ The 134th Inf Regt (35th DIV) contributed its' 2d Bn to the security and logistics mission at Adak August 30, 1942.²⁵

U.S. Strategy

Just as the Japanese had assumed, the U.S. was on the strategic defense on a line from Australia through Hawaii and Midway to Alaska across the Pacific theater. In the theater operational area of the Aleutians, the strategic objective was to contain the invasion force to its' initial locations and execute a campaign to recapture Kiska and Attu.²⁶

At the operational level, U.S. plans were: to quickly occupy those islands considered strategically important, with particular emphasis on Adak, Amchitka and Atka; to prevent Japanese capture and utilization of the islands; and to emplace airfields as far west in the chain as possible for offensive operations against Kiska and Attu. With aerial bombardment and a naval blockade of the western Aleutians, isolate Kiska and Attu, cutting them off from reinforcement and supplies. An attack could then be launched against Attu to recapture that island and quickly isolate Kiska. Admiral Kinkaid, the Supreme Commander for the operation, had recommended the attack of Attu before Kiska on March 3, 1943 for four reasons: Attu was less well defended; the U.S. lacked the forces, equipment, and shipping to attack Kiska; the preparation time had been too short and finally, nearby Shemya Island had good potential for an air base. In these considerations, the Alaska Defense Command agreed with Admiral Kinkaid and supported the recommended change of the primary target. Admiral Kinkaid also recommended the month of May for the operation, since the weather was least worst during that period. The most critical operational objectives were to

recapture Attu and Kiska in succession. The Japanese expected an attack at Kiska because of the airfield, submarine pens and the harbor. To further their expectations, war correspondents were encouraged to write articles about the difficulties foreseen on Kiska.²⁷

After the June 3 to 4 attack, the race for islands began. Japanese units were confirmed on Kiska by aerial reconnaissance June 10, but U.S. forces could not join the race until August 27. At 0700 hrs, two squads of Alaskan Scouts departed from a submarine in rubber boats to claim Adak Island for the U.S. An airfield was built in twelve days and planes were using this base in air operations against Kiska by September 12. Atka, sixty miles east of Adak, was occupied by U.S. forces (800 men) September 20 and Amchitka, 200 miles from Kiska, was occupied on January 12, 1943 by the Amulet Force of 2,000 men, landing from the Coast Guard transport Arthur Middleton. An airfield was built and in use by fighter escorts February 18. Within thirty days, another 2,000 men had reinforced Amchitka, including two infantry battalions, two artillery battalions and two AA battalions. By the end of February the Amchitka force was 8000 men, with the addition of two PBVs and sixteen P40s. During February 1943, 156 tons of bombs were dropped on Kiska by aircraft from this base. The Amulet Force was to have landed on Tanaga Island, but this landing was canceled in favor of the Amchitka operation. These were the key facilities, which prevented reinforcements to proceed from Kiska to Attu during the

battle in May 1943.³⁸.

The U.S. 5th Fleet was given a mission to form Task Force 8 and provide a naval screen in the western Aleutians blockading Attu and Kiska. Task Force 8 was very small, but contained all the naval combatant resources that could be spared. One heavy cruiser, one light cruiser and four destroyers established the blockade early in 1943, without the benefit of a carrier or appreciable land based air forces. On March 26, this small force, out numbered two to one, prevented the only Japanese attempt at a major reinforcement of their Aleutian forces. The naval battle of the Komandorskis is a story unto itself. Its' importance to the campaign was the effective blockade of the western chain.³⁹.

The 11th Air Force had the mission of interdicting the airfield construction on Kiska and Attu and supporting the 5th Fleet, within their capability to do so from distant bases. At the end of June 1942 the 11th Air Force had two heavy bomber squadrons, two light bomber squadrons and one fighter group of four U.S. squadrons and one Royal Canadian squadron. Their mission required flying in the most hazardous weather to be found anywhere in the world. During the summer and fall of 1942, 11th Air Force lost seventy two planes. Only nine were the result of enemy action! Sixty three planes went down because of the extreme weather conditions found along the chain! It would be wise to note, those conditions have not improved. Pilots operating in this environment today will be faced with the

greatest challenge of their lives. Add an enemy to these conditions and disaster is lurking at every turn.⁴⁰

Bombing missions over Kiska and Attu were run, as often as weather and available forces would permit, throughout 1942. In February 1943, 156 tons of bombs were dropped on Kiska. Attu began to get some relief, while the raids deceived the Japanese. With good weather in April, 92 tons of bombs fell on Kiska in five raids per day; on two days 11th Air Force managed thirteen raids and one sunny day nineteen raids attacked Kiska. The Japanese were thus assured Kiska was being prepared for an assault from the sea.⁴¹

On April 26, a single bomber flew thirty feet off the ground the full length of Massacre Valley in a reconnaissance of the island. He could detect none of the many defensive systems built at the key choke points, such as Jarmin Pass. The only evidence of the enemy was two 20mm AA guns that would be captured on D-day. At D-day minus ten, twenty four fighter bombers from Achitka began a six day attack that dropped 95 tons of bombs on Attu. Four days before D-day Aleutian weather halted all air operations. On May 8, a bomber photo reconnaissance mission uncovered the defenses at Jarmin and Clevesy Pass. The Japanese had prepared well.⁴²

Task Force Decision

One of the first questions became what or who the ground force would be? The 35th and the 7th Division were available to

Western Defense Command. The 7th DIV was considered better staffed and trained for such a mission. The division was at San Luis Obispo training for deployment to North Africa. They transferred to Fort Ord in January 1943 to be reorganized from a Motorized Division to a Light Division. All vehicles were removed and the division was given jeeps and tractors and the 75mm guns were replaced with the heavier 75mm field howitzer. They immediately began amphibious training in California for two to three months under the direction of Commander Amphibious Force PACFLT, Admiral Rockwell.⁴³

Landing exercises were conducted from February 21 to March 9 supported by APAs USS J. Franklin Bell and Harris. The USS Zeilin and Haywood joined exercises during March 10 to 27, which included day light landings on San Clements Island. Battleships Idaho, Nevada and Pennsylvania and Destroyers Abner Read, Macdonough and Phelps supported this latter exercise. Most of these combatants would participate in the battle for Attu.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, the 11th Air Force did not receive any amphibious warfare training before the battle, nor were the members of either force familiar with one another or the operating procedures each followed. The 11th Air Force was learning a great deal about the area of operations and the Japanese. They were already in combat in the Aleutians and had been for almost a year. In this way, the 7th DIV went from a superbly trained motorized division to an amphibious division

between January and April 1943. By May, they were locked in vicious combat on Attu.⁴⁵

Landing Force 51.4 of Task force 51 ⁴⁶.

7th DIV HQ (Landing Force commander 51.4, MG Albert Brown)
Southern Force (main body), Col Edward Earle, 17th Inf Regmt
2/17th Inf Bn
3/17th Inf Bn
2/32nd Inf Bn
48th FA (3 Btrys 105mm)

Northern Force, Ltc Albert Hartl 1/17th Cdr
1/17th Inf Bn
1 Btry 105mm, 48th FA
17th Regmt Cannon Co
1 Btry AA
1 Det Alaskan Scouts

Provisional Bn, Cpt William Willoughby 7th Scout Co Cdr
7th Scout Co (Alaskan Scouts)
7th Recon Co (minus a 1 plt mission to Alexei Point)

Supporting units
48th FA 2 Bns, BG Archibald Arno (assistant LANDFORCOM)
49th Arty (ADA)
1 Co 5th Engs (shore party)
7th Med Bn
50th Eng (1 Bn minus)
13th Eng (1 Bn minus)
20th Field Hospital
78th Coast Arty Anti Air (CAAA, less 1 Bn)
51st CAAA (2 Bns)
75th Special Signal Co (3 Dets)

Tactical Reserve (afloat), Col Frank Culin 32nd Inf Regmt
1/32nd Inf Bn
3/32nd Inf Bn
2 btrys 105mm, 48th FA

Operational Reserve (called strategic) at Adak Island
4th Inf Regmt (future Shenya landing)
2d Bn 501st CAAA
18th Combat Eng

159th Inf Regmt (remained in California to undergo amphibious training with TF 9 for operations at Kiska. The unit replaced 17th Regmt at Attu July 9, 1943)

The assault force was embarked on six transports and supported by a naval Task Force of three battleships, three cruisers, three light cruisers, nineteen destroyers, one escort carrier, five submarines and assorted tenders, oilers and minesweepers. The attack transport Perida with one medium landing craft (LCM) and ten landing craft for vehicles (LCVs) were to join Task Force 51 later. On April 23, the 7th DIV marshaled on the piers in San Francisco for boarding the convoy. It was here that much of the individual equipment was issued. Each soldier received: Blucher boots with two pair of insoles, Alaskan field jacket, overcoat, wool underwear and socks, rucksack, sleeping bag with the cover (not water proof), snow glasses and a two piece rain suit very similar to that issued today. The 7th DIV staff turned back the Kersey lined Alaskan trousers. This was a mistake that later could not be corrected due to the quick pace of the operation. The Blucher boot was the weak link. It was not water proof and wore out quickly in the harsh environment of the Aleutians. Most of the frostbite and trench foot casualties could be attributed to the inadequate foot gear. Nevertheless, the division set sail in the evening hours of April 23, 1943. The division headquarters, aboard the USS Zeilen, was six days traveling to Cold Bay, where most of the division would come to port. The Scouts put in at Dutch Harbor and the reserve force traveled to Adak.*7-

Command relationships were somewhat typical of the WW II era. In an April 1 Joint Directive between Admiral Nimitz,

CINCPAC, and LTG Dewitt, Commander Western Defense Command (WDC), the operational objectives were established and the Supreme Commander named. The objectives were to; reduce the Japanese defenses and occupy Attu, construct an air field in the Near Islands, as quickly as possible, and deny the Near Islands to the Japanese. Shemya Island was the tentative location for the air field and the 4th Inf Regmt, 2/501st CAAA and 18th Combat Engineers were being held in reserve at Adak for this mission.^^.

The Supreme Commander or Commander North Pacific Force was Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid. He would exercise operational command of the campaign through several service commanders. The Amphibious Force was commanded by Vice Admiral Francis W. Rockwell. He was in command of the amphibious operation, which included all the Army forces of TF 51.4, until these forces were ashore. Then, MG Albert Brown, Commander 7th DIV, would assume command of the Landing Force (TF 51.4). At a date, determined by the LF CDR and the Amphibious Force Commander, CDR LF 51.4 would assume command of Attu as an Occupation Force. Command of Army reserve forces was retained by Admiral Kinkaid. Once the islands of Attu and Kiska were secured, command of the area was to revert to Western Defense Command through Alaska Defense Command. The WDC and ADC were to provide service support of an administrative and logistical nature to TF 51.4 and support TF 51 with air operations by 11th Air Force. While not as streamlined as one might find today, these relationships were well understood by the participants and worked throughout the campaign.^^.

Tactical Plans and Objectives

TF 51.4 objectives were to attack and seize Attu, destroy the Japanese defenders, hold Attu against counter landings and facilitate the occupation of Shemya by establishing shore installations in the east and west arm of Holtz Bay.³⁰

Tactical plans for the recapture of Attu included eight options within five different plans, A through E. All involved landings at Massacre Bay, Sarana Bay, Holtz Bay and supporting landings at smaller beaches. Plan A called for landings at Massacre Bay and Red Beach; plan B was a landing by the entire force at Sarana Bay, which the Navy didn't favor due to the navigational hazards in that area; plan C was a single landing by all forces at Massacre Bay; plan D called for landings in the west arm of Holtz Bay and at Red Beach. The Navy didn't favor plan D for the same reasons they had rejected plan B. Plan E required landings in Massacre Bay, Sarana Bay and Red Beach or Holtz Bay. This plan was revised based on the Navy's concern about Sarana Bay and Holtz Bay.³¹

The final plan chosen for execution called for two main landings with two supporting landings by smaller units (FIG. 5). The general plan was to recapture Attu by holding the Japanese at Chichagof Harbor and destroying the enemy forces. Southern Force (main body) was to land at Massacre Bay on Yellow and Blue beach. Advance northwest through Massacre valley, capture Jarmin Pass (Massacre-Holtz) then Clevesy Pass (Massacre-Sarana). Linkup with North Force in the Holtz Bay area and conduct a final

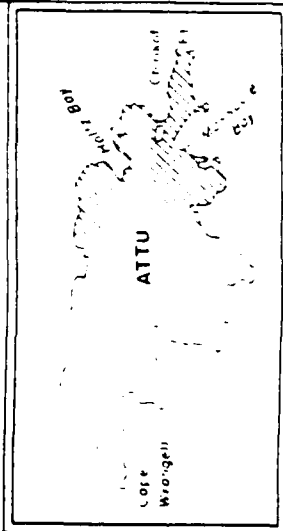
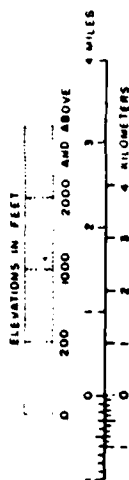
11-30 May 1943


 AXIS OF MAIN U.S. ATTACK

 SECONDARY U.S. MOVEMENTS

 JAPANESE COUNTERATTACK

ELEVATIONS IN FEET



Source: Stetson Conn, Rose C. Engelman and Byron Fairchild, Guarding the United States and its Outposts, U.S. Army in World War II, Washington, OCMH 1964, pp. 280-281. Reprinted with permission.

attack on Chichagof Harbor with all forces.³².

Northern Force was to land on Red beach, three miles north of the Japanese camp, in the west arm of Holtz Bay. They would then advance west across Hill X, secure Moore Ridge between the west and east arms of Holtz Bay. Linkup with Southern Force, complete the capture of Holtz Bay and join the final attack on Chichagof Harbor.³³.

Provisional Bn had a special and vital part of the operation. They were to land at Blind Cove (later named Austin Cove), attack east toward the head of the west arm of Holtz Bay and contain the enemy force by causing them to engage to the west, away from the bay area and Northern Force. Provisional Bn would then linkup with Northern Force, when Moore Ridge could be held, and join in the final attack on Chichagof Harbor.³⁴.

One platoon of the 7th Recon Co was to land at Alexei Point to cover the rear of Massacre Bay landings by establishing OPs on Gilbert Ridge to the north. The platoon was to reconnoiter west and north between Lake Nicholas and Massacre Bay along Gilbert Ridge; destroy enemy detachments and installations and linkup with 17th Inf at Clevesy Pass, where they would join the attack on Chichagof Harbor.³⁵.

F Co, 32nd Inf, although part of the main body, was to land at Cascoe Cove on Purple beach and provide the covering force for

the left flank. Cpt Robert E. Goodfellow was to advance west, capture Tennac Bay, continue his advance to the high ground west of Jarmin Pass and assist the attack of Jarmin Pass by 17th Inf.⁵⁶.

TF 51.4 was underway from Cold Bay sailing toward Attu on May 4, 1943, just six days after their arrival in the Aleutians. There was no time for desert trained soldiers to become acclimatized to the harsh conditions they were to face on Attu. The Navy placed a northern and southern Covering Group ahead to the west. All forces were to rendezvous 100 miles north of Attu at D-day minus one for the final assault. It was a trip made by measuring miles and speed because the crews couldn't see any of the hundreds of islands or the stars through the dense fog along the entire chain. As the force made their rendezvous May 10, the destroyer/minesweeper Sicard collided with destroyer Macdonough. Both valuable ships went out of action and had to be towed east for repairs. Sicard was to have been boat control vessel for the Holtz Bay landing. Aleutian weather was beginning to wage its' own war against TF 51.⁵⁷.

Execution Operation LAND CRAB

For simplicity and better understanding, operation LAND CRAB is arranged in four phases. These were not necessarily the actual phases of the operation and are different from those described in the history of the 7th DIV, which fought the battle. Outlined below are the major phases and engagements that will be described in some detail. Each element of TF 51.4 will be

discussed within each phase day by day, as appropriate.

Phase 1 Landing Operations at Attu

Southern Force

Massacre Bay

Cascoe Cove

Alexei Point

Northern Force

Red Beach

Provisional Bn

Austin Cove

Phase 2 Initial Advance and Engagements

Southern Force

Battle for Jarmin Pass

Battle for Clevesy Pass

Northern Force

Operations to capture Holtz Bay

Provisional Bn

Advance and initial engagement

Phase 3 Linkup of Northern and Southern Force

Battle for Fish Hook and Buffalo Ridge

Japanese counterattack and enemy destruction

Phase 4 Capture of Chichagof Harbor

Phase 1 Landing Operations on Attu May 11, 1943

Massacre Bay landings were scheduled for 0740 hrs, but had to be delayed because of heavy fog until 1040 hrs. The weather did not improve that morning causing another delay until midday. At 1220 hrs, Admiral Rockwell, in conjunction with MG Brown, made the decision to land at 1530 hrs (FIG. 6 and 7). Landing craft were on their way to the beach and landed almost an hour later, at 1620 hrs. Minelayer, USS Pruitt, used its radar to guide approximately 100 landing craft toward Yellow and Blue Beach. The fog was as thick as soup, with the cloud ceiling at 1,500 feet, visibility was 500 to 600 yds. At 100 yds from shore, all 100 landing craft came together in a concentrated mass of

FIG. 6 & 7 (below)

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 1. Reprinted with permission.



Photo by Signal Corps

Artillerymen with their howitzer and 105mm. ammunition being transferred from transport to landing craft off the Attu beaches. Two leading boats of their wave, dimly seen in the background, are already half swallowed by the fog.



FIG. 7

The first wave of assault boats gropes its way through Aleutian fog

Photo by Signal Corps

confusion. In the resulting chaos, the second wave landed first followed by the simultaneous landing of the first and third wave of Southern Force. During the confusion, eleven crowded landing craft capsized, losing men and equipment over board (FIG. 8). Fog prevented the use of naval gunfire in a preparation of the beach at Massacre Bay, which in this case may have been a fortunate situation. Chichagof Harbor was hit by the radar controlled firing of battleships Pennsylvania and Idaho at 1515 hrs, about the time Massacre Bay landings got underway.³⁰

Co F, 32nd Inf landed with the first wave at Yellow beach rather than Cascoe Cove as planned (FIG. 9). The company had to advance southwest on foot into their proper area of operations. As F Co advanced to the top of Artillery Hill, Japanese crews abandoned the two 20mm AA guns that had stood silently overwatching the entire chaotic landing. These two guns alone could have seriously disrupted the landing and caused heavy losses, perhaps even aborting the landing altogether. Why the crews abandoned a lucrative opportunity no one knows. It must be remembered the Japanese wanted the landing at Massacre Bay, since that fit their defensive plan and tactical approach to the upcoming battle. The 2/17th Inf assembled on Blue Beach, while 3/17th Inf assembled on Yellow Beach for further advance inland. All the field artillery units mired into the mud and tundra 100 yds from the beach.³¹

Despite all the confusion, Southern Force, under direct command of MG Brown, came ashore unopposed. They faced steeply

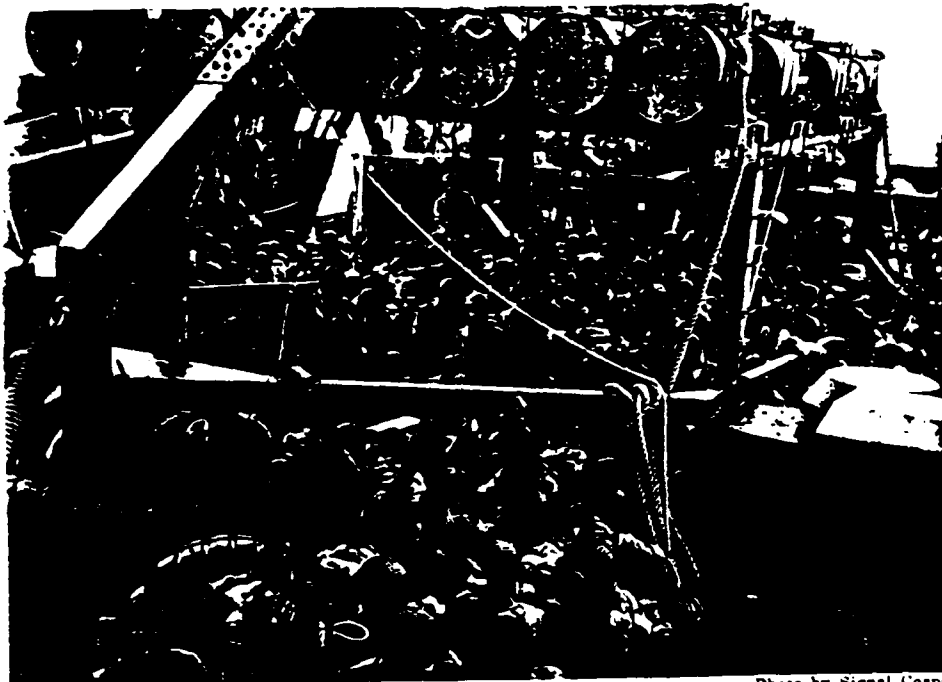


Photo by Signal Corps

Approaching Attu, 7th Division troops crowd the transport deck to get some fresh air or have a relaxing smoke. Fog and somber gray water surround the ship. Crowded conditions made it impossible to exercise aboard ship.

FIG. 8 & 9 (BELOW)

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washinton, 1944, following p. 144. Reprinted with permission.

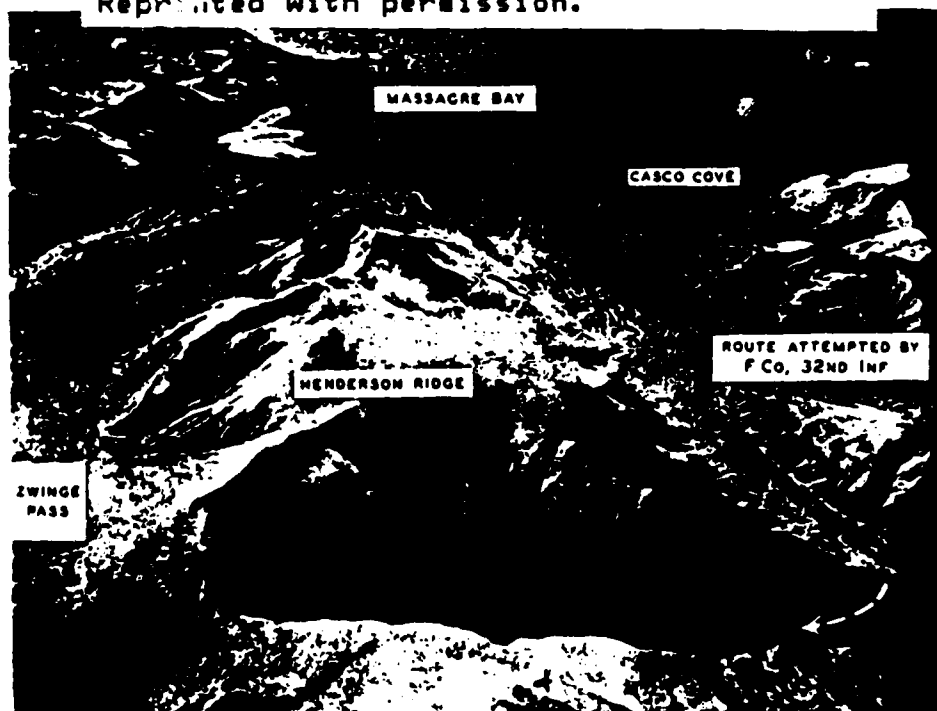


Photo by 11th Air Force

No model here—Attu itself, where the Southern Force landed on May 11, 1943. Massacre Valley, up which they advanced, stretches inland from Massacre Bay, its sides lined with towering snow-capped peaks. On the highest of these a Navy flyer crashed after strafing the fog-hung valley, thus giving his name to Henderson Ridge.

rising terrain at the shore, with Henderson ridge at 1,500 ft on the left, Gilbert ridge at 2,000 ft on the right, and a valley floor with broken terrain punctuated by a gradually rising ridge known as Hogback running northwest through the valley (FIG. 10 and 11). At the end of the valley was Jarmin Pass nestled between Black and Cold Mountain, and bristling with a well camouflaged, well prepared Japanese defense, established by the two companies of 303d Ind Inf Bn, which had been reinforced by two machinegun platoons and two mortar platoons. The members of Southern Force soon found the tundra covered ground mushy under foot, causing their pace to be slow and fatiguing. A pause for rest had to be taken every 300 to 400 yds. The pace was going to be much slower than predicted by LTG Dewitt of Western Defense Command. By 2200 hrs, Massacre Bay was secure with 2,200 men ashore and making their initial advance toward Jarmin Pass. MG Brown came ashore with his HQs at 2300 hrs and set up in the bay area.⁶⁰

Blind Cove (later Austin Cove) was the site selected for the Provisional Bn landing, which occurred at 0100 hrs, May 11, 1943. Cpt William H. Willoughby, a former UCLA football star from California, led 244 men off submarines Narwahl and Nautilus toward Scarlet Beach. They departed the subs by inflating rubber rafts on the after deck, loading the men and equipment and floating free as the subs submerged. It took the battalion two hours to reach shore across 5,000 yds of thick fog and the 27 degree temperature that dropped sharply to 20 degrees as the wind



Photo by Signal Corps

Blue Beach, Massacre Bay, looking southwest. The typical fog line hides all but the lowest slopes of the 2,000-foot-high mountains in the background. In the foreground a "cat" with its trailer waits for supplies to haul up the valley. Tents and supply dumps line the beach now well established on May 16.

FIG. 10 & 11 (BELOW)

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144. Reprinted with permission.



Photo by Signal Corps

May 12—beachhead established. Since our landing caught the Japs off guard, no opposition developed and supplies could be rapidly brought ashore. In the background are transports and landing barges feeding troops and matériel into Massacre Beach. The banner between poles on the beach designates a dump for one type of supplies. In the foreground the tundra covered by coarse beach grass is used for a bivouac area.

FIG. 11

rose. Once ashore with his small, but well trained force, Cpt Willoughby faced steep cliffs of about 300 ft, which had to be scaled to get off the beach. The Japanese had expected no one to land in a place such as Scarlet Beach. One of Willoughbys' men commented, "It was easy to get completely turned around in the thick, moving mist that made everything vague." And the Scouts eventually made a wrong turn in the fog, which cost them valuable time getting over the mountains to their objective. Cpt James Austin landed in the second wave with 165 men of the 7th Cav Recon Troop. The landing site would bear his name after his death on Attu.⁶¹

Alexei Point was taken without opposition or incident by one platoon of the 7th Recon Trp. The landing, by all accounts was smooth and lacked the chaos found at Blue and Yellow beach.⁶²

Red Beach, the landing site for Northern Force, was three miles from the main Japanese camp at Holtz Bay (FIG. 12). At 1315 hrs, after Ltc Hartl received permission from MG Brown to land, Northern Force headed for shore. Motoring toward shore in two landing craft, they found the approach to Red Beach to be a winding course through submerged rocks, dangerously close to the surface or protruding above the water. The landing craft approached the beach at dead slow speed with soldiers hanging over the sides to detect rocks and other hazards. Fortunately the landing was preceded by a detachment of Alaskan Scouts and A Co, 1/17th Inf. This recon element had departed their transport, J. Franklin Bell, at 0830 hrs aboard Higgins boats (LCVPs) two

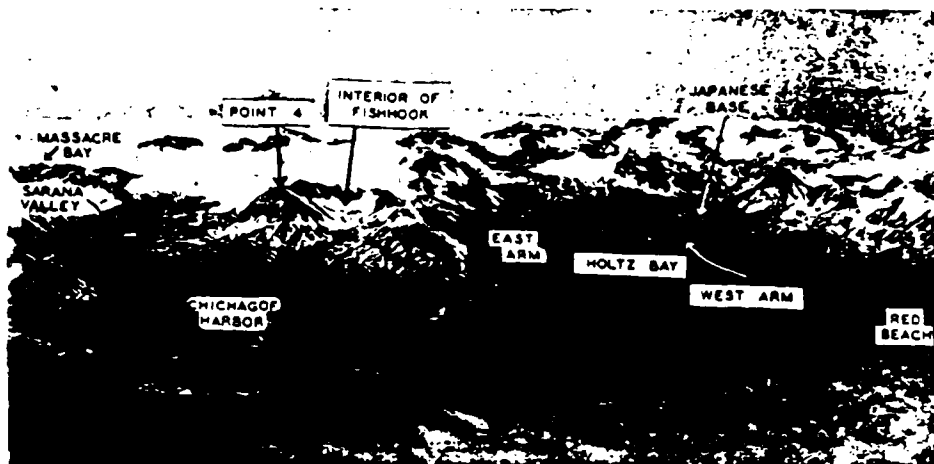


Photo by 11th Air Force

Aerial view of northeast corner of Attu island. The Northern Force of the Attu invading troops landed on May 11 at Red Beach, extreme right center of photo. The landing was difficult but unopposed. They fought completely around Holtz Bay and then joined the Southern Force in the drive which ended at Chichagof Harbor.

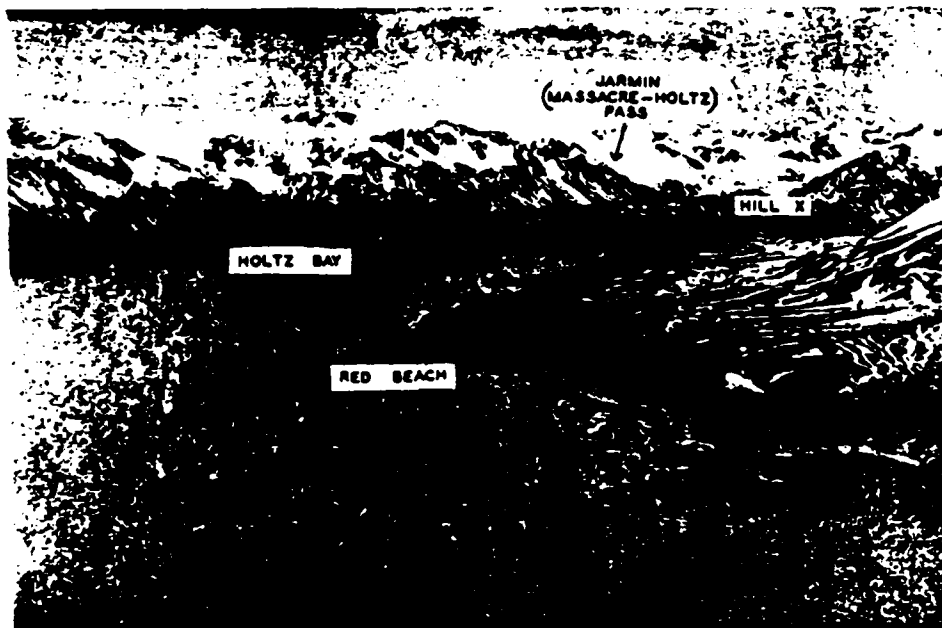


Photo by 11th Air Force

Aerial view of Holtz Bay showing rock-infested approaches to Red Beach and the rolling snow-patched tundra terrain leading inland to Hill X (also known during the battle as Bloody Knob). Here the 1st Battalion of the 17th Infantry won its first major encounter with the Japs (May 12-13) and gained the high ground dominating the west arm, Holtz Bay Valley.

FIG. 12 (top)

Source: U. S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, followingp. 144. Reprinted with permission.

miles offshore. About 1,000 yds from shore, they climbed over the side into whale boats and rowed ashore under the cover of heavy fog (FIG. 13). At 1400 hrs, Northern Force was signaled to come ashore. Col Culin, Cdr 32nd Regmt, made a personal reconnaissance of the beach for adequacy before allowing the first wave in at 1530 hrs. He used the radar from destroyer Phelps to get the recon element ashore. Red Beach was a very unlikely landing site from most aspects. It was only 100 yds long and 75 yds in depth; surrounded by steep cliffs 250 to 300 ft high, with a shallow landing area and very difficult approach from the sea, as described earlier. It had two important features: it was close to the enemy at Holtz Bay and, because of its' other features, allowed total surprise. The landing, led by B Co, 1/17th Inf, was complete by 1800 hrs. Col Culin had 1,500 men ashore without major difficulties (FIG. 14).⁶²

Task Force 51 had conducted four independent landings with no direct communication between them, nor liaison from one to another (FIG. 15). Landing operations in the Aleutian chain are invariably carried out in the face of great danger. Seas could be whipped into tremendous waves by icy winds reaching up to 100 plus miles per hour! Narrow, rocky beaches merged with tundra and mud so deep not even tracked vehicles could move through the landing sites or the terrain beyond the beach. The landings at Attu had been a combination of boldness, daring, and luck! Just forty one days after the decision to retake Attu, the forces were on the beaches. No modern army had ever fought there; no



FIG. 13

Source: Photo Archives USAMHI, RG1- H.U.M., .8624, file # AC 23637.



Photo by Signal Corps

Close-up of Red Beach on May 12. Supplies and heavy equipment such as tractors and cannon had to be winched up the 200-foot escarpment which completely encircled the beach.

FIG. 14

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144. Reprinted with permission.



FIG. 15

Source: Photo Archives USAMHI, RG1- H.U.M., .10466, file #
W -ALE - 52-54498.

experience existed from the past in the summer of 1942; the soldiers of TF 51 would learn the necessary lessons as they went. Here at the beaches of Attu they were on the brink of an education many would never forget.⁶⁴

As U.S. forces left the landing sites, they could not have been more ill prepared. While they outnumbered the Japanese 5:1, he was a determined opponent who occupied all the key terrain between U.S. forces and their objectives. The Japanese were dug in on high ground over watching every major avenue of approach from well prepared defensive positions. Most importantly, they were properly dressed and equipped mountain troops, trained in north Manchuko (FIG. 16). Having trained in such an environment and acclimatized to their conditions, these mountain troops would lay motionless for hours in paper camouflage to ambush U.S. soldiers, as they passed.⁶⁵

The tundra sagged under the weight of a man, slowing them to a snails' pace. Trucks and towed weapons quickly sank up to the under carriage within 100 yds of the beaches. C Btry, 48th FA had placed their 105mm howitzers on sleds to be pulled by CAT tractors. The guns and CATs ground to a halt 75 yds from the beach and could not gain another inch (FIG. 17). The FA prepared to fire from their sleds right on the beach as the first fire missions came from advancing units. Even though the crews emplaced logs behind the trails, the first rounds buried them eighteen inches further into the boggy tundra. It was a glimpse of things to come.⁶⁶



JAPANESE WINTER CLOTHING WITH
BOOTS, OVERCOATS & WINTER CAPS

FIG. 16

Source: U.S. Army Alaska Defense Command, Advance Command Post, G-2, Action on Attu: A Summary of Information on the Enemy, Alaska, 1943, following p. 102. Reprinted with permission.

Supplies sank into the tundra and mud before they could be transloaded onto any form of transportation. The chaos that started 100 yds from the beach transferred ashore, as vehicles, equipment and men began to fight one of their three worst enemies of the campaign - the unforgiving terrain of Attu. A short distance from the shoreline, and throughout the interior of the island, steep mountains rose abruptly to heights of 3,000 feet with rugged peaks and narrow, knife like ridges overlaid with snow and ice in the 20 degree, wind swept, temperatures. No accurate maps existed of the mountains and passes that were the key objectives of the operation and so well defended by a determined enemy. U.S. maps were based on a Russian survey completed in 1864! Where empty spaces existed on the maps there were mountains, deep crevices and passes reaching into the fog. The height and direction of vital passes were unknown (FIG. 18). The only available map was a Coast and Geodetic Survey chart that provided detailed information only 1,000 yds inland. Even today, tactical maps of the area cannot be obtained!⁴⁷.

The U.S. had a force ashore, controlled the local ocean areas, had air superiority in the Theater Operational Area (TOA), but couldn't fly most of the time. Everything would depend on the light infantry soldier, who at this point was untried, fighting a battle for which he was untrained. It was to be an infantrymans' battle, often between individual soldiers hunting each other in the surreal mist and fog of Attu.



Photo by Signal Corps

Traffic problem—illustrating the difficulties of mechanized warfare on Attu. The sound of planes indicates to the man on the right the possibility of trouble overhead as well as underfoot.



Photo by Signal Corps

Attu's northern coast line, a bleak, unfriendly jumble of empty crags, appeared through the lifting mists on May 12. Troops going in to Red Beach on the second day could see their objective five miles ahead, rising from the sullen waves.

FIG. 17 (top) & 18

Sources: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144.
Reprinted with permission.

PHASE 2 Initial Advance and Engagements May 11 to May 17, 1943

Phase 2 of the operation includes the advance northwest through Massacre Valley, initial engagements at Jarmin Pass and the early culmination of the attack by Southern Force resulting in stalemate at Jarmin Pass (FIG. 19). The landing at Red Beach by Northern Force completely surprised the Japanese, but a tough engagement for Hill X developed during Phase 2.**

Southern Force

By 1700 hrs all beaches had been secured to the point that operations inland could proceed. At 1730 hrs, Southern Force began a two pronged advance northwest up Massacre Valley with 2/17th Inf on the right proceeding up Hogback and 3/17th Inf on the left advancing along the valley floor. In reserve to the rear was 2/32nd Inf. The fog was so heavy a company in Massacre Valley got lost and spent precious time reorienting themselves on what appeared to be featureless terrain. Left flank protection was given to I Co, 17th Inf. They were to advance along Henderson ridge, paralleling the progress of 3/17th Inf in the valley below. The right flank was secured by one platoon of F Co, 2/17th Inf. Their mission, inside the screening force on Gilbert Ridge, was to block Cleveay Pass at the head of Sarana Valley and await the arrival of the 2/17th Inf descending from Hogback. The platoon was reinforced with a light machinegun section and a 60mm mortar squad. The platoon marched all night in an advance toward Sarana Valley hauling their mortars up cliffs and steep slopes with ropes and muscle. At dawn the next

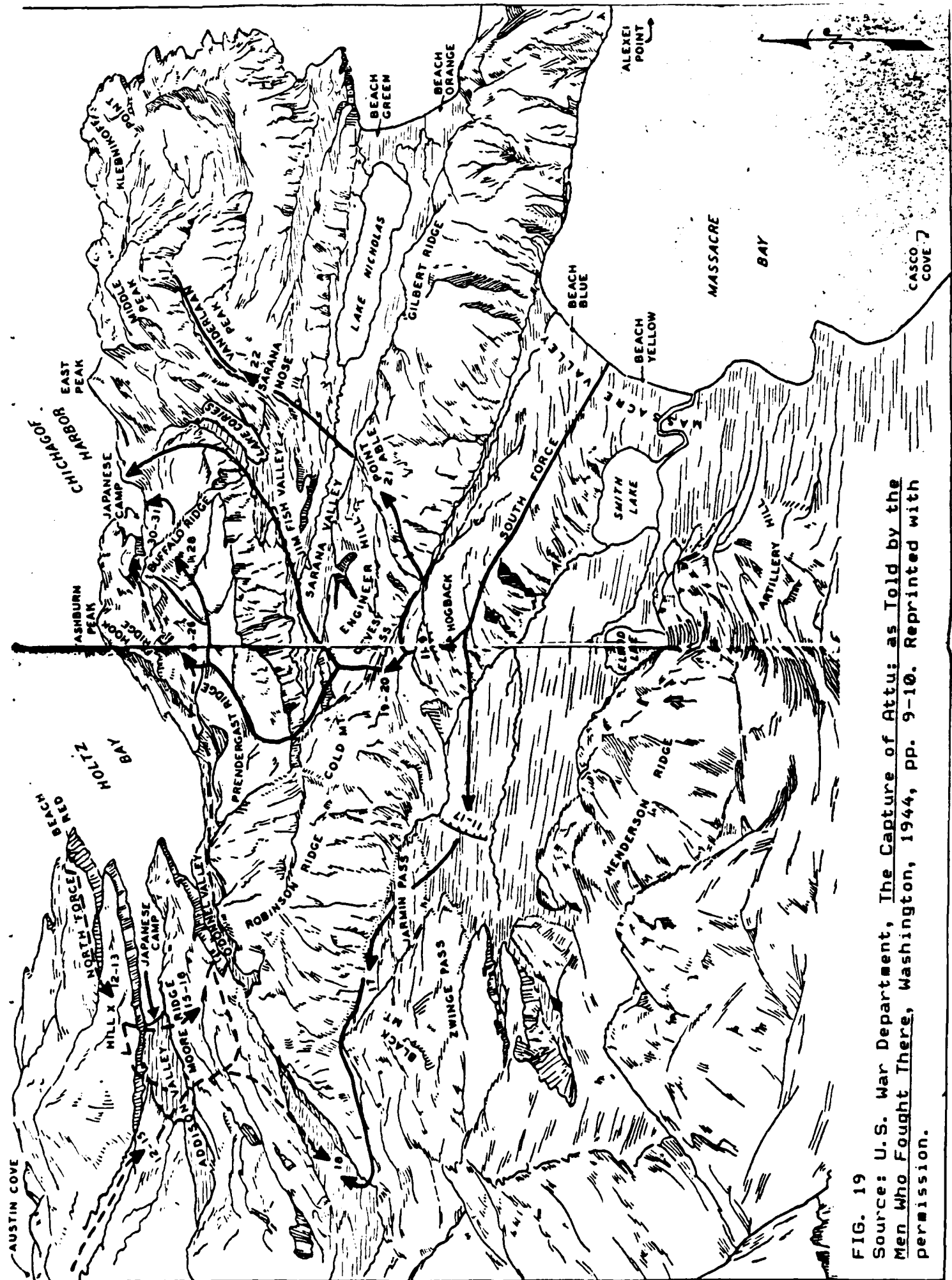


FIG. 19

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, pp. 9-10. Reprinted with permission.

morning the platoon leader watched the Japanese prepare defensive positions on Sarana Nose. He could do nothing because the -195 and -284 series radios given to the platoon were useless in the damp cold weather of Attu. Preparations on Sarana Nose went unchecked and unreported. Days later the capturing of Sarana Nose would be costly, but this was to be one of many communication failures due to weather or equipment. As Lieutenant Odus E. Long watched the preparations on Sarana Nose, he did not know his men would not eat for four days.⁶⁹

The 17th Regt met resistance 2,500 yds from the beach. The Japanese began a pattern that would continue throughout the battle for Attu; they opened fire with machineguns at 1,000 yds, using plunging fire. This technique would prove to be ineffective, although it greatly slowed the pace of advance. At one and a half miles inland, the 2/17th Inf was pinned down by heavy machinegun and mortar fire from the high ground to their front and right flank. They were still one half mile from Jarmin Pass. Two assaults by the battalion were stopped and thrown back into their original positions. By 1900 hrs, 2/17th Inf was stalled on the western end of Hogback Ridge level with Clevesy Pass.⁷⁰

The 3/17th Inf was pinned down 600 yds from Jarmin Pass by the same techniques of plunging machinegun and mortar fire. Artillery fire of the 48th FA was placed on the pass, but heavy enemy fire continued. The Japanese were too well camouflaged and prepared for the barrage to be effective.⁷¹

As nightfall came 2/17th Inf established defensive positions on Hogback facing north and east and about level with Clevesy Pass. On the left 3/17th Inf dug in facing north and west, still under fire 600 yds from Jarmin Pass. Both units remained in these positions for the next five days! The 17th Regt tried repeated frontal assaults only to be thrown back to their original foxholes and pinned down (FIG. 20). It would be May 17 before any progress would be made and that could be attributed to actions by Northern Force.⁷²

The left and right flank security units were both pinned down on Henderson Ridge to the left and on the lower slopes of Gilbert Ridge to the right. Left flank security was pinned down in the same position until May 18. The platoon from F Co, 17th Inf fought well, but made a key mistake during the early stages of the battle. Members of the platoon captured documents outlining the entire defensive plan, including unit dispositions, for Jarmin Pass. The papers were not turned over to anyone who could have made use of the information. They were found in the pocket of a wounded soldier at an aid station after Jarmin Pass had been taken at a cost of 100 lives!⁷³

The Japanese 303d Ind Inf Bn had two companies in fortified positions on Henderson Ridge, Black and Cold Mountain, Sarana Nose and Point A (Able). They had perfect observation down through the fog, which along with the snow, hid their positions



he Infantryman's foxhole view of Jarmin Pass, leading from Massacre Valley across to Ioliz Bay. Jap trenches, sniper and machine-gun positions, cleverly camouflaged in the dotted tundra folds, swept the valley floor from the nose of Black Mountain and the low plateau (right center of photo) stretching across the mouth of Jarmin Pass. Mortars emplaced in low

ground behind the plateau pounded the Americans who were dug into the valley mud. He continuous pressure by our forces compelled the Japs to abandon these positions the night May 16. The following day the pass was occupied, thus joining the Northern and South landing forces and restricting the Jap garrison to the northeast corner of Attu.

Photo by Captain N. L. Deussen

FIG. 20

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144. Reprinted with permission.

almost completely (FIG. 21). The temperature that night was a wet, windy 10 degrees.⁷⁴

Northern Force

Hill X was the initial objective of Northern Force (FIG. 22). It was a group of peaks 300 yds long that dominated the shelf west of Holtz Bay. Even though the physical pace was agonizingly slow through the tundra and snow, Northern Force, led by 1/17th Inf in column of companies, had advanced two miles inland by 2200 hrs. They were 800 yds short of their initial objective at Hill X, when Ltc Hartl, unsure of his position because of the fog, darkness and poor maps, decided to halt his advance and establish defensive positions. In this simple action, the element of surprise was lost. During their advance toward Hill X, the battalions' left flank security platoon, traveling along the beach, surprised four Japanese soldiers. The platoon opened fire killing two of the enemy soldiers, but two others escaped to warn their leaders of the landing at Red Beach! That evening the Japanese occupied Hill X and prepared to defend terrain that had been free for 1/17th Inf to take only hours earlier. The unit settled into their wet, cold, muddy positions exhausted from marching the tundra and rope hauling equipment up steep cliffs. The first casualties from exposure began to occur in the bitter cold weather. Col Culin, the Northern Force Commander, was evacuated during the evening of May 11.⁷⁵

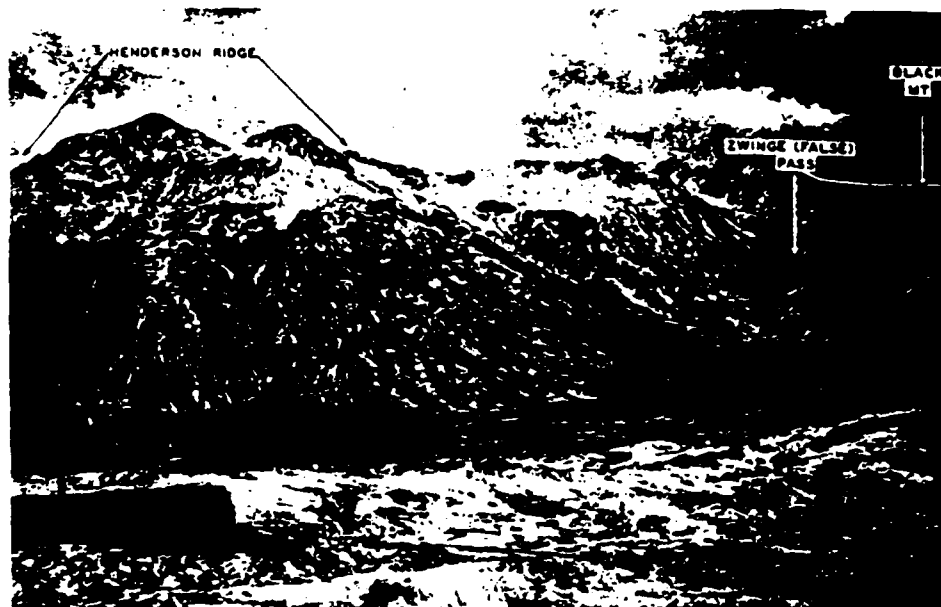


Photo by Captain N. L. Drummond

The Southern Force advanced up Massacre Valley the evening of May 11. Their objective was the pass (Zwinge Pass) leading from the valley's upper end through the mountains to Holtz Bay. In the gathering darkness and fog which blanketed the mountains they finally met Japanese machine-gun, rifle, and mortar fire from strong positions surrounding the pass. The next morning fog still hid the heights of Henderson Ridge, stretching down from Zwinge Pass along their left flank. Jap snipers and machine gunners enfiladed the valley floor from high positions along the fog line. During the next few days small American patrols fought along these rugged slopes and gradually wiped out the Jap emplacements there. The photo was taken from the highest point (600 feet) on the Hogback, looking westward just to the left of Black Mountain.



Photo by Captain N. L. Drummond

West arm of Holtz Bay Valley taken from positions along Moore Ridge which the Japs held after they were driven from the west arm. From these the enemy swept the valley floor with mortar and machine-gun fire. Detachments of Companies A and B, 17th Infantry, fought their way to the highest point on Moore Ridge and forced the

FIG. 21 (top) & 22

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144.

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Provisional Battalion

As Provisional Bn left Scarlet Beach, carrier fighters from the USS Nassau mistakenly strafed and sank all the rubber boats used by the battalion to come ashore. Now they had no choice but to complete the 4,000 ft climb to their objective (FIG. 23). Cpt Willoughbys' men lacked communication with the other forces of the battle and possessed only one and a half days of rations! Provisional Bn would face the worst weather and terrain of the battle on Attu.⁷⁴

May 12, 1943

Southern Force

The fog was so thick on May 12 no advance was attempted until 0900 hrs. Battleship Nevada shelled the ridges to the front and sides of 17th Inf with 14 inch guns. Col Earle ordered Southern Forces into an attack on Jarain Pass, but within yards of the line of departure (LD) withering machinegun and mortar fire, covering almost every foot of ground, drove the 17th Inf soldiers back to their foxholes in a low crawl. At the 17th Regt HQs, the weather disrupted radio communications, as it would repeatedly during the battle. Col Earle decided to find out the situation on his front lines first hand. During his tour, in the early afternoon he became the target of a Japanese sniper. He was one of 56 killed, thus far, in the struggle for Attu. MG Brown, 7th DIV Cdr, ordered his Chief of Staff, Col Zimmerman, to assume command of Southern Force immediately. Col Zimmerman, upon arrival, found the battalions stalled and just



Photo by 11th Air Force

The independent Provisional Battalion, made up of the 7th Scout Company and the 7th Reconnaissance Troop, landed separately from submarines before daylight on May 11. Separated from the main Northern Force by four miles of jagged mountain peaks, they pushed up through the fog and snow to bivouac overnight on a snow-drifted pass. The next morning they attacked the rear of the Japanese positions in Holtz Bay, keeping up the pressure throughout four days.

FIG. 23

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144.
Reprinted with permission.

beginning to receive supplies. A new and extremely difficult problem was surfacing. Supplies were bogged down on the congested beaches, vehicles were all but useless and everything had to be hand carried to the front lines. Col Stewart, from Alaska Defense Command, assumed duties as the Chief of Staff for 7th DIV.⁷⁷.

Northern Force

While Southern Force seemed to be locked into repeated attempts at frontal assaults, Northern Force was planning the kind of maneuver that would eventually lead to success in the larger battle for Attu. Ltc Hartl sent his A Co on a mission to envelop Hill X from the right flank. As A Co maneuvered into position, they found a deep ravine, which didn't appear on any maps, between themselves and Hill X. As the leadership of A Co tried to solve this difficulty, Japanese machinegunners and mortarmen pinned them down, where they would be forced to remain throughout May 12. The main body advanced toward Hill X, with B Co on the left and C Co in reserve facing the hill, but they were also stalled by sniper fire from 300 yds up slope on Hill X (FIG. 24). Northern Force fell back without casualties and at midday began planning an assault on Hill X supported by artillery and naval gun fire. At 1630 hrs, naval aircraft bombed and strafed the Japanese positions. Northern Force followed up with an attack by C Co that overran the snipers and first defensive line on Hill X at 1830 hrs. The Japanese launched a vicious local counter attack. Fighting was hand to hand and with bayonets, but

Northern Force held and by 1930 hrs Ltc Hartle's men had taken the last high ground on the west arm of Holtz Bay. They had to continue fighting to hold Hill X and A Co was still pinned down across the ravine to the right flank. Northern Force had sustained fourteen KIA, fifteen WIA and twelve exposure cases, but they were in control of the high ground and the Provisional Bn to the west had done their job well by preventing reinforcement of those forces engaging Northern Force.^{7a}

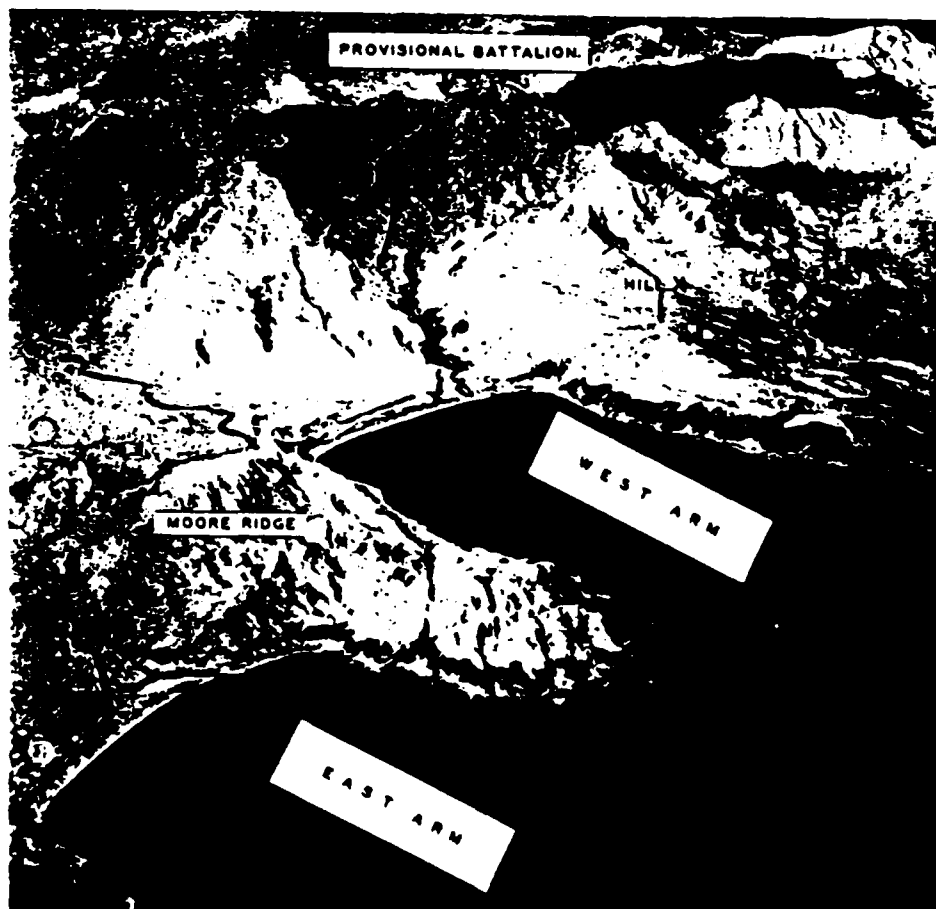
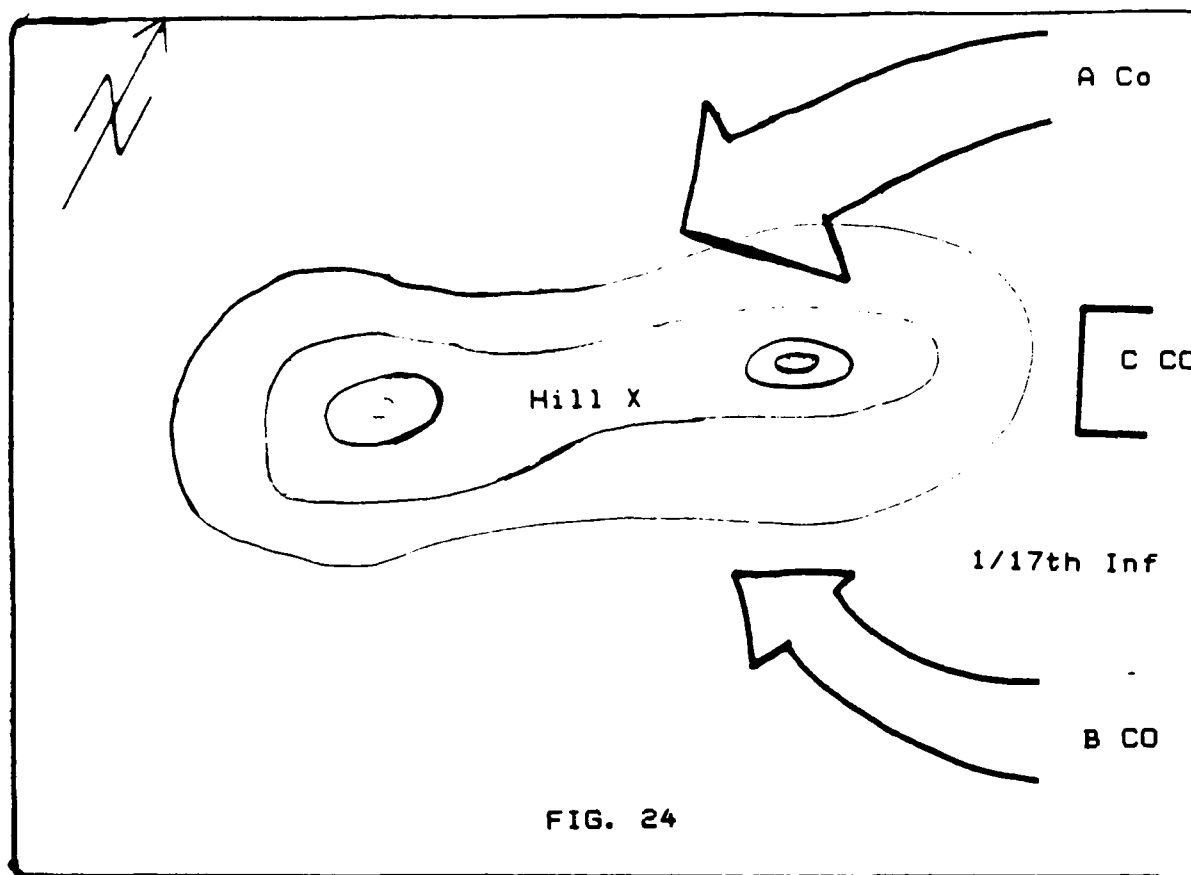
Provisional Bn

By 0400 hrs, Provisional Bn had crossed the western mountains from Austin Cove and entered Addison Valley (FIG. 25). Cpt Willoughby was at the enemies rear lines about the time A Co was being pinned down. He engaged the Japanese at 0800 hrs, in what would be an ongoing fire fight for three days on the southeastern slope of the northern mountains behind Hill X, stalemating any attempt to counter attack east in strength or to reinforce against Northern Force. The cost in casualties was to be high, not from enemy fire, but brutal Aleutian weather. The Provisional Bn would eventually accomplish all objectives and force evacuation of the Holtz Bay camp May 15.^{7a}

May 13, 1943

Southern Force

Through thick fog and snow, Southern Force launched another



Aerial shot of Holtz Bay, February 1943, showing in graphic snow relief the junction area of the Provisional Battalion with the main Northern Force

FIG. 25

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144. Reprinted with permission.

assault on Jarmin Pass, advancing to within 200 yds of the summit, only to be thrown back by a triple cross fire of machineguns and enemy riflemen. Soldiers of 17th Inf fell back to their foxholes of two days before. The Japanese defense was established in a series of long trenches with machinegun and rifle positions, which completely dominated the valley below. Trench systems were located on the slopes of Black Mountain, between Jarmin and Zwinge Pass, and linked with similar systems on Henderson and Robinson Ridge with crawl ways and snow tunnels (FIG. 26 and 27). These trenches were generally 400 feet up the slope and supported by outlying snipers as the first line of defense. The Henderson ridge trench was 400 feet up slope and 500 yds south of Zwinge pass. The main defensive trench on Cold Mountain was built in the form of a large wheel, with all fighting positions connected by trenches like spokes to a hub. At the hub, was a large bunker with two machineguns and a 37mm gun. Enemy snipers often tried to infiltrate approaching and passing U.S. forces to cause fear and confusion, thus slowing the progress of advancing units.²⁰

Dismaied by the situation facing the division, MG Brown had repeatedly tried to contact ADM Rockwell and inform him of the critical situation ashore, but MG Browns' critical communication equipment for his headquarters had been placed aboard the USS Perida, which lay sinking off Yellow Beach, as a result of running onto one of many pinnacle rocks in Aleutian waters. The radios for the joint command nets were lost before the action started.²¹

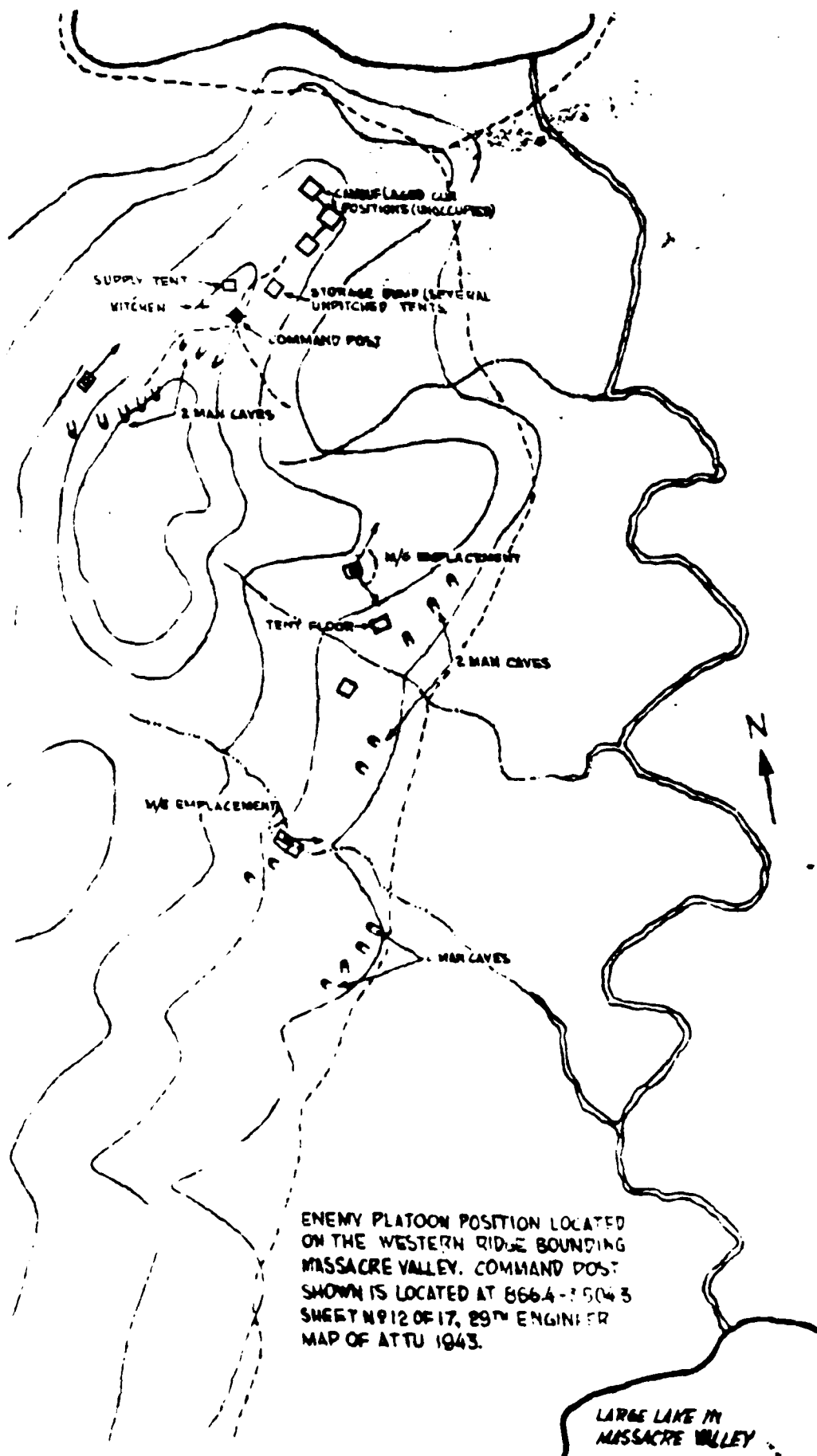


FIG. 26

Source: U.S. Army Alaska Defense Command, Advance Command Post, G-2, Action on Attu: A Summary of Information on the Enemy, Alaska, 1943, p. 9-10. Reprinted with permission.

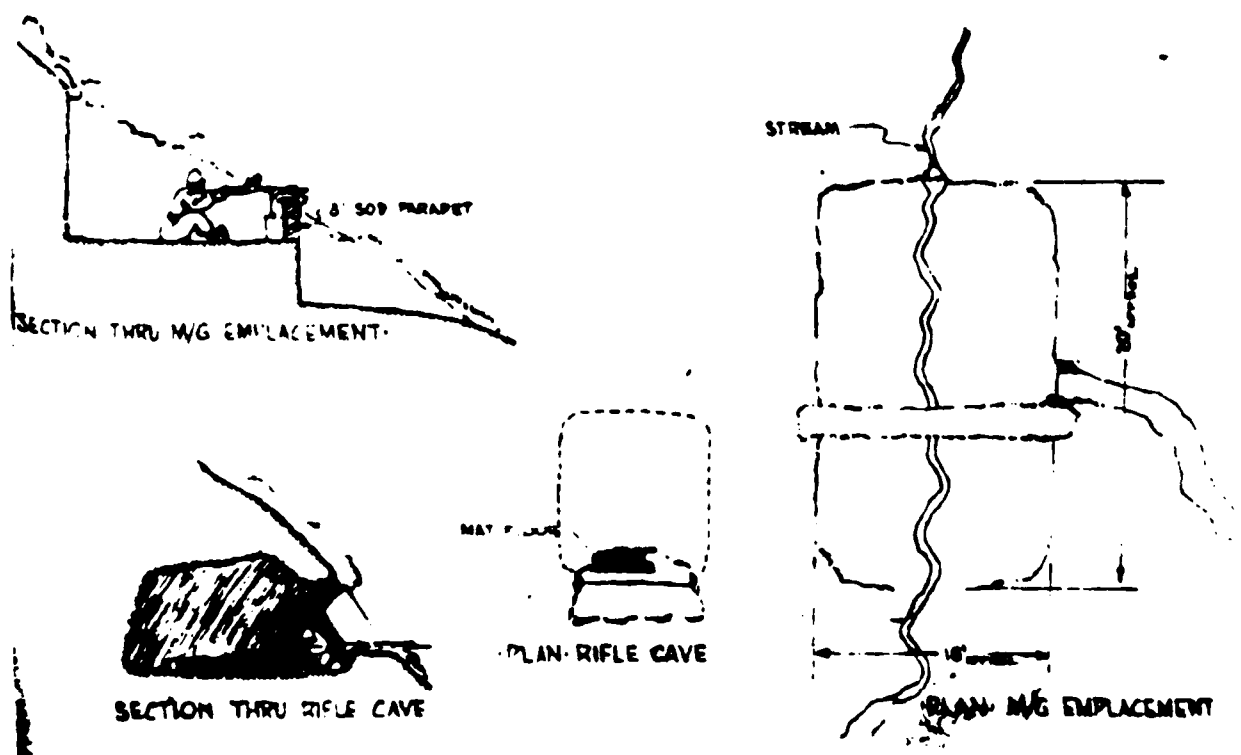


FIG. 27

Source: U.S. Army Alaska Defense Command, Advance Command Post, G-2, Action on Attu: A Summary of Information on the Enemy, Alaska, 1943, p. 14-15. Reprinted with permission.

This critical loss initiated a chain of increasingly intense misunderstandings between MG Brown, ADM Rockwell and their superiors. ADM Rockwell had little understanding of the situation on the ground, because almost no information was getting through to him from MG Brown, who had tried everything to communicate, including runners with written reports. Everything from snipers to sunken landing craft prevented ADM Rockwell from receiving a clear understanding of the situation. MG Brown implored ADM Rockwell to send the floating reserve ashore immediately. The poor communication and lack of understanding in conjunction with friction between various personalities would lead to MG Browns' relief, but for now he was struggling to get supplies to the front with badly needed reinforcements.²²

Early in the afternoon 1/32nd Inf (less A and B Co, which remained afloat) and 20th Field Hospital debarked USS Grant for landings at Massacre Bay. The 3/32nd Inf aboard USS Chirikoff positioned themselves for landing at Red Beach, only to find the area totally covered by enemy fire. Col Culin, who had been evacuated to the Chirikoff, decided to land that night to avoid concentrated fire.²³

Northern Force

The 1/17th Inf was continuing their success on Hill X, when A Co joined them from across the unmapped ravine on the right flank. B Co maneuvered into position behind A Co and attacked

from the right flank, through A and C Co, to the crest of Hill X. Six hours of vicious fighting followed, which cost 1/17th the most casualties of the battle. After capturing the remaining peaks of Hill X, Northern Force paused to consolidate their position, reorganize and plan an attack on the Holtz Bay camp. They had the dominate terrain overwatching the main Japanese camp 1,000 yds down hill across open tundra. Throughout the afternoon, enemy snipers and artillery fire harassed the men on Hill X, but 1/17th Inf wouldn't budge. By 2000 hrs, 3/32nd Inf had landed and was advancing toward Hill X to reinforce the hard won success. By noon the next day, the battalion would be in position and Col Culin would again assume command of Northern Force.♦♦-

Provisional Bn

The Provisional Bn continued to draw the Japanese west and occupied the remaining high ground behind Hill X. They had not eaten in two days.♦♦-

May 14, 1943

Southern Force

After the necessary preparations, 3/17th Inf and 2/32nd Inf, with G Co on the right and F Co to the left, made yet another assault on Jarmin Pass at 0630 hrs and again at 1100 hrs. The 3/17th Inf was advancing toward enemy positions on Cold Mountain,

while 2/32nd Inf attempted an advance on the eastern slope of Henderson ridge. The men were too exhausted to carry it off and the Japanese were as relentless as ever. During the attempt two company commanders were wounded and two others were killed. The 3/17th Inf had taken a beating during the numerous attempts on the pass. Many of the men suffered from exposure, had not eaten in days and now most of the key leaders were out of action. Col Zimmerman asked for replacements from the hundreds now tied up performing logistical tasks, but MG Brown had no ready reinforcements or replacements. Those soldiers carrying supplies to the front lines would have to continue. It was the only method of feeding and resupplying the division. The 2/32nd Inf would temporarily replace 3/17th Inf during the night.⁶⁶

MG Brown delayed any further attacks by Southern Force until his Northern Force could attack Holtz Bay. With the success of Northern Force to the rear of Jarmin Pass, the Japanese would have to consider a withdrawal from the pass to defend their main camp at Chichagof Harbor. Southern Force had already made at least five frontal assaults on Jarmin Pass, at the cost of nearly 100 KIA. They were given time to reorganize and resupply. And the supply situation, or any kind of support from the beach, was desperate at best.⁶⁷

The landing craft used to bring supplies ashore were being lost at an alarming rate to the weather, uncharted waters and enemy fire. By May 18, ninety of the available ninety three landing craft were lost! Shoals, reefs and williwaws had

destroyed them! Supplies were being brought ashore by PT boats and PBY aircraft making taxi runs to the beach! Wounded soldiers had to be carried off the treacherous terrain in litters. The terrain was so rugged each wounded soldier required eight others to rope haul them down the steep slopes and cliffs (FIG. 28). By now the landing force had a detail of 400 men carrying wounded soldiers on stretchers! The field artillery units had to move their guns by hand; it took twenty men half a day to move 600 yds. Ammunition was carried in rucksacks or by hand and it was being fired at an unbelievable rate. The 75mm guns required five men for each gun just to carry ammunition (FIG. 29). Radios were breaking down at a high rate because of the continuous moisture, snow and ice. The entire force was ashore five days before communication was established between Northern and Southern Force. Communication broke down completely between battalions and regimental headquarters. During an attack on Cold Mountain, one frustrated radio man threw his radio off a nearby cliff. Worse yet, the calf high Blucher boot was not water proof. Soldiers began to experience frostbite far beyond the expected level. All in all, it was a situation that required heroic action to overcome.^^-

Northern Force

Col Culin had planned an attack for May 14 to take Holtz Bay, but MG Brown delayed the attack until May 15 to get Southern Force ready on the south side of the island. Resupply efforts and preparations for the attack on Holtz Bay were the primary



FIG. 28

Sources: Photo Archives USAMHI, RG1- H.U.M., .10470, file #
W - ALE - 56-54502.



FIG. 29

Sources: Photo Archives USAMHI, WW II Signal Corps Collection,
U.S., Alaska, Attu, Aleutians #2, file # SC 174503.

tasks at hand.²²-

Provisional Bn

The day was marked by continuous firefights without any gains on the ground. Cpt Willoughbys' men had performed better than anyone could have asked, but they had been fighting continuously for days and had not eaten in 3 to 4 days. They had no food, no mortar ammunition and small arms ammunition was almost gone. The only attempted air drop had gone awry because of the usual terrible weather and rugged terrain. By night fall, half the Provisional Bn was either wounded, frostbitten, or vomiting green bile from lack of food. They might have been ineffective if their situation had not demanded otherwise. They had little choice but to fight their way through to Northern Force.²³-

Situation in General

During the planning for the Aleutians Campaign, the Commander of Western Defense Command, LTG Dewitt, had given the War Department an estimate of three days for the recapture of Attu. Now four days after D-day, the entire force seemed stalled near the beaches. Southern Force, the main body of the landings, had made no progress in four days of fighting and the casualties were getting worse by the day. Northern Force, while in possession of their initial objective at Hill X, had not followed up on their initial success. The tactical reserve had been landed and put into action with the Southern and Northern Forces.

Provisional Bn was in a continuous and desperate battle without gaining any further ground and, it appeared to some, they may be lost altogether in the bitter fighting for Holtz Bay.⁹¹

The artillery squated in the tundra near the beaches and could only be moved by gargantuan physical efforts by the crews. Every round had to be hand carried from the beach supply areas, which were heaping with supplies and totally congested (FIG. 30). The Perida, with her vital communication equipment on board, was still aground offshore and could not be unloaded. The 11th Air Force was unable to assist in breaking the stalemate because of the weather conditions. Air strikes and air drop of badly needed supplies were impossible. Naval forces had supported with everything they could muster and now were out of ammunition and possibly facing a Japanese naval force entering the area. If this happened U.S. naval forces would be forced to leave the Attu landing force for safer waters and resupply.⁹²

Soldiers began to come in from the front lines limping on frozen feet and sick from the lack of food; first in twos and threes, then in scores and finally by the hundreds! The high Blucher boot caused feet to perspire freely, which quickly froze and led to frostbite or trench foot. Some men would not remove their boots for thirteen days, inviting gangrene and amputation. MG Brown had a warmup tent facility erected and rotated battalions so that each unit would spend every third day inside out of the 20 degree wind driven rain and snow. It was obvious



FIG. 30

Source: Photo Archives USAMHI, WW II Signal Corps Collection, U.S., Alaska, Attu (Aleutians), #4, file # SC 179468.

to everyone on Attu that the issue clothing was inadequate. Many of the U.S. infantrymen started wearing Japanese clothing to stay dry and warm even at risk to their lives.²²

MG Brown had put his reserves into the line and now asked for the 4th Inf Regt to reinforce from Adak. ADM Rockwell refused this request because of the situation on the beaches and intelligence reports on a Japanese naval force approaching the area of operations. The chain of command above MG Brown had little understanding of his situation because of the communication difficulties, which they mistook for reluctance to keep them informed on what appeared to be a failing effort. That very day MG Brown had again, dispatched situation reports to ADM Rockwell for delivery by PBY. These were also dropped into the ocean and never arrived. By now, ADM Rockwell was being asked for numerous details on the operation, which he didn't have. At the very moment communication needed to be at its' best, the intelligence staff informed ADM Rockwell the Japanese were picking up most of the U.S. communications traffic and with it the desperate situation ashore. What little communication there had been was now cut off! No information only worsened the situation for MG Brown. Unknown to him, a conference was being held the next day concerning the situation on Attu. Those attending were LTG Dewitt, MG Buckner (Alaska Defense Command), ADM Kinkaid and MG H. M. Smith (USMC). Not one really knew or understood the true situation on Attu. MG Brown, upon learning of LTG Dewitts' visit, requested him to intercede with the Navy commanders and have the 4th Inf Regt and sixty days of engineer

supplies to Attu. The conferees at Adak were astounded and misinterpreted the message. It appeared that MG Brown was settling for a long operation and certainly well beyond the three day estimate given by LTG Dewitt. The 4th Inf Regt and the supplies were going to Attu, but a larger decision had to be made. MG Brown's relief would be decided at Adak.⁹⁴

May 15, 1943

Southern Force

Col Zimmerman led yet another assault into Jarmin Pass with 2/32nd Inf, reinforced by M Co, 17th Inf, only to watch his men be thrown back to their original LD of four days earlier. Southern Force had, for too long, held onto an ineffective set of tactics against Jarmin Pass. Maneuvers to take the high ground on the left and right of the enemy probably would have brought success, much as it had for Northern Force. Their flank security and screening forces were in place on Henderson and Gilbert Ridge. Why not reinforce the flanking elements and envelop the well prepared positions being held so tenaciously by the Japanese? It was a question that would go unanswered.⁹⁵

Northern Force

The critical break in the battle was created by the efforts of Northern Force and Provisional Bn. At dawn, and for most of the morning, visibility in the fog was only 100 yds. Col Culin delayed the attack on Holtz Bay until 1100 hrs in hopes the fog

would lift to its' normal level of 500 to 600 feet up the slopes. By noon Northern Force was advancing down slope from Hill X toward the Japanese camp.⁹⁶

The Japanese had withdrawn during the night, leaving an empty camp and stores of supplies for capture by Northern Force. Determined, fierce fighting and dogged pursuit by the Provisional Bn caused the Japanese to over estimate U.S. strength to the west. Fearing an envelopment from the west and north, the Japanese withdrew to Moore Ridge just south of the Holtz Bay camp. Here they established a defensive line, much as before and waited. They left behind large amounts of food and medical supplies, a battery of 70mm dual purpose guns and a number of machineguns and mortars.⁹⁷

During the early afternoon, Northern Force secured Holtz Bay and prepared to attack Moore Ridge to the east. By evening, they had advanced to the middle of the west arm floor and began final preparations for the attack in the morning hours of the next day. Col Culins' plan was to drive the attack east across Moore Ridge and Prendergast Ridge forcing a Japanese withdrawal from Jarmin Pass to Chichagof Harbor where they could be surrounded and destroyed. His immediate concern ,however, was his open right flank exposed to the Japanese forces at Jarmin Pass.⁹⁸

Provisional Bn

Cpt Willoughbys' determined men had pursued the Japanese the

entire night and into the next day, relentlessly attacking. The Japanese got no rest at the western side of Holtz Bay. As they withdrew from Holtz Bay, those forces facing the Provisional Bn were taken with them. Cpt Willoughby could now complete his special mission by linking up with Northern Force. His men had not eaten in four days. They limped and crawled into Holtz Bay on frozen feet to join Col Culina's force. Many had bleeding, ulcerated lesions on their knees from crawling hundreds of yards out of the mountains. Of the initial 420 man force, only forty could walk unassisted or without pain. Amazingly, the well trained force had only sustained eleven men KIA and twenty wounded during the intense fighting through the mountains. Weather injuries were much more severe. Numerous cases of frostbite, trench foot and gangrene had to be evacuated. A full 90% of the scout company and 75% of the 7th Recon Troop suffered severe exposure. Only 165 men remained to fight on with Northern Force.^^-

May 10, 1943

Southern Force

MG Brown ordered another assault on Jarmin Pass! This assault was no different from the past half dozen. The men of Southern Force were, no doubt, demoralized by the unyielding defenses. Their leaders had been killed, they were hungry, cold, wet and suffering from exposure. Probably a few wondered whatever happened to the concepts of fire and maneuver?^1^^-

Notification of his relief as CG of the 7th DIV and the Landing Force at Attu shocked MG Brown. He asked for an immediate investigation, but MG Landrum (ADC), who had been recommended by MG Buckner, was already enroute to Attu. MG Brown spent his final day at Attu bringing his replacement up to date on the situation. He had been the victim of the chaos at Attu and the lack of communication, which was interpreted for lack of aggressive leadership and action by his senior leaders.^{101.}

Northern Force

Dawn brought with it a hail of machinegun fire on the two battalions of Northern Force pinning them down in their night defensive positions. During the melee, detachments of B and C company 1/17th Inf found a covered approach that allowed them to maneuver on the right flank of the enemy. The elements out flanked the Japanese positions and attacked to a point on Moore Ridge that overlooked the enemy. The fighting was vicious, but the Japanese would be enveloped or withdraw. C Co, 1/17th Inf earned a unit citation for the heroic fighting on Moore Ridge.^{102.}

The 1/17th and 3/32nd Inf waited until nightfall to launch a coordinated attack, thereby avoiding the machinegun fire and deceiving the Japanese about their intentions (FIG. 31 and 32). At 0100 hrs, May 17 they attacked the second ridge east of the bay and higher on Moore ridge with 3/32nd in the lead. By 0300 hrs, both units reached the crest to find the earlier flanking

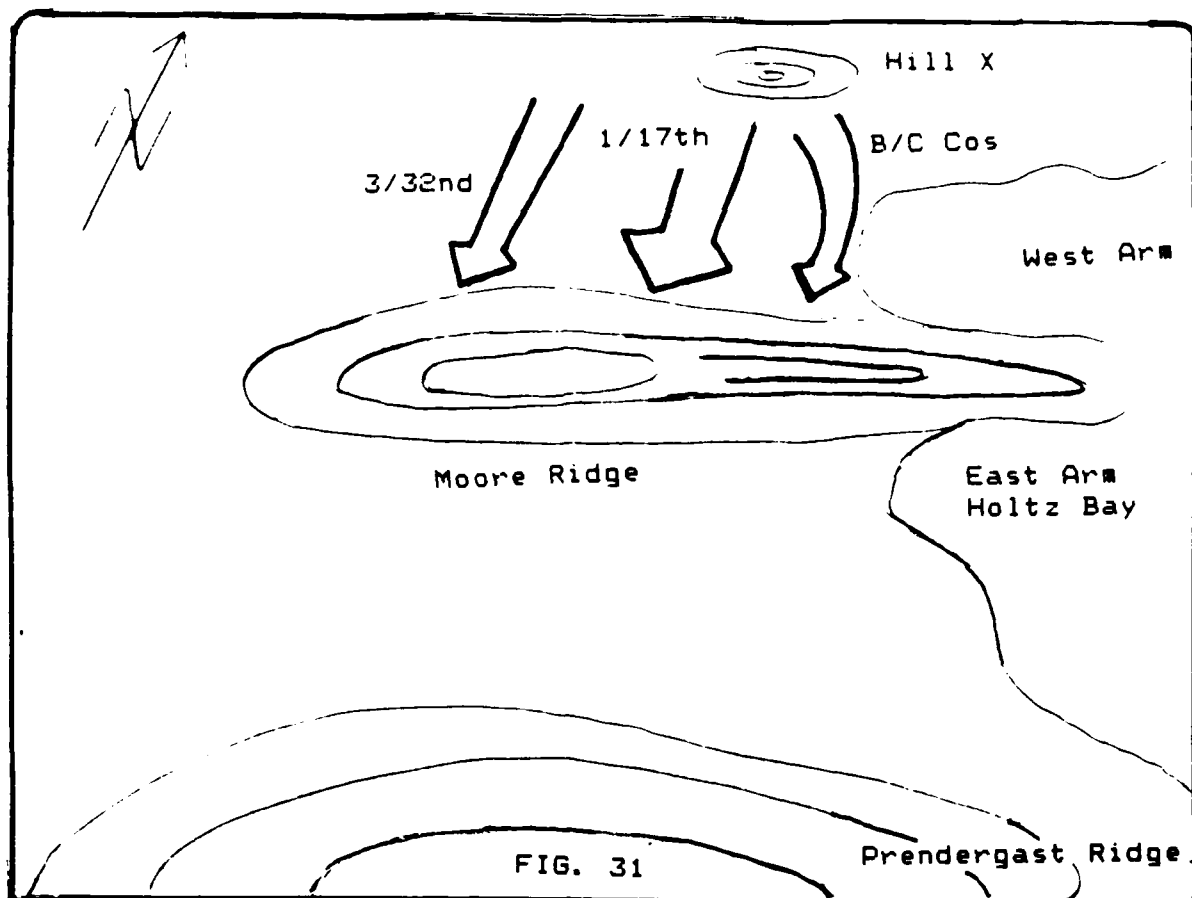


FIG. 32

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu, as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144. Reprinted with permission.



Photo by Signal Corps

Holtz Bay, swept by Japanese machine guns, against which the Northern Force fought on its way up to the Holtz-Chichagof Pass. The photo was taken from a Japanese position along the lower slopes leading up from the bay. The slopes are pock-marked with shell craters from our artillery across Holtz Bay. Troops are moving up to reinforce the Northern Force assault on Holtz-Chichagof Pass, May 25, 1943.

maneuver by C Co convinced the Japanese to withdraw under cover of darkness. The Japanese 1st Co had fallen back to defensive positions in the east arm of Holtz Bay. Northern Force established defensive positions and began patrolling east to conduct reconnaissance of Japanese positions. The taking of Moore Ridge was a key engagement during the early stages of the battle. It allowed U.S. forces to out flank the enemy at Jarmin Pass and broke the stalemate of Southern Force. A series of maneuvers were then initiated by the division that continually threatened to envelop Col Yamaskis' weaker forces.¹⁰³

Holtz Bay was now open for use by the Navy and the beaches could be cleared of the heaping piles of supplies and ammunition. The bleak situation of days before was beginning to change. MG Landrum made the same estimate of the situation that MG Brown had developed and concluded that no major change in the tactical plan was necessary. At least in this small way, MG Brown had been vindicated. MG Landrum required his units to take the flanking high ground and attack from these positions, rather than continue the methods used at Jarmin Pass. This decision made a major difference in the outcome of succeeding engagements.¹⁰⁴

The seventh day of the battle ended with 1,100 casualties, of which 500 were caused by exposure, poor hygiene habits, and inadequate equipment. A total of 12,500 men were on Attu, but only 3,500 were in the front line! The rest were struggling to move guns, equipment and supplies to the front and wounded to the rear, all by hand or on the backs of individual soldiers (FIG.

May 17, 1943

Southern Force

As Northern Force attacked Moore Ridge the morning of May 17, Southern Force was still in their positions of May 11 deciding their next move. About noon, Col Zimmerman moved to an advanced observation post near Jarmin Pass. He searched for signs of the enemy as the fog lifted almost to the top, but found no movement or other indications the enemy was still in the pass. Quickly gathering a patrol he reconnoitered the pass to find the Japanese had withdrawn during the night. On his way up the slopes, he found most of an U.S. platoon dead. Among them was Cpt Jarmin, Commander of L Co, 17th Inf. The pass would, forever, bear his name in memory of the bitter fighting that took place in the Holtz-Massacre Pass. K Co, 17th Inf occupied the pass and I Co, 17th Inf pushed through the pass and initiated patrols down the north side, where they would join with Cpt Willoughby and North Force the next day.106.

Remnants of the Japanese 303d Ind Inf Bn had withdrawn from Henderson Ridge and the area surrounding Jarmin Pass, in favor of reinforcing Clevesy Pass and Point A. Their withdrawal had been totally unobserved. It is important to note that Japanese communications must have been well established, since all forces were well informed on the status of the battle elsewhere. Key withdrawals were well timed, throughout the battle, with events on

other parts of the islands.^{107.}

Northern Force

Recall the early hours of May 17 were used in the night attack on Moore Ridge. Northern Force spent most of the daylight hours consolidating their gains on the ridge and reconnoitering east into the eastern arm of the bay. These patrols found the Japanese 1st Co had withdrawn further to the high ground of Prendergast Ridge in the direction of Chichagof Harbor.^{108.}

Col Yasuyo Yamasaki had left the rear positions of Jarmin Pass exposed when his forces were compelled to avoid envelopment at Holtz Bay. The advance by Northern Force toward Prendergast Ridge would isolate Jarmin Pass, therefore Col Yamasaki ordered withdrawal from the pass during the night of May 16 and 17. Maj Watanabe and Lieutenants Honna and Goto withdrew in darkness toward the main force at Chichagof. The 1st Co joined elements of 2nd Co in defense of Sarana-Massacre (Clevesy) Pass. Defense of Sarana Nose was taken up by 4th Co, with Point A defended by 2nd Co. Jarmin pass was open for Col Zimmermans' noon discovery.^{109.}

Phase 3 Linkup of Southern and Northern Force May 18 to May 28

Operations during this phase were characterized by the linking of Northern and Southern Forces and a series of offensive engagements to reduce Japanese defensive positions at Clevesy Pass, Sarana Nose, Fish Hook Ridge and Buffalo Ridge. Maneuver

to gain dominating terrain near enemy defenses prevented further stalemates, such as that at Jarmin Pass. Still, the fighting was no less brutal.^{110.}

May 18, 1943

Southern Force and Northern Force

In the early hours of May 18, Col Culin asked for Cpt Willoughby, who was still recuperating from his ordeal in the mountains. Col Culin needed a patrol leader for another special mission. Cpt Willoughby accepted the task of reconnoitering the approaches to Jarmin pass from the north. Unaware the Japanese had withdrawn, Cpt Willoughby and his 150 volunteers from the remnants of Provisional Bn thought they would be advancing on the enemy rear lines at Jarmin Pass. At 0230 hrs, his lead platoon met a patrol from I Co, 17th Inf. Northern and Southern Forces were now joined; the enemy and lack of communication no longer separated U.S. forces. K Co, 17th Inf guarded Jarmin Pass, while the rest of 3/17th Inf went into reserve and warm tents. Attacks on Clevesy Pass were being planned by 2/32nd Inf and 2/17th Inf. Moving into position on the Hogback was 1/4th Inf, which had landed at 1300 hrs.^{111.}

MG Landrum, his staff and commanders used the day to reorganize, resupply and plan for the advance on Chichagof Harbor. The pincer approach was to continue with Northern Force advancing on the north slope of Prendergast Ridge and Southern Force advancing on three avenues from Clevesy Pass to Buffalo

Ridge via the southern slope of Prendergast Ridge, Clevesy Pass north through Sarana valley and from Hogback across Point A on Gilbert Ridge to Sarana Nose continuing north on Vanderlean Peak. These were the tactical plans in their simplest form. Much remained to be done in preparation for the undertaking.¹¹²

Resupply efforts still had to be carried out by individuals with rucksacks and strong backs. While congestion at the beaches had been cleared away, only three of the original ninety three landing craft remained! ADM Rockwell made an urgent plea for tugs or other available craft from Adak, but they would take a week traveling to Attu.¹¹³

May 19, 1943

Southern Force

The attack on Clevesy Pass was to be led by 2/17th Inf advancing through the pass into Sarana Valley. They were to be followed by 1/4th Inf, 3/17th Inf, and 2/32nd in that order. C Co, 1/32nd Inf was to advance along Gilbert Ridge and attack Point A in support of the main advance through the pass (FIG. 34). Supporting fires came from one battery of 48th FA, ten 37mm guns, two 75mm guns and three caliber .50 machineguns all located on Hogback Ridge.¹¹⁴

The first attack began at 0500 hrs with F Co(-), 2/17th Inf advancing from the Hogback into the pass. A platoon of F Co and I Co, 2/17th Inf attacked from Jarmin Pass to Cold Mountain,



Photo by Signal Corps
Manpower moved most of the front-line supplies and ammunition. Tractors were few on Attu and vulnerable to Jap fire. Here men of the 4th Infantry haul mortar ammunition and combat equipment up the Hogback.

FIG. 33

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144.
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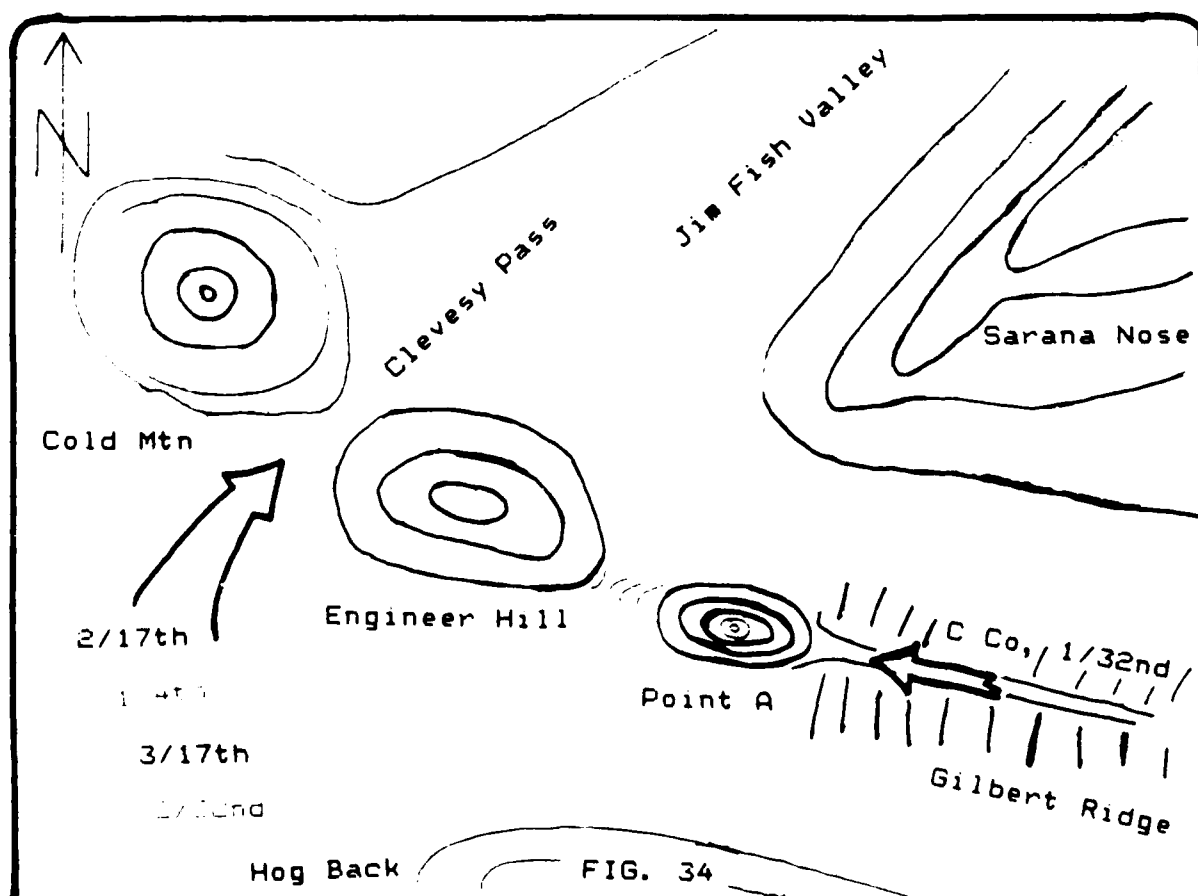


FIG. 34

while C Co, 1/32nd Inf attacked Point A. Japanese fire stalled the attack pinning down the lead elements. At 0900 hrs, the attack was initiated again with the same results. Planning for a second attack began immediately.^{115.}

At about 1000 hrs, Southern Force laid an artillery preparation on the high ground northeast of the Hogback. At 0952 hrs, 2/17th Inf attacked Clevesy Pass with I Co and F Co on the left flank attacking Cold Mountain; E Co attacked Clevesy Pass and Engineer Hill. The 2/32nd Inf attacked northeast toward the high ground near Point A. C Co, 1/32nd Inf applied pressure on Point A from Gilbert Ridge. G Co, 2/17th Inf remained in reserve on the Hogback (FIG. 35). Artillery smoke rounds were fired into the pass to help obscure enemy observation. While it drifted north toward Cold Mountain, the Japanese were terrorized by what they thought was a chemical attack. They huddled in their positions or fled as the U.S. forces attacked.^{116.}

As the attack developed, resistance on Cold Mountain caused G Co, 2/17th Inf to join I and F Co in efforts there. Lt Gilbert of G Co, 17th Inf was killed on Cold Mountain during actions the next day. Gilbert Ridge was named after him. E Co, 2/17th Inf blocked Clevesy Pass and continued their advance on Engineer Hill with one platoon. The 2/32nd Inf sent their E Co to a position behind E Co, 2/17th Inf, while two companies attacked Engineer Hill. G Co, 2/32nd Inf attacked toward Point A to the right of Engineer Hill.^{117.}



levey Pass, on the northeast side of upper Massacre Valley, led across to Sarana Valley and the
 -stant heights of Prendergast and Fish Hook ridges. Strong Jap trenches, machine-gun and
 ortar emplacements held the slopes of Cold Mountain and the ridge leading up to Point A

Photo by Captain N. L. Drumme
 (Point Able). Deadly fire swept the exposed slopes leading up to the pass. On May 19 the
 Battalion of the 17th Infantry, and the 2d Battalion of the 32d Infantry, successfully assault
 these positions and opened the gate for a drive against Sarana Valley and the Chichagof height.

FIG. 35

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the
Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144.
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The lead units advanced one half mile and rapidly overran the initial high ground, but ahead stood Point A 1,800 feet above Clevesy Pass at the inland end of Gilbert Ridge. It rose 2,000 feet from the sea along a knife like ridge only four feet wide. Massacre Valley was to the south and Sarana Valley to the north; Point A was a conical shaped peak adorned with huge rocks - a veritable fortress. On top was the reinforced Japanese 2d company led by Lt Honna. It was dejavu. It would take Col Zimmermans' force three days of hard hand to hand and bayonet fighting to capture Point A.¹¹⁸

Northern Force

The battle for Attu was closing in on the Japanese main forces now held in Chichagof camp by encircling U.S. infantry, but Col Yamasaki was far from finished and hoped to gain more time for a possible evacuation of his forces from Attu. Anticipating an attempt by the Japanese to reinforce Attu, 1/17th Inf was given the mission to defend Holtz Bay. About 1000 hrs, one platoon of L Co, 3/32nd Inf advanced north along Prendergast Ridge toward a series of hills, numbered 1 through 4, stretching from the sea at Holtz Bay inland to Prendergast Ridge. Almost immediately the platoon came under machinegun and mortar fire, which stalled their advance on Hill 2. At 2025 hrs, the remainder of L Co attacked Hill 4, but impassable terrain prevented the completion of this attack. The remaining companies of the battalion plus two companies of the 1/17th Inf were successively employed forward to begin yet another round of

bitter fighting.^{119.}

May 20, 1943

Southern Force

By noon the only resistance left at the immediate front of Southern Force was Lt Honnas' 2nd company defending Point A (FIG. 36). The strong point was still under attack by C Co, 1/32nd Inf on Gilbert Ridge and G Co, 2/32nd Inf on the upper slopes of Engineer Hill. At 2330 hrs, E Co, 2/32nd Inf attacked from Engineer Hill to the right of G Co, with three platoons on line, to encircle Point A (FIG. 37).^{120.}

Earlier, at 0600 hrs, 1/4th Inf bypassed the heavily defended position to the north. The soldiers of the 1/4th Inf had been aboard ship for three weeks in unbelievably crowded conditions. They had not had any substantive physical exercise for almost a month. Marching out of Massacre Bay at a snails pace, the soldiers began to take measure of the tundra and what it would be like to fight on Attu. The 1/4th Inf passed through 2/17th Inf at Cleveay Pass as they marched toward Prendergast Ridge. Lt Joseph Prendergast, for whom the ridge was named, was in the lead platoon of B Co. A and C Co followed in column. Lt Prendergast was killed in action at the base of Cold Mountain soon after the advance began. The 1/4th Inf advanced along the high ground, north of Sarana Valley, to Prendergast Ridge.^{121.}

One of two recorded long distance kills scored by Corporal



Photo by Captain N. L. Drummond

Point A (Point Able) from which a determined platoon of Japanese enfiladed the Americans in the valley below. From their dominating height they beat back our first few attempts to climb the steep, slippery slopes and dislodge them. Finally, on May 21, Company E, 32d Infantry, scaled the top in the early morning darkness. The Japs' retreat was blocked by Company C, 32d Infantry, in positions along Gilbert Ridge. The Jap platoon chose to die to the last man. In the foreground is a heavily fortified American position on the Hogback overlooking Clevesy Pass and Point A.

FIG. 36

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144. .
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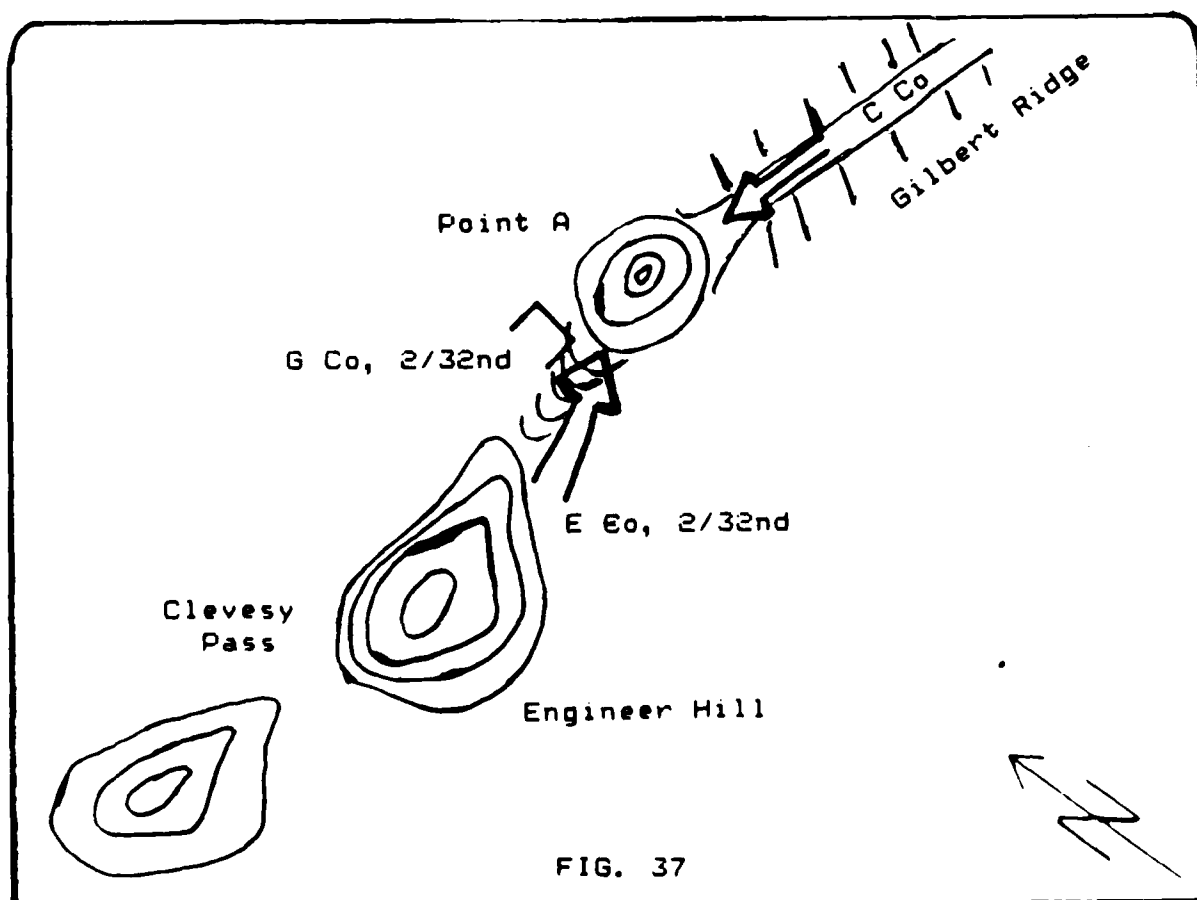


FIG. 37

William E. Smith, of C Co, 1/4th Inf, occurred in the Cold Mountain area. Cpl Smith made a one shot kill on a sniper at 600 yds with a M1 rifle. The next day he hit all four members of a mortar crew at an estimated 900 yds. Obviously a fine shot, Cpl Smith ended the battle credited with 35 verified kills. His shooting skills and those of his comrades were in sharp contrast with the Japanese, who by now, were showing their lack of individual marksmanship skills. As fighting continued, U.S. infantrymen gained more confidence in their ability to out shoot the enemy.^{122.}

Northern Force

The combined efforts of 3/32nd Inf and 1/17th Inf, fighting a grim inch by inch advance against snipers and machineguns, gained 300 yards in the day long struggle near Prendergast Ridge on Hills 3 and 4. Late in the afternoon, Hill 3 was captured by a platoon of L Co, 3/32nd Inf. I Co, 3/32nd Inf was securing Jarmin Pass and K Co was being held in reserve for a possible landing against Chichagof Harbor.^{123.}

The Japanese Imperial HQs gave orders to evacuate as much of the Attu force as possible. Submarines and I boats moved cautiously toward Attu and ADM Rockwells' forty ship fleet. Their best efforts were to fail. Col Yamasaki was nearly in the grip of U.S. infantry. MG Landrum was not so convinced of this and requested the remaining battalions of 4th Regt to be landed. His request was denied, but the local reserve companies of 1/32nd Inf were released for landings on May 21.^{124.}

May 21, 1943

Southern Force

Col Zimmerman was planning the advance on his first objective at Sarana Nose, but Lt Honna and the 2d company, 303d Ind Inf Bn remained in his way at Point A. U.S. infantry controlled every inch of Massacre and Holtz Valley, as well as, parts of Prendergast Ridge. Col Zimmerman knew he could not leave a reinforced Japanese infantry company on Point A, while Southern Force attempted an advance across Sarana Valley. During the evening hours, E Co, 32nd Inf made a bold attack on Point A wiping out the entire 2d company. Plans for an attack the next day could proceed. This plan called for 3/17th Inf, reinforced by three heavy machinegun companies, D and H companies of 32nd Inf and H Co of 17th Inf, to make an early morning attack on Sarana Nose.^{125.}

The newly arrived 1/4th Inf had been sent to the left flank of Point A the previous day in an advance toward Northern Force near Prendergast Ridge. At 0600 hrs, A and C Co were continuing their advance toward Prendergast Ridge in the worst weather of the battle. By nightfall, they occupied the high ground overlooking the Sarana-Chichagof Pass. Ahead was the Fish Hook Ridge; final defensive line of the Japanese 2nd Sector.^{126.}

Northern Force

Northern Force, fighting for control of Prendergast Ridge,

continued their inch by inch, yard by yard advance. Japanese snipers and machinegunners made the 3/32nd Inf pay for every foot gained. At dawn, a preparation was fired on Hill 4 from Moore Ridge using four 75mm cannons of 17th Regmt, two 75mm cannons of 32nd Regmt and the 81mm mortars of 3/32nd Inf. L Co seized the hill in the wake of the preparation. Hill 4 was covered with forty three enemy dead and six wounded. Progress was extremely slow, but that would soon change as 1/4th Inf began to arrive from the south. By nightfall, they were facing the southeast slopes of Fish Hook from the high ground on Prendergast Ridge. Four more days of bloody fighting would be required to control Prendergast Ridge and set up for the attack on Fish Hook Ridge.^{127.}

I Co and K Co, 3/32nd Inf were released from Jarmin Pass and the reserve mission to rejoin their battalion in the advance on Prendergast Ridge. The newly arrived A Co, 1/32nd Inf secured Jarmin Pass and C Co, 1/17th Inf assumed the counter landing mission as I and K Co moved out toward the Fish Hook area. At 2100 hrs, Col Zimmerman issued the order to attack Sarana Nose the next day. The main effort was given to 3/17th Inf, followed by 2/32nd Inf, then 2/17th Inf. The largest concentration of fire during the battle was to be delivered on the Nose before the attack.^{128.}

May 22, 1943

Southern Force

At 0640 hrs, thirty two heavy machineguns, eight light machineguns, fourteen 37mm guns, twenty three 81mm mortars, a section of 75mm pack howitzers and four batteries of 105mm howitzers fired on Sarana Nose in a simultaneous and murderous preparation. An enormous amount of ammunition poured into Sarana Nose; 110,000 rounds of caliber .30, 2,300 rounds of 81mm, 1,500 rounds of 37mm and 1,400 rounds of 105mm munitions fell on the Nose. It appeared that every inch of the Nose was covered by fire. Two companies of infantry advanced across the 800 yds of Sarana Valley to the slopes of Sarana Nose (FIG. 38). K Co, 3/17th Inf easily overran the first defensive lines, as the Japanese withdrew. With I Co on the right, they continued the up hill assault to the second defensive line, where enemy soldiers were so stunned they either ran or were killed while attempting to resist. By early afternoon, Sarana Nose had been captured and I Co sent patrols south through Sarana Valley to the beach. L Co advanced up Chichagof Valley to Lake Cories to provide security for those forces coming through Cleveay Pass. The Japanese infantry company on Sarana Nose stood little chance against the onslaught of such fire power. During the entire campaign, this stands out as the best example of coordinated fires in support of infantry action. Why the same effort had not been used on Jarmin Pass is unknown, perhaps the lessons were being learned or relearned as the battle took shape. The next objective was the high ground between Buffalo Ridge and Sarana Nose, which dominated the entrance to Chichagof Harbor.¹²³

As Sarana Nose was being attacked, the 1/4th Inf intercepted

what had been reinforcements for Sarana Nose advancing across Prendergast Ridge from the north. The enemy element was initially mistaken as Northern Force, but closer scrutiny revealed Japanese infantry traveling south. It took 105mm support and hard fighting by A Co and reinforcement from B Co to dislodge the Japanese from the ridge during what was essentially a meeting engagement.^{130.}

Southern Force had gained control of Prendergast Ridge and Sarana Nose, opening an avenue of direct attack on Chichagof Harbor and easing the resistance to the front of Northern Force. The 1/4th Inf continued its' advance to the base of Fish Hook Ridge, the final defensive line of Col Yamasaki. The stage was set for attack of the ridge and Holtz-Sarana Pass, which ran between Prendergast Ridge and the Fish Hook. Southern Force would attack across the pass up the southeast end of Fish Hook, while Northern Force attacked the northwest slopes. This was the general concept of operations for seizing the ridge.^{131.}

The only beach held by the Japanese was Chichagof Harbor. Col Yamasaki knew this was his only avenue of escape, if the Imperial Navy could penetrate ADM Rockwells' blockade. This possibility was growing more unlikely each day, but Col Yamasaki and his men held on to the only hope they had - evacuation. The harbor had to be held if that hope was to be realized.^{132.}

Their positions ran from the steep icy Fish Hook down slope

on Buffalo Ridge to Jim Fish Valley short of Lake Cories. It was a network of trenches and fighting positions across the most rugged terrain the Landing Force had to face in the campaign. Defensive positions had been emplaced on Prendergast Ridge, but these were cut off by the advance of 1/4th Inf. Any effort to advance through Jim Fish Valley would result in another Jarmin Pass situation. The commanders of the 7th division would avoid making the mistake again.¹³³.

Northern Force

Northern Force could do little more than hold their ground near the Bahai Bowl on the north slope of Prendergast Ridge, while plans were being made to attack the Chichagof defenses (FIG. 39). Tactical plans called for Northern Force to hold their position and keep the enemy forces to their front pinned down. Southern Force, on the southern slope of Prendergast Ridge, would pass 2/17th Inf through the 1/4th Inf and attack Japanese defenses on the Fish Hook. While this plan allowed capture of the high ground, it also called for assault of the strong point at the Fish Hook. The attack was scheduled for the next morning, May 23.¹³⁴.

To better support Northern Force, M Co, 3/32nd Inf hauled a single 37mm gun into position between Hills 3 and 4 and A Co, 7th Med Bn, with 14th Field Hospital, occupied Hill 3 from Holtz Bay. They set up five heated tents and prepared for the action to come. The field artillery crews of 48th FA had hauled their 105mm howitzers almost three miles, using only ropes and strong

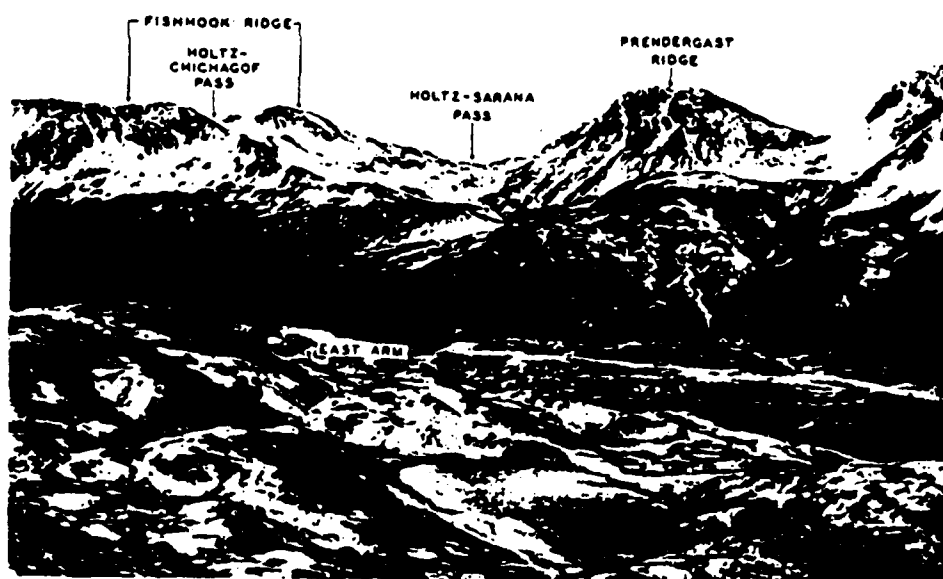
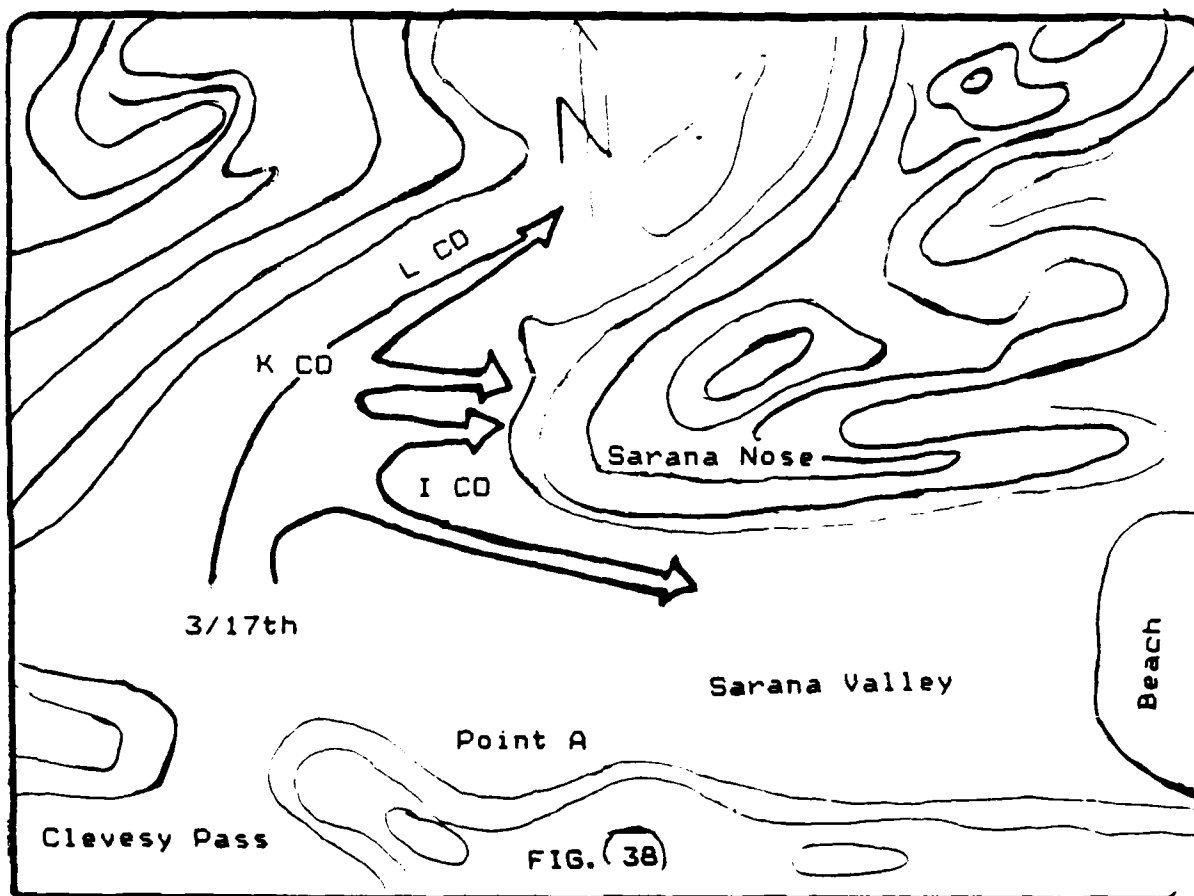


Photo by Captain N. L. Drummond

The Bahai Bowl between Fish Hook and Prendergast ridges meant deadly fighting for the Northern Force on its way to Chichagof. The Jap forces withdrew from the East Arm valley in the middle foreground May 16-17, leaving rear-guard machine gunners and snipers along the rugged slopes. The main Jap positions were well constructed trench and tunnel systems just below the crests of Fish Hook and Prendergast ridges.

FIG. 39

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144.
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backs, to better support the attack from Hogback Ridge. Two batteries of the 48th FA were still at Massacre Bay with two batteries of 49th FA under fire control of the 48th FA. Neither force at Attu had dedicated supporting artillery. This resource was apparently committed in a piecemeal fashion as the need arose. By this time, major supply dumps had been hauled by the 78th CAAA to Clevesy Pass and the Prendergast Ridge area and collecting stations of the 7th Med Bn were also established in Clevesy Pass and Sarana Valley. MG Brown and the 7th DIV was ready to attack the final defenses of Col Yamasaki.^{125.}

May 23, 1943

Southern Force

The morning of 23 May dawned with heavy fog and light snow cutting visibility to a point that caused Col Zimmerman to delay the attack until 1700 hrs. At 1900 hrs, 2/17th Inf, passing through 1/4th Inf, launched their attack on Fish Hook from the end of Prendergast Ridge with two companies (FIG. 40 and 41). Within 200 yds, nine Japanese machinegun positions, supported by riflemen, stopped their advance. This was the extent of progress made on May 23 by Southern Force.^{126.}

Northern Force

On the northern slope of Prendergast Ridge 3/32nd Inf, reinforced by two companies of the 1/17th Inf, reached a position to the left flank of 2/17th Inf. They could now join in a



The jagged ridge line of the south part of the Fish Hook, photographed from just above the Holtz-Chichagof Pass looking northeast to Chichagof Harbor. These peaks, more than 2,000 feet high, and their precipitous slopes were strongly held by Jap infantry.

Photo by Captain N. L. Truman.
an icy knife-edged ridge leading out from the base of the Fish Hook to Point 3, then on 500 yards to Point 4. Along many sections one man at a time had to work ahead under covering fire to dislodge the Japs with rifle and grenade. A few feet to each side of him the ground dropped almost straight down for 200 feet.



Photo by 11th Air Force
Aerial view of Holtz Bay valleys looking southeast, outlining the mass of mountainous terrain which separated the Northern and Southern Forces in their drive against Chichagof Harbor. Though the northeast part of Attu is clear, the typical overcast which rendered air support so difficult and uncertain throughout the battle blots out all of Massacre Valley.

FIG. 40 (top) & 41

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There Washington, 1944, following p. 144. Reprinted with permission.

coordinated attack with 2/17th Inf. L Co, 3/32nd Inf fought a four hour engagement to take the Holtz-Sarana Pass without success. At about 2200 hrs, K Co, 3/32nd Inf attacked across the Bahai Bowl from Hill 4 to destroy the positions that halted 2/17th Inf, but they were forced to withdraw at 0125 hrs with high casualties. During the night, a land line connected 32nd and 17th Inf. A coordinated attack was to commence at 0630 hrs, May 24. North Force was to launch a diversionary attack on the pass to follow up the action by L Co, while Southern Force attacked the Fish Hook.^{137.}

May 24, 1943

Southern Force

The Japanese had prepared an intricate system of fighting positions, linked by trenches, 220 yds long. Every inch was dug into the ice and snow making it almost invisible to the attackers coming from below the trenches. Again, the Japanese objective was to gain time by delaying the U.S. forces and attriting them to the maximum extent possible.^{138.}

At 0630 hrs, a coordinated attack was launched as planned. The weather was turning bitterly cold, with temperatures in the twenties and gale force winds. The wind chill temperature dropped far below 0 degrees (F) and maneuvering on the icy ridge, along the narrow approaches to the Fish Hook, became almost impossible. To this situation, the Japanese added a relentless rain of rifle and machinegun fire along both sides of Prendergast

Ridge. The assault slowed to a halt. Col Zimmerman reinforced the attack by employment of C and D company, 1/32nd Inf on the front to the right of 2/17 Inf, but the Japanese and the weather were too much to overcome and the attackers fell back to their start point. In hopes of renewing a stronger effort the next day, 1/4th Inf was brought back to positions at the rear of 2/17th Inf. During the night soldiers huddled together wrapped in captured blankets and shelter halves; one officer made an entry in his notebook about the high rate of sickness and missing. There was no shelter and only the prospect of facing the Fish Hook the next day.¹³⁹

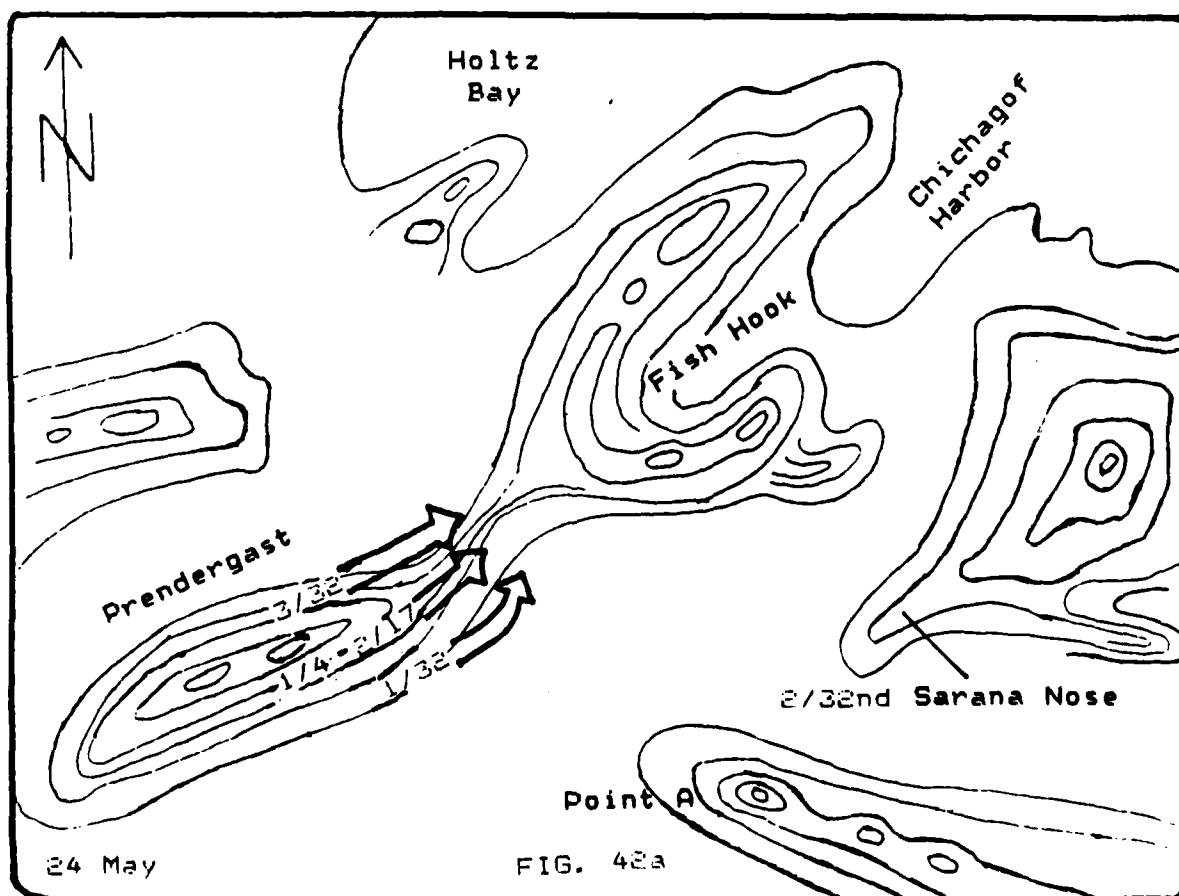
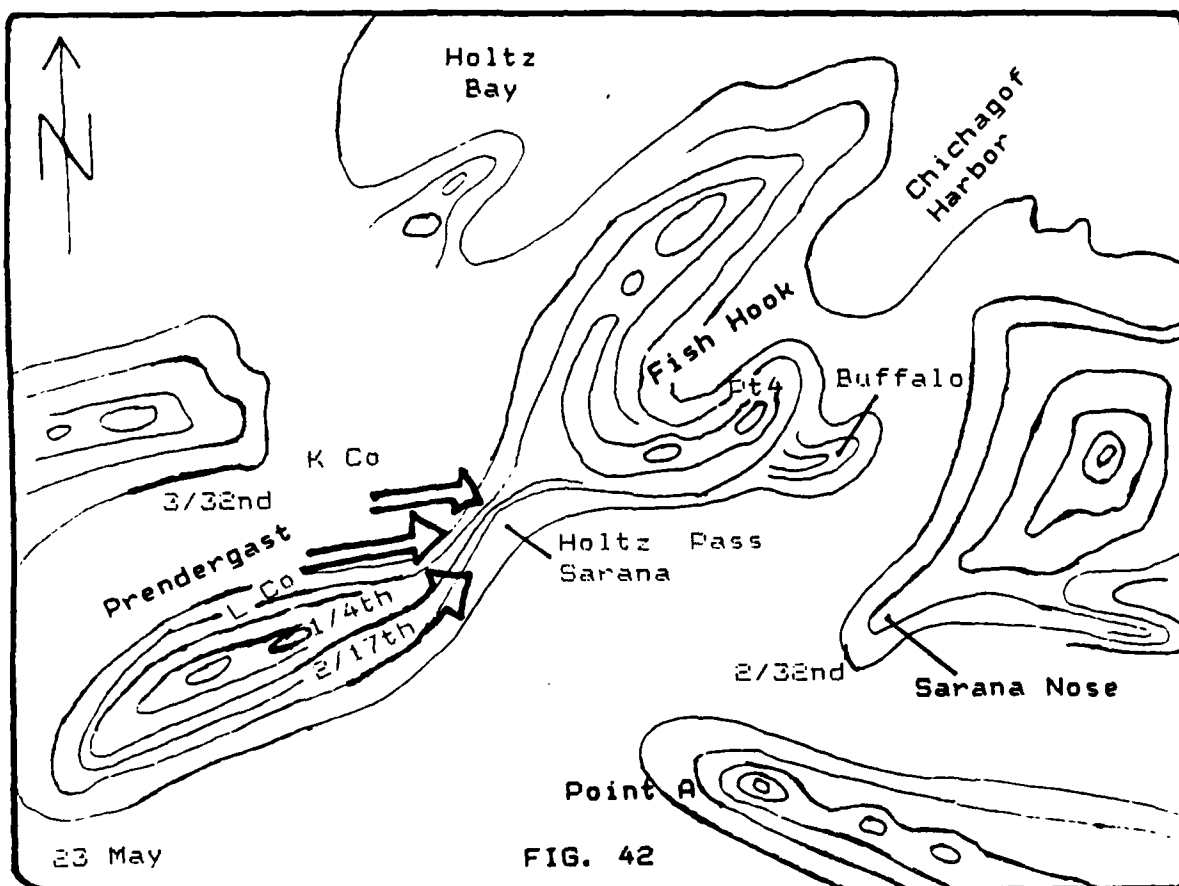
During the early part of the day disaster was narrowly avoided by G Co, 2/32nd Inf. On one of the few occasions when the 11th Air Force could provide close air support, their planes bombed G Co on the third target run despite the orange "friendly" panels in use on the ground. A fourth run was made on H Co. Fortunately, when the smoke cleared and the swearing stopped, not a single person had been injured.¹⁴⁰

MG Landrum ordered the artillery to be hauled further inland to support the next days' attack, but it was a task that could not be readily accomplished. BG Arnold, the 7th Div Arty Commander, had the 105mm howitzers hauled as close as they could get by the next day. During one fire mission supporting the attack on the Fish Hook, one 105mm howitzer fired 118 rounds in forty minutes before it went out of action. By now the engineers had constructed a makeshift road in a streambed running up

Massacre Valley making the hauling of heavy equipment to the front somewhat easier. One 37mm gun was hauled into place on Prendergast Ridge across from Fish Hook to support the next series of attacks. This single weapon was crucial fire support to the success on the Fish Hook.¹⁴¹

Northern Force

Col Culina's forces, now joined with Southern Force on the left flank, had done no better on the north face of Prendergast Ridge. I Co and K Co, 3/32nd Inf attacked from Hills 2 and 4 respectively, toward the Holtz-Sarana Pass. In snow flurries, clouds and fog they struggled up a fifty degree slope to be pinned down at 0930 hrs. I and K Co then maneuvered to the southern slopes of Prendergast Ridge and forward between 2/17th Inf and the pass. At 1735 hrs, MG Landrum had four companies abreast near the crest of the pass and Fish Hook (FIG. 42). On the left were I and K Co, 3/32nd Inf with E and G Co, 2/17th Inf on the right. All companies launched an attack on the Fish Hook from this position. I and K Co were pinned down in knee deep snow by a hail of machinegun fire, but their diversion allowed elements of 2/17th to find a weakness on the Fish Hook. E and G Co, 2/17th Inf climbed into ravines, which led to the crest of Fish Hook, seeking cover from the enemy fire. Members of G Co soon found a covered ledge, just below the crest, from which they could concentrate fire on the enemy positions. At 2100 hrs, G Co was dug into this position and the Japanese could not attack without exposing themselves to Northern Force. In late



afternoon. A and C Co, 1/17th Inf were brought up to reinforce 3/32nd Inf in preparation for the next day. Their main task would be to provide covering fire from Hills 1 and 2 along with L Co on Hills 3 and 4.¹⁴²

May 25, 1943

Southern and Northern Force

Snow, drifting during the night, now made the Japanese positions completely invisible from below concealing them better than ever. As the assault started anew, 3/32nd Inf was immediately pinned down by machineguns higher on the Fish Hook, but E Co, 2/17th Inf could still maneuver and fought its way to a point where fire could be placed on the main trench system. The remainder of the 2/17th Inf rushed to join E Co to hold the position. To reinforce 17th Inf, B Co, 1/4th Inf advanced toward the position held by E Co, only to be caught intermingled with a large number of snipers behind the forward lines of 2/17th Inf. Apparently, the snipers had intentionally allowed some units to pass while trapping others to the rear. This tactic accomplished the Japanese objective of delaying U.S. forces and caused scores of casualties within B Co, 1/4th Inf.¹⁴³

Meanwhile, G Co, 2/17th fought an independent action with two platoons to reach the summit of the Fish Hook. Fortunately, as these platoons broke through the Japanese lines, they found themselves on a peak, which dominated the rest of the ridge. F Co quickly reinforced the position to the right and reorganized

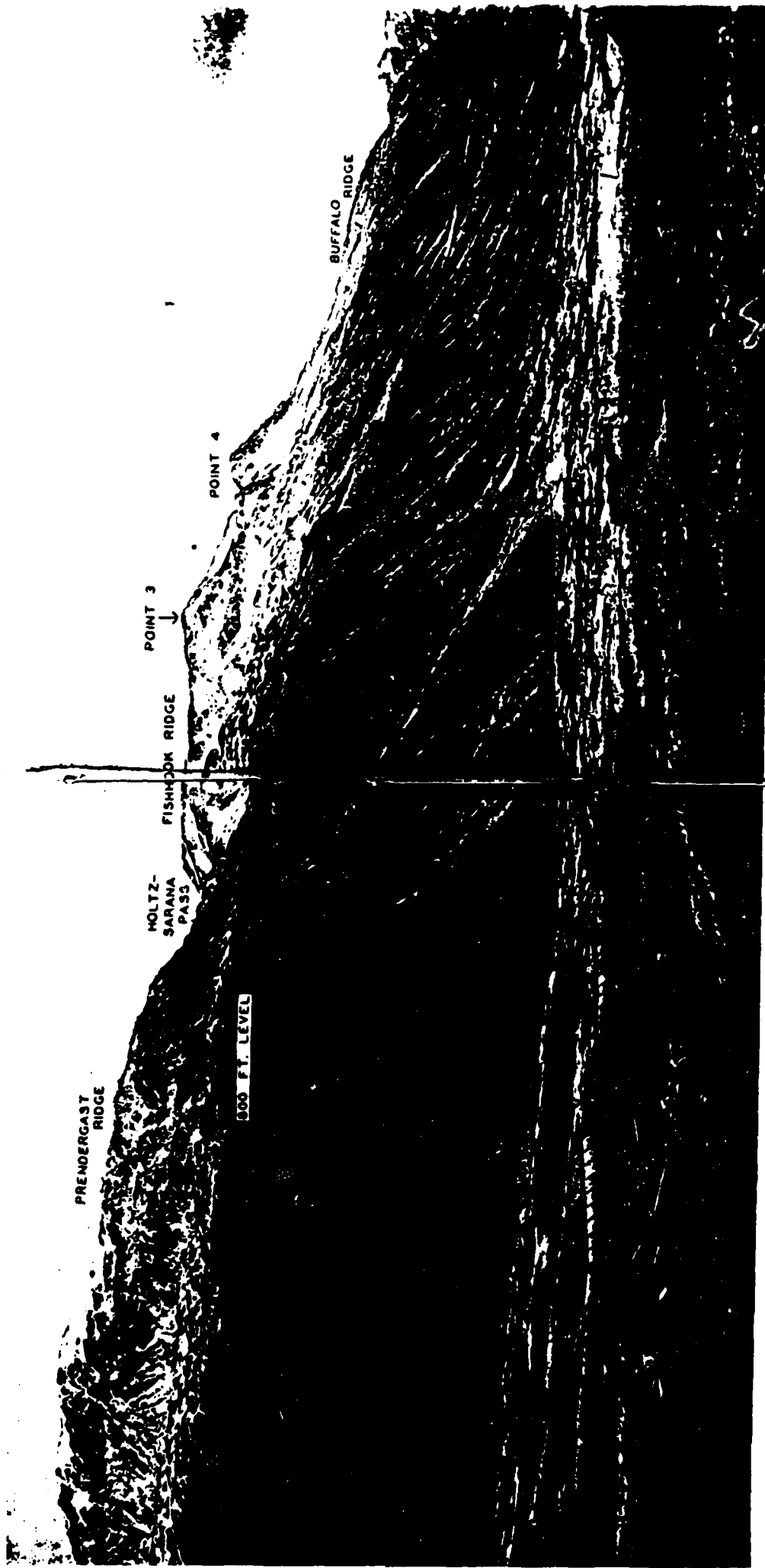
the remnants of G Co into their ranks. This done, F/G Co resumed the attack, but were immediately pinned down. This situation lasted for five hours before E Co, 2/17th could reinforce and assist the withdrawal. The 2/17th Inf held the ridge line level with the enemy, while 1/4th Inf moved into their position. By nightfall, B Co, 1/4th Inf had reinforced F/G Co and the remainder (A and C) of 1/4th Inf occupied Holtz-Sarana Pass.¹⁴⁴

With a foothold on the Fish Hook, MG Landrum renewed the advance in Chichagof Valley toward Buffalo Ridge. At 1725 hrs, operations began on two levels in an assault on Buffalo Ridge. The 1/32nd Inf and C Co, 2/32nd Inf attacked from the northeast end of Prendergast Ridge at the 800 ft elevation level. A Co, leading 1/4th Inf, attacked positions above Buffalo Ridge from the Fish Hook. Their objectives were a series of five peaks called Points 1 to 5 (FIG. 43).¹⁴⁵

At noon, the first two Japanese prisoners were taken, not at Fish Hook, but near an outpost at Scarlet Beach. The prisoners told Nisei interrogators that Japanese strength on the island was extremely low. The information did not help much at the Fish Hook where U.S. infantry had worked their way to within 200 yds of the final peak against an enemy who showed no signs of weakness.¹⁴⁶

May 26, 1943

Southern and Northern Force



the south side of Prendergast and Fish Hook ridges, looking northeast from the Sarana de of Clevesy Pass. Jim Fish Valley and Lake Cortes lie to the right. In the Southern force's drive against the Chichagof area it was necessary to take these heights before progress could be made along the valley floor. Two and a half hours were required to move a company from the valley to 800-foot level. Japanese machine-gun and sniper nests studded the

ridge lines along which fog and snow squalls swept. The main enemy defensive system by low Fish Hook Ridge guarded Clevesy Pass. The Fish Hook-Buffer Ridge heights were the final iron ring of Jap defense for their Chichagof Harbor base. At any cost they had to hold this line of crags and were willing to die in the attempt. Combined elements of the Northern and Southern Forces took the two passes and the southwest end of Fish Hook on May 25.

FIG. 43

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144. Reprinted with permission.

Weather greatly improved the morning of May 26, allowing the 11th Air Force to provide close air support on enemy positions at the Fish Hook. Sixty two planes attacked the Fish Hook and Chichagof Harbor repeatedly throughout the day. The bombing and strafing provided a key break favoring U.S. forces on the ridges overlooking Chichagof Harbor.¹⁴⁷.

Having gained an advantage on Fish Hook, the 2/17th Inf and B Co, 1/4th Inf could cover the entrance to the narrow pass leading from Holtz Bay to Chichagof Harbor. Their position was reinforced by hand carrying a 37mm gun into a position that would ensure control of the pass and support a further assault of the remaining Japanese trenches.¹⁴⁸.

The remaining portions of the 200 yard main position were successfully attacked by two platoons of A Co, 1/4th Inf. Points 2 and 3 were captured by nightfall, but they would fight the Japanese in squads and as individuals for two days before the Fish Hook was captured. The entire Northern Force, on the west side of the ridge, attacked the Bahai Bowl area of Fish Hook. North Force continued their attack across the Bowl with A Co, 1/17th Inf to the left in reserve and C Co, 1/17th, with I and K Co, 3/32nd Inf in the attack. At 0900 hrs, they seized the crest of Fish Hook in their zone, but made no progress for five hours due to enemy fire.¹⁴⁹.

C and K Co withdrew and renewed their attack via the avenue gained by G Co, 2/17th Inf. Both companies attacked through B

Co, 1/4th and E Co, 2/17th Inf. Simultaneously, I Co, 3/32nd Inf attacked the northern part of the Holtz-Sarana Pass and A Co, 1/17th Inf attacked Fish Hook on the northwest side of the ridge from Hills 1 and 2. It should be apparent that companies and battalions were so intermingled at this point that command and control to effect a coordinated effort was probably impossible. These attacks brought Northern Forces to the first tunnel systems where they were pinned down and the attack stalled.¹³⁰

Of particular note during K company's assault, were the individual actions of Private Joe P. Martinez from Taos, New Mexico. Martinez was a BAR man in K Co, 3/32nd Inf, who finally got mad enough to take matters into his own hands. As the company stalled on the northwestern slope of Fish Hook, Martinez single handedly assaulted the entrenched positions with handgrenades and his BAR. He cleared the enemy from the northwestern slope and destroyed every position up to the crest of the intermediate ridge below Fish Hook. The entire force rose up to follow him to the crest, but Pvt Joe Martinez fell dead, of wounds received during the assault, upon reaching the high ground. He was Attus' only Medal of Honor recipient. His actions allowed I and K Co, 3/32nd Inf to seize the Holtz-Chichagof Pass and the remainder of Fish Hook Ridge.¹³¹

The Japanese were now too few to cope with the coordinated attack from several directions. I and K company of the 32d Inf received unit citations for their actions against the enemy in

the Bahai E Northern Force was well positioned on the Fish Hook after the assault and held these positions until May 30. Only Buffalo Ridge stood between the 7th Division and Chichagof Harbor.¹⁵²

May 27, 1943

Southern and Northern Force

By May 27, most of the Fish Hook was in American hands except for several isolated peaks. Unfortunately, the fog and snow closed in on the ridge, drastically limiting visibility. Col Yamasaki used the opportunity to reinforce these pockets of resistance. With reinforcements, the Japanese held the advancing forces to the main ridge of the Fish Hook and continued to dominate Buffalo Ridge with over watching machinegun fire. No substantive gains were made on the ridge by either force.¹⁵³

Meanwhile the 1/32nd Inf and 2/32nd Inf began a series of attacks on Buffalo ridge. The 2/32nd Inf attacked in a northeasterly direction up slope to within 200 yds of the peak. Reinforced Japanese positions dominating the ridge from the Fish Hook prevented further advance until additional fire support could be brought to bear on both ridge lines (FIG. 44). An attack on Buffalo ridge was scheduled for the next day to give 1/4th Inf time to cut the remaining resistance on the Fish Hook, particularly at 4.¹⁵⁴

The 1/4th Inf attacked with A and C Co, from Fish Hook

Ridge toward Points 3 and 4. They fought yard by yard across the saddle between point 3 and 4, completely annihilating one Japanese counterattack from Point 4. B Co attacked through C Co to take Point 4 late in the day, thereby opening the way for a continued advance through Chichagof Valley.¹⁵⁵

Below in the Chichagof Valley floor, 3/17th Inf advanced to the point where Buffalo Ridge met the valley and began preparations for an attack the following day. They were reinforced by B Co, 1/32nd and the 2/17th Inf, which was removed from the Fish Hook to support the attack in the valley.¹⁵⁶

During the action on Point 4 and in Chichagof Valley, artillery crews hauled the 105mm howitzers closer to the action on the ridges overlooking Valley. By now, they had moved their guns over three miles from the beach with ropes and muscle!¹⁵⁷

May 28, 1943

Southern and Northern Force

After six days of determined fighting on all sides of the Fish Hook, 1/4th Inf captured the remainder of the ridge in early afternoon. This action allowed the attack on Buffalo Ridge to proceed as scheduled. Artillery, mortars and 37mm guns had steadily fired on the Japanese positions atop Buffalo all afternoon. About one hour before the attack, the fire intensified to a full preparation of the entire ridge.¹⁵⁸

The attack began on schedule at 1830 hrs. The steady pounding of the ridge throughout the day made the initial advance much easier than previous attacks had been. By nightfall, the two units of 32nd Inf had occupied key positions along the ridge. The Japanese still held the northwestern part of the ridge that would allow observation of Chichagof Harbor, where Col Yamasaki would assemble his forces for a final desperate counter-attack.^{159.}

The 3/17th Inf, reinforced by B Co, 1/32nd Inf, began an advance in column of companies toward Chichagof through Jim Fish valley, simultaneously with the attack on Buffalo ridge. This advance met no resistance, although it was probably observed from Buffalo Ridge. This information was of great importance to Col Yamasaki as he planned his assault to the west. The 3/17th Inf established defensive positions with Lake Cories on their right and 32nd Inf on the left. They immediately established patrol contact with the 32nd Inf and began preparations for the attack scheduled for the next day.^{160.}

Col Yamasaki was almost surrounded, facing U.S. forces on the high ground from three sides and with the sea to his back. He occupied terrain that was ill suited to the defense and susceptible to naval and air bombardment. His air defenses and his supporting artillery had been destroyed. It was obvious Imperial Naval forces could not break through the U.S. blockade and most of his supplies were lost at Holtz Bay. Seventy percent of his forces had been killed and the remaining 700 were battle



Photo by Captain N. L. Brown.

of Fish Hook Ridge; the 800-foot bench along which the camera looks; and in Jim Fish Valley below. The heights beyond Lake Cories figured only in the mopping-up after Chichagof Harbor was taken.

Buffalo Ridge, taken by the 32d Infantry, stretches down from the end of the Fish Hook to Lake Cories. From May 25 to May 30 the Southern Force attacked in this direction on three different levels—the crest line

FIG. 44

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144. Reprinted with permission.

weary and despondent; another 600 were wounded and could not fight or advance. His soldiers had only two days rations and suicides had become common. One half his headquarters had been blown up during the air and naval attacks. Col Yamasaki had fought a shrewd delay to gain time against a force he estimated as a division, but his situation was desperate and he correctly assumed U.S. forces would attack in strength at the earliest opportunity.¹⁶¹ Indeed, at that very moment MG Landrum had everyone in the 7th DIV making preparations for an attack on Chichagof the next day. No reserve forces were to be held back in the May 29 attack. Every available unit was to attack in force supported by all the firepower that could be mustered.¹⁶²

Col Yamasaki considered the options open to him in the face of an impending attack. Four possibilities were within his remaining capability: surrender, which was out of the question under the Bushido code; suicidal defense of Chichagof; withdrawal into the rugged terrain of Klebnikoff Point to the east, which might continue the delay for three to five days; and finally counterattack through the weakest point to establish defenses in Massacre Valley or further west. The possibility of success seemed to rest within the final option. His plan would be simple, but extremely bold.¹⁶³

Based on the action at Fish Hook and Buffalo ridge, Col Yamasaki reasoned U.S. strength was in the mountains to his immediate front and therefore the weakest point would be where

those forces had set up in Jim Fish Valley earlier in the evening. His force would counterattack at night to break through in Jim Fish valley, with an intermediate objective of Engineer Hill, where U.S. artillery was located. There they hoped to capture the 105mm howitzers and turn them on U.S. forces pinning them down long enough for his main body to advance through Massacre Valley and reestablish defenses at Jarmin Pass and Henderson Ridge. They planned to raid supplies along the way and destroy what could not be carried into the southern mountains. The ultimate objective was to prolong the battle until Attu could be reinforced or evacuated. Key to success was surprise and speed of the attack. Col Yamasaki planned to bypass most of the U.S. forces; there would be no time for mopping up resistance or totally destroying isolated pockets. They would have to get past the high ground held by U.S. forces before dawn to avoid over watching fires.¹⁶⁴.

Col Yamasaki sent his final message to Japan, burned all records and gave the orders that would bring 600 hospitalized soldiers to their death. Morphine over doses were given to 400 of the wounded; the remainder could use handgrenades on themselves. At 2000 hrs, he assembled approximately 700 soldiers for the attack. They gathered at the foot of Buffalo Ridge, only one half mile from B Co, 32nd Inf (FIG. 45). Many had only bayonets; a very small amount of ammunition was on hand and some of this was only target ammunition with paper bullets in place of lead.¹⁶⁵.

The plan of attack was a bold and desperate gamble, but unfortunately for the U.S. forces, it could succeed, if not stopped before reaching Massacre Valley.¹⁶⁶ The attacking force was organized such that Watanabe battalion covered the assembly and took up a position on the left flank. Their objective was to capture Clevesy Pass. The remnants of Yonegawa battalion were to attack on the right to assist capture of the pass. All other soldiers were to advance near the center to the rear, under control of the adjutant, as the second and third reserves. Remaining naval personnel were organized into a detachment and placed in third reserve.¹⁶⁷

As nightfall came on 28 May, U.S. units were in positions that, for the most part, would be bypassed by the counterattack. For simplicity, the positions are outlined below:

Holtz Bay defense	1/17th Inf
Fish Hook Ridge	3/32nd Inf
Point 4 and Holtz-Sarana Pass	1/4th Inf
Buffalo Ridge area (800 ft)	2/32nd Inf 1/32nd Inf 2/17th Inf (+ B Co, 1/32nd)
Chichagof Valley	3/17th Inf
Clevesy Pass	D and F Co, 50th Eng (DIV reserve) A Co, 13th Eng 1 Det, 1/4th Inf 1 Det, 48th FA ¹⁶⁸ .

The 3/17th Inf was to receive the main force of the Japanese attack. On their left was L Co, in contact with 2/32nd, I Co

behind Sarana Nose, M and K Co were on the right on the slopes above the valley and B Co, 1/32nd Inf occupied the lowest ground toward the middle of the valley 150 yds to the right of L Co.¹⁶⁹.

May 29, 1943

The Japanese Counterattack

At 0030 hrs, Col Yamasaki issued the order to counterattack. To their front was B Co, 1/32nd Inf on the valley floor at the southern end of Lake Cories. B Co was the right most unit in the valley that night, with L Co of 3/17th Inf to the left and Lake Cories to the right. These units had advanced to this position earlier on May 28, as 3/17th Inf took up positions east of Buffalo Ridge. At 0300 hrs, B Co was withdrawn from their position to be fed a hot meal at the battalion kitchen in preparation for the next day. Col Yamasakis' lead element attacked the rear guard of B Co at 0330 hrs with complete surprise, as they withdrew toward the battalion kitchen area. The Japanese fell on B Co soldiers with bayonets and handgrenades. Screaming out of the fog they must have seemed like an entire regiment. B Co was thrown into total disarray and sought refuge on higher ground to the west or fell back through Jim Fish Valley toward Engineer Hill and Cleveasy Pass. They were reduced to twenty five riflemen by the intense fighting that followed.¹⁷⁰.

The Japanese had created the break through needed for success. The main force advanced quickly toward Engineer Hill

leaving small detachments to prevent flanking attacks, where U.S. forces had established themselves in strength, such as Sarana Nose. L Co was hit at 0350 hrs by twenty five Japanese and fought a hand to hand engagement for over an hour. Fifteen Japanese attacked I Co at 0415 hrs and more struck M and K Co at 0420 hrs. The 3/17th Inf was fighting for survival! The battalion headquarters was overrun and the commander and the regimental executive officer were killed.¹⁷¹

At Cleveasy pass and Engineer Hill, the 50th Engineers, with the 7th DIV engineers and 7th Div Arty were bivouaced without any thought of close combat with Japanese infantry. The sounds of battle up Jim Fish Valley were not too unusual, but as the noise of battle grew closer, infantry and medical soldiers began to run into their midst shouting about Japanese attacking down the valley immediately behind them. Engineers, artillerymen, cooks and support troops of every variety were thrown into a hasty defense line from Engineer Hill to Point A. At the base of Engineer Hill a group of sixteen Americans, mostly officers, were caught in their bivouac site; among them was Cpt William Willoughby of the Scouts. They fought as best they could, but eleven were killed within minutes. Cpt Willoughby was shot in the face and hit by handgrenade fragments, but manage to survive.¹⁷²

Col Yamasakis' plan was succeeding. There was little organized resistance and the Japanese swept up on Engineer Hill toward the 105mm howitzers needed to pin down the U.S. forces

behind them in the valley. The fighting was fierce, two senior officers were killed trying to defend Engineer Hill - Maj J. E. Siddons and Ltc James Fish, after whom the valley was later named. On the right flank the Japanese overran a medical clearing station, bayoneting every patient showing signs of life. Cpt George S. Buehler and Cpt James W. Bryce, with ten wounded, played dead for hours, while Japanese soldiers stood around their tent. Captains Buehler and Bryce kept the seriously wounded quiet by crawling forward and administering morphine. Their tent was checked repeatedly by the attacking Japanese who often shot up the tent adding wounds to soldiers desperately trying to remain quiet and motionless. It was a tense situation into the next day, but Cpt Buehler and the others survived.¹⁷³

Higher on Engineer Hill the support units of the 7th DIV (50th Eng, 13th Eng, 7th Med Bn, 20th Field Hosp HQs) were taking the attackers under fire (FIG. 46). BG Archibald V. Arnold, 7th Div Arty commander, had placed his headquarters on the hill in preparation for the division attack, but now he and the division support troops were face to face with a well laid counterattack. BG Arnold organized a defense and directed fire on the Japanese, killing sixty in the first assault. The attackers faltered briefly, reorganized and charged to the crest of the hill where they were met by the engineers in fierce hand to hand combat. It was the kind of fighting where bayonets are broken off in the enemy and attackers are clubbed with rifles and entrenching tools! It was desperate, but a small counterattack by the

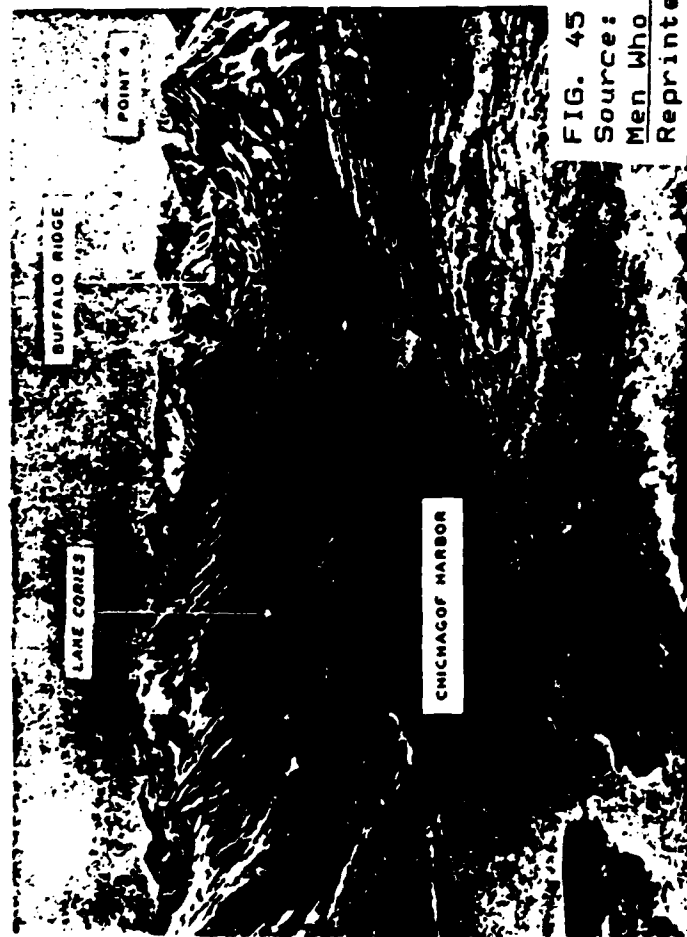


FIG. 45 & 46 (below)

Source: U.S. War Department, The Capture of Attu: as Told by the Men Who Fought There, Washington, 1944, following p. 144. Reprinted with permission.



Division Headquarters Commandant helped hold the line.¹⁷⁴.

Major Smith pulled together an infantry platoon, rear echelons of D battery, 78th CAAA, H battery, 501st CAAA and remnants of 13th Engineers to counterattack at Clevesy Pass. He lost his life in a valiant effort to restore the line between the engineers and the artillery detachment near Point A.¹⁷⁵.

Several Japanese detachments broke through in the direction of the artillery at Clevesy Pass, but they were destroyed by machinegun fire and the fire from a single 37mm gun. The main force fell back down slope off Engineer Hill in disarray. After several weaker attempts, it was obvious Engineer Hill would hold. About 500 of Col Yamasakis' men committed mass suicide near the medical clearing station with handgrenades. Col Yamasaki was killed in a final assault with about one platoon of his remaining force.¹⁷⁶ Throughout the day small detachments were engaged and destroyed from Clevesy Pass to Sarana Nose and up the valley where Japanese elements had been left behind or had broken off the attack to hide. For the most part, these were annihilated, since they refused surrender. By nightfall, most of the Japanese force on Attu had been wiped out.¹⁷⁷.

Phase 4 Capture of Chichagof Harbor, May 30, 1943

In the late afternoon, 2/32nd Inf, 3/32nd Inf, 3/17th Inf and A Co, 1/4th Inf occupied Chichagof Harbor without serious resistance. The Japanese High Command officially notified the nation and the world of the loss of Attu the same day. Another

three months of mopping up small groups would be required to fully rid the island of Japanese. When cornered, most committed suicide. Only twenty eight prisoners were taken at Attu, not one was an officer of the Imperial Army. Japanese dead accounted for 2,351 enemy soldiers and another 300 to 500 were presumed buried in the mountains as the battle occurred. Total annihilation had been required to win the battle for Attu. It would not be the last island captured by annihilating Japanese fighting men.¹⁷⁸.

CONCLUSION

U.S. forces suffered 3,829 casualties. Of those, 549 were killed in action on or near the island, another 1,148 were wounded. An unusually high number of men were lost from the front because of the weather and disease. Severe cold weather had caused extreme frostbite and trench foot to 1,200 soldiers. These were the first cold weather casualties of WW II. Disease, primarily those brought on by exposure such as pneumonia, accounted for 614 casualties. Accidents, mental breakdowns, and self inflicted injuries took another 318 from the front lines of Attu. There were many lessons to be learned from Attu. The bitter cold and fog had been a tougher enemy to fight than the Japanese. The battle would contribute to the success of many succeeding operations from the North Pacific to Italy.¹⁷⁹.

The battle for Attu was a light infantrymans' fight. The weather greatly limited the use of airpower and hindered fire support, since the island was shrouded in fog and swept by extremely high winds daily. Steep, jagged crags, knife like

ridges and boggy tundra made the use of vehicles and other mechanized equipment totally impractical. In the Aleutians, deployment by the march is a norm that is not likely to be overcome by any other method.¹²⁰

LESSONS OF ATTU

A brief discussion of the lessons from the operation will, perhaps, help the reader in arriving at their conclusions as to what can be of use in planning future operations of this nature or in the Aleutian area. The principles of war and Airland Battle doctrine will be used as the frame work for identifying those lessons of value to contemporary planners. Chapter 2 and 3 of FM 100-5 provides further discussion on the imperatives of Airland Battle and the related principles.

The Aleutians campaign began with deep operations by the 11th Air Force and the 5th Fleet. Their continuous bombing, interdiction and screening of the western Aleutians isolated the battlefield, severed Japanese external lines of communication and denied deployment of reinforcements to the area of operations.

Deception played a vital role in preparation for the campaign. The primary methods were the force buildup using pseudo fish cannery companies, deep air operations against the secondary target at Kiska and the open discussion via the press of difficulties expected at Kiska. These measures allowed operational surprise in the campaign and to a lesser degree tactical surprise at Attu.

Close operations were designed to envelop the Japanese center of gravity at Kiska and avoid their main strength while conserving and protecting our own forces. Japanese forces were separated for piecemeal defeat and decisive terrain was occupied astride their lines of communication. Cut off from their supporting bases and unable to reinforce the Japanese were forced to fight on our terms or withdraw. With their center of gravity thus neutralized, the Japanese withdrew during the early days of August leaving an empty island to be taken without the anticipated battle.

The campaign culminated with the August 15 invasion of Kiska by a joint and combined force of over 34,000 troops supported by almost 100,000 servicemen and women in the 1,000 miles east of Kiska. Rear operations along the chain were the U.S. strength which Japan could not interrupt. The landing at Kiska was unopposed and has not gone down in history as one of the most important operations, yet it set the stage for future operations and allowed deep operations against the Japanese mainland. The Aleutian chain was also considered for staging the invasion of Japan, but the severe weather conditions eliminated the area as a primary avenue of approach.¹²¹

Strategic/Operational Level Principles

Surprise: U.S. forces used an effective signal intelligence break through to surprise the Japanese at Midway and later applied the principle of surprise to capture Attu and Kiska. An

elaborate deception plan allowed combat power to be built up in Alaska and deceived the Japanese about the primary target of attack. Primary tools of the deception were the pseudo fish cannery companies and the open discussion of an operation against Kiska. Once achieved, surprise allowed strategic Security and protection of TF 51 by concentrated land based air power and naval power.

Offensive Maneuver: While the Japanese operational center of gravity was at Kiska, U.S. forces were offensively maneuvered to weaken and remove that center of gravity by attacking Attu, thereby disrupting the Japanese external lines of communication. This led to the withdrawal of forces from Kiska, which culminated the campaign without further combat.

Economy of Force: At the strategic level, the Aleutians campaign was fought with the minimum forces available to the CINC. These were applied against the proper objectives to achieve strategic/operational aims with low risks. The decisions made during selection of the forces require closer scrutiny. To have taken a division out of months of desert warfare training, completely refitting it and sending the unit against a determined enemy in the Aleutians environment in the space of two and one half months was precipitate, but probably unavoidable. This decision was the root cause of most of the weather casualties.

Unity of Effort and Mass: Unity of effort was ensured by the establishment of well understood command relationships and a

joint task force of combined arms and services. Task Force 51 was then concentrated against a single operational objective - Attu.

Simplicity: This principle was not a strong point of the campaign. The failure to reconnoiter Attu and the paucity of intelligence concerning the enemy led to the development of many complicated plans involving dangerous, high risk operations. The landings, weather, terrain and the nature of the enemy required better preparation than was afforded LF 51.4.

Tactical Level:

Unity of Effort & Mass: The command relationships were near the joint doctrine espoused today. The LF Commander was the central authority for operations ashore after the Amphibious TF Commander put the LF on the island. The concentration of combat power, however, could have been improved. Once ashore and having developed the situation, Northern Force should have received all reinforcements rather than reinforcing both sides of the island. Reinforcing the success of Northern Force would likely have isolated Jarmin Pass before the Japanese could withdraw.

Surprise: While operational surprise was gained by an attack on Attu, the landing at Massacre Bay played to the strength of Japanese deception and well prepared defenses. The attack on Jarmin Pass culminated too early because it lacked

surprise and a cohesive concentration of combat power. The surprise gained at Red Beach was quickly lost before the unit could reach initial objectives on the dominating terrain of Hill X. Only Provisional Bn could be said to have gained the full advantage of surprise.

Maneuver: Concentration could not be achieved by Southern Force to some degree because they didn't take the initiative by exploiting gains on the flanks at Henderson Ridge and Gilbert Ridge. If an economy of force effort had been taken in Massacre Valley to fix the Japanese at Jarmin Pass, the main body of Southern Force could have then maneuvered to envelop the defenses. This technique was used with some success by Northern Force and eventually led to the Japanese withdrawal from Jarmin Pass. Later in the battle, maneuver to envelop the Japanese or gain dominating terrain by establishing the proper objectives was the fundamental cause for success.

Security: Tactical security on Attu was practiced in varying degrees by the units ashore. Some were very successful against the stay behind sniper tactics of the Japanese, while others fell victim to the confusion and panic such techniques are designed to cause. One unit kept 50% of their personnel awake throughout the night besides the normal patrolling, listening posts and other routine security measures. They rarely experienced the panic and confusion generally caused by the Japanese and were apparently avoided by the enemy, since they

were never attacked at night, unlike many others.¹²² The normal security measures such as patrols, flank and rear detachments, stay behind ambushes, and economy of force efforts using organic fire support worked well for those units using them effectively.

Simplicity: Simplicity can be translated into "understanding the effects of combat on soldiers." In this, the leaders and planners for the battle of Attu failed. While the soldiers sent into combat on Attu performed exceptionally well, they were not well trained for the mission, were ill equipped, uninformed and enjoyed none of the advantages of rehearsal in the area of operations or acclimation to the terrible conditions. Those harsh lessons concerning individual clothing and field gear would later serve the forces invading Italy very well. The Aleutians area demands arctic clothing, water proof tentage and sleeping bags, rain suits and a heavy emphasis on personal hygiene during training.

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GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Anti Aircraft
ADC	Alaska Defense Command
ADM	Admiral in the Navy
APA	Attack transport ship
Arty	Artillery
Bn	Battalion level unit
Btry	Artillery battery
CAAA	Coastal Artillery Anti Aircraft
CAV	Calvary
CDR	Commander
CDR LF	Commander Landing Force
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief Pacific Theater
Co (s)	Company (s)
Col	Colonel
Cpt	Captain
Det	Detachment
DIV	Division level unit (ie, 7th Infantry Division)
DIVARTY	Division Artillery
ENG	Engineers
FA	Field Artillery
ft	Feet
Hosp	Hospital
hrs	Hours, as in 0700 hours military time
HQ(s)	Headquarters
Ind Inf Bn	Independent Infantry Battalion
Inf	Infantry, as in 1/17th Inf or First Battalion, Seventeenth Infantry Regiment
KIA	Killed in action
LANDFORCOM	Landing Force Commander
LCM	Landing Craft Medium
LCV	Landing Craft Vehicular
LCVP	Landing Craft Vehicular and Personnel
LD	Line of Departure
LF	Landing Force
LF CDR	Landing Force Commander
Lt	Lieutenant
Ltc	Lieutenant Colonel
LTG	Lieutenant General
Maj	Major
MG	Major General
Med Bn	Medical battalion
NG	National Guard
ops	Operations
OP(s)	Observation post(s)
PACFLT	Pacific Fleet
PBY	Navy patrol bombers capable of water landings
Plt	Platoon
Precip	Precipitation
PT boat	Navy patrol boat
Recon	Reconnaissance

Regmt	Regiment, as in 32nd Infantry Regiment
Sta Hosp	Station Hospital
Sec	Section level organization
TF	Task Force
TOA	Theater Operational Area
U.S.	United States of America
USS	United States Ship
WDC	Western Defense Command
WIA	Wounded in action
WW II	World War Two
yds	Yards, as in distance
105mm	Millimeters, as in larger caliber weapons