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THE ALEUTIAN CAMPAIGN:
LESSONS IN OPERATIONAL DESIGN

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of
THE ALEUTIAN CAMPAIGN; LESSONS IN OPERATIONAL DESIGN

Failures and successes relative to current theories on operational design and operational art are examined and critiqued from the U.S. perspective at the operational level. Emphasis is placed on examining the critical linkages between tactical and strategic objectives. The campaign is divided into three phases with the first centering on prewar plans, the second, on orientation and expansion within the theater and the third, on the counter offensive with the intention of linking tactical and operational objectives to the strategic goal. A convoluted command structure and personality clashes between senior leadership created significant problems through most of phase II. With the transfer of senior leadership late in phase II, a significant transformation occurs within the theater; operational objectives are accomplished through coordinated joint operations and Clausewitz's theory of "center of gravity" is validated with the neutralization of the Japanese Northern Area Force. Phase III is dominated by the operations to retake Attu and Kiska and the failures in operational intelligence. Lessons are summarized to include interdependence of all elements of operational design, unity of command, physical dimensions, logistical sustainment and the far ranging effects of operational intelligence. The lessons remain valid for the contemporary student of operational art.

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THE ALEUTIAN CAMPAIGN: LESSONS IN OPERATIONAL DESIGN

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Aleutian Campaign, often called "the forgotten war," is easily overlooked when examining the numerous campaigns planned and fought in the second world war. Relegated to a secondary theater of war, isolated and remote, the campaign was brought to a successful conclusion long before the war in the Pacific ended.

As a historical case study, the Aleutian Campaign offers unobstructed insight into the individual elements of operational design. Many of the lessons learned in the Aleutians, set the operational premise for operations and campaigns to follow.

Fortunately for the modern historian, a plethora of information exists about this misunderstood campaign in the North Pacific. Much of this information is recorded and presented at the tactical level with the emphasis placed on specific engagements and missions. This analysis attempts to rise above the tactical level by examining the critical linkages between those tactical engagements and the strategic objective. A detailed analysis of this campaign with the emphasis on the principle elements in operational design provides valuable insight into the concept of operational art.¹ These insights continue to remain valid for the operational planner of today.

CHAPTER II

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The pre-war years in the continental territory of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands can best be characterized by neglect caused by false assumptions about the security of this territory and its' waters. The Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 provided the basis for these false assumptions. The Treaty in essence restricted the size of Japan's fleet and further prohibited the fortification of their islands in the North Pacific. Limited funding and domestic priorities in the depression trodden years of the thirties made an easy case for ignoring the fact that Japan had withdrawn from the Treaty in 1934 and was aggressively pursuing her vision of the greater east Asia co-prosperity sphere.

Geographical and economic factors provided additional rationale for ignoring the defenses of this remote territory, specifically the Aleutian chain. Ironically, technological advancements in bomber aviation made certain aspects of that same geographical factor prime motivators in the garrisoning of the Island chain.

The island archipelago is comprised of approximately 120 volcanic islands. A thousand miles separates the eastern most island, Unimak from the western most American island, Attu (see fig. 1). Jagged shorelines and submerged rock formations render maritime navigation in the area extremely hazardous. Terrain of individual islands ranges from jagged ridge lines to low lying areas composed of muskeg of up to three feet in depth. This

múškeg makes walking extremely difficult and effectively prohibits the use of wheeled or tracked vehicles.²

The islands themselves essentially represented no economic value as they harbor no mineral or oil reserves and are totally devoid of trees. Native population was limited to few in number and inhabited very few of the islands.

The final justification for ignoring the defenses in this area during the pre-war years can be found in the extreme meteorological conditions common to the islands. "Rain, snow mist or a low thick overcast (and fog) may be expected 365 days a year in the Aleutians."³ Moderated by the sea, temperatures in the Aleutians were generally moderate and rarely went below zero. Wind gusts or "williwaws" were continuous and often reached gale proportions. Weather would remain a major factor throughout the Aleutian Campaign and extracted the greatest toll on air operations. During the summer and fall of 1942, 63 of 72 aircraft lost by the 11th Air Force were attributable to weather. Brian Garfield, in his most complete account of this campaign, summarizes the formidable climatic and geographical impediments to operations in this area most succinctly by saying, "The forces of nature in the Aleutians could always call the turns. No general or admiral was as powerful as the weather."⁴

Several factors in 1938 would cause neglect to yield to awareness and force the planners to find ways to overcome the difficulties of operating in the Aleutians. A low level concern for the security of this remote territory began to develop with

the revision of the "Orange plan" for a war with the Japanese. Of utmost significance was the Army's adoption of the hemisphere defense concept. A concept that would bring the strategic location of the Aleutian Islands under renewed interest.

Armed with the assumption that "the United States could not be threatened seriously by either air or surface attack unless a hostile power first secured a lodgment elsewhere within the Western Hemisphere", army and navy planners set forth the premise of hemisphere defense.⁵ This premise was quickly adopted as the new national defense policy and the security of the Alaskan territory suddenly held new meaning. The geographic reality that only 650 miles separated Attu from the northernmost of the Japanese Kurile islands could no longer be ignored. "The long, sweeping curve of the Aleutian Islands presents a natural route of approach both towards the continental United States and towards Japan."⁶ Despite the difficulties involved in operating in this theater, it could not be assumed that either the Japanese (or the United States) would overlook this fact. "Alaska was to be provided with a major air base from which the Army could interdict the establishment of any hostile air base in the territory and also cover the northern flank of the Hawaiian establishment. These plans would give some meaning to the idea of an Alaska-Hawaii-Panama defensive triangle, a concept that meant little as long as Alaska had no military defenses."⁷

With this decision, the problem became one of designing a valid defense plan for the vast Alaskan territory with extremely limited resources. A strategy of stationing independent units of

air-ground teams along the southern coast and in the Aleutian islands for local defense was eventually adopted. It is this same strategy that guided the subsequent expansion into the Aleutian chain during the war.⁸

In July of 1940, Ft. Richardson in Anchorage was approved as the site for Army Headquarters in Alaska. Colonel Buckner was appointed commander of the Alaska Defense Force (ADF) in order to supervise the expansion of defenses in Alaska. Within a year, the ADF became the Alaska Defense Command.

The Navy followed suit and in midsummer of 1940 established the headquarters for the Alaskan Sector in Kodiak, Alaska. Additional naval air and sub bases were designated at Sitka and Dutch Harbor. The army maintained sole responsibility for the security of these bases. The problem with this force structure is that it effectively tied the army units to the navy bases they were protecting. No additional manpower was available for operations beyond these basing areas.

As relations continued to deteriorate with Japan, it was now considered "vital to keep control of the Aleutians at least as far west as Dutch Harbor, and preferably in their entirety."⁹ In order to insure the security of the Aleutians it became necessary to upgrade this defensive posture to one of an aggressive defense. The same technology that made these desolate islands of national concern would now have to insure their security.

It was assumed that the extended range of land based bombers combined with the firepower of surface combatants would provide

that technology. Designated a theater of operations with the activation of the Western Defense command on 11 December 1941, the Alaskan theater continued to present numerous obstacles for operators and planners alike.

Naval Task Force 8, commanded by Rear Adm. Robert Theobald, left Pearl Harbor on 25 May 1942 with orders to hold Dutch Harbor and to prevent the Japanese from gaining a foothold in Alaska. Although Task Force 8 represented a third of Nimitz's fleet it contained no carriers and had no experience operating in Aleutian waters. Alaska and the Aleutians were not ready for war when the Japanese attacked Dutch Harbor on 3 June 1942.

Any further analysis would be impossible without a further division of the United States conduct of the Aleutian Campaign. In line with the basic principles of operational design, events in the theater of operations were driven by three distinct phases each aimed at an intermediate goal. The first phase of the campaign can essentially be seen as the recognition of the strategic vulnerability and the importance of insuring the security of the Aleutians. This includes pre-war plans, orientation, and the accelerated preparations for the defense of the easternmost islands up to the Japanese attack on Dutch Harbor.

Driven by climatic variables and shortages of personnel, the second phase was indeed shaped by the results of the first phase. This includes expansion into the Aleutians, and the establishment of airfields within tactical striking distance of the Japanese strongholds on Attu and Kiska and the naval blockade of these

islands. It encompasses the time frame from 3 June 1942 to April 1943 and closes with the establishment of U.S. air and sea supremacy.

Phase II laid the groundwork for the third and final stage, the counter offensive to reclaim Attu and Kiska and subsequently eject the Japanese from the Aleutians. This includes the poorly coordinated air and naval bombardment of Attu, marking the beginning of counter offensive operations in mid April 1943. It concludes with the securing of Kiska as the anti-climatic final decisive action on 24 August 1943.

OBJECTIVE

The transition between Phase I operations and Phase II is most clearly delineated with the Japanese attack on Dutch Harbor. Along with this transition a marked shift in objectives occurs. With the subsequent Japanese occupation of Attu and Kiska (and Agttu), these objectives were once again modified to include the operational objectives characteristic of phase II operations. "The American purpose was to prevent any military build up in these islands, to sever their sea communications with Japan and to destroy their usefulness to the enemy while awaiting an opportunity to recover them."¹⁰ The seizure and establishment of airfields and bases on Adak and Amchitka provided the linkage for accomplishing these objectives.

Phase III operations are distinguished by another modification of objectives made possible only by the subsequent addition of adequate forces in theater. The operational

objectives of seizing control of Attu and Kiska successfully linked the tactical objectives in phase III to the strategic objective of ejecting the Japanese from the Aleutian archipelago.

ENEMY CRITICAL FACTORS

Enemy "critical factors" remained a constant throughout all three phases of the American Campaign. In Clausewitzian terms, a Japanese center of gravity in this campaign must be construed as Admiral Hosogaya's Northern Area Force based in Paramushiro. Without this Force, operations in Aleutian waters could never have been a reality. This force provided a means of projecting Japanese combat power in the Northern Pacific. Of utmost significance, fleet units from this force insured the security of Japanese sea lines of communication which were the life lines for Attu and Kiska operations. Their Northern Force, therefore, was "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends."¹¹ Consequently, the sea lines of communication protected and supplied by this same force represented a Japanese critical vulnerability. The failure of the Japanese to successfully construct runways and establish a land based bomber capability on either of the occupied islands had two significant consequences relating to centers of gravity and critical vulnerabilities. First, it unmistakably increased their dependence on these extended sea lines of communication as their only source of supply and reinforcements and significantly reduced Japanese operational tempo. This further heightened the criticality of these "lines" and increased the potential benefits

of using leverage against them. Second, it effectively isolated and undermined Fleet units of the Northern Force by insuring that they became the only means of projecting combat power within the theater of operations. These factors combined to give the operational advantage to U.S. Forces in late phase II and phase III operations.

CHAPTER III

EXECUTION OF THE U.S. OPERATIONAL SCHEME

Army Field Manual 100-5 clearly stipulates the importance of unity of command at all levels of war. "Employment of military forces in a manner that masses combat power toward a common objective requires unity of command and unity of effort. It requires a single commander with the requisite authority to direct all forces in pursuit of a unified purpose."¹² The command structure in the Aleutian Campaign far from resembled this definition.

The unique harsh Aleutian environment placed a premium on unity of command and clarity of objectives in order to successfully link tactical objectives to the strategic objective. Unfortunately, the convoluted command structure and interservice rivalry, so prevalent in this theater, detracted significantly from all elements of the operational scheme particularly in phase II operations.

During phase II and phase III operations, the ground forces of the Alaskan Defense Command remained under Buckner,

headquartered in Anchorage. Buckner was subordinate to General DeWitt of the Western Defense Command, headquartered in San Francisco. An additional constraint placed on DeWitt restricted him from moving major ground or air units from the west coast to Alaska without War Department consent.

Alaskan naval surface, submarine and air forces were placed under operational control of Rear Admiral Theobald, Commander, North Pacific, still headquartered in Kodiak, 300 miles from Anchorage. Accordingly, Theobald was answerable to the 13th Naval District in Seattle who was subordinate to CINCPAC in Pearl Harbor. Theobald additionally assumed operational control of the army's Eleventh Air Force while they remained administratively under Western Defense Command.¹³

The command relationship between the Alaska Defense Command and the North Pacific Force was poorly defined as one of "mutual cooperation". In reality, the joint operations centers first established at Fort Richardson then moved to Kodiak proved wholly inadequate for the task. A major rift between senior theater commanders severely undermined joint operations and contributed to extreme interservice discord. Subsequently, "there was a quick shutdown of the usual informal channels of interservice communication."¹⁴ These conditions were hardly conducive to the development of a cognizant operational scheme and clearly violated the principle of unity of command and unity of effort. Additionally, the extended chains of command removed the decision making authority from those in the theater of operations with operational expertise.

Operational planners were most successful in applying limited forces and assets to all three phases of the Campaign. The extensive exploitation of Army engineers early in the westward push into the Aleutians insured forward operating bases were efficiently constructed. Bombers from the 11th Air Force were operating out of Adak within two weeks of the initial occupation of the island. In contrast, the Japanese occupied Attu and Kiska for almost fourteen months and were never able to construct a runway on either island. "The bulldozer, as Admiral William Halsey contended, was one of the decisive instruments of the war."¹⁵ Operational bases on Adak and Amchitka set the terms for battle and allowed Naval and Air Forces to take advantage of the significantly reduced distances to Attu and Kiska. The success of these engineers insured minimal combat power was squandered on secondary efforts.

The employment of the inexperienced and somewhat inappropriate 7th Motorized Division for the invasion of Kiska was the result of two factors outside the operational planners control: 1) The experienced Alaskan troops under Buckner were limited in number and scattered over hundreds of thousands of miles. 2) DeWitt recommended the 35th Infantry, commanded by two experienced officers who had recently commanded the occupation of Adak. The final decision to employ the 7th Division was a direct result of the removal of operational expertise in the decision making process.

The 7th Division had trained in the California desert as a mechanized division for use in North Africa.¹⁶ It was plainly

evident to operational planners within the theater that the use of vehicles on Kiska or any of the islands in the chain would be wholly inappropriate given the nature of the mission and the nature of the islands themselves. Attempting to make the best of the situation, a Joint Alaskan Staff was sent to California to impart their operational wisdom and to insure a cogent plan was developed for the amphibious assault. It is unfortunate that a great deal of this advice was ignored.

Constrained by the logistical limitations of insufficient numbers of naval ships, the decision to change the initial objective of phase III from Kiska to Attu (Operation Landcrab) was practical based on the distorted intelligence available at the time. The iterative process continued as planners learned from the outcome of Operation Landcrab and assembled a combined landing force totaling over 34,000 well equipped troops for the amphibious assault on the island of Kiska. Higher priority operations across the Atlantic and in the South Pacific forced operational planners in the Aleutians to employ the limited combat power available in the most effective way possible. Quite clearly, planners in the Aleutian theater, by necessity were completely aligned with the principle of economy of force at the operational level.

The sector of main effort continually moved to the west as operational planners attempted to adjust for changes in objectives in each of the three phases in the campaign. The enormous scale of the island chain, coupled with the extremely limited assets of the theater during Phase I, demanded that these

sectors be established. Employment of naval assets in Phase I violated this tenet. The division of naval assets to establish a non-radar picket line in a wide arc across the entire Aleutian chain and the further division of the remaining ships between Dutch Harbor and a position off Kodiak, 500 miles to the east, diluted the effective combat power of these assets allowing the Japanese to attack Dutch Harbor with virtual impunity.

Conversely, the deployment of the 11th Fighter Squadron and the 36th Bombardment Squadron to the island of Umnak, north of Dutch Harbor, significantly reduced the operational depth and firepower in the Anchorage bowl. This deployment marked the designation of Anchorage and the mainland as a sector of secondary effort and showed an initial recognition of the immediate area surrounding Dutch Harbor as the sector of main effort by army planners.

During the majority of phase II operations, the sector of main effort moved west to the islands of Adak and Amchitka leaving Dutch Harbor with reduced reserves and limited firepower. In pursuit of the primary objectives of seizing Attu and Kiska in the counter offensive phase, the sector of main effort did not move as it did from Dutch Harbor, but it expanded to include Adak and Amchitka in addition to the westernmost islands in the chain. Adak and Amchitka remained vital installations from which assets were employed to attain the primary strategic objective of the campaign.

Changes in these primary and secondary sectors of effort were guided throughout all three phases of the campaign by the principle of maneuver. Movement of elements from the 11th Air

Force and naval assets into positions on Adak and Amchitka, from which they could place the enemy at a disadvantage and subsequently exploit both tactical and operational successes, were critical to the success of this campaign.¹⁷

Within two weeks of the Japanese occupying Attu and Kiska naval and army air assets began bombing attacks in an attempt to inflict "strong attrition" on the enemy. These attacks continued throughout phase I and into phase II of the campaign with inconclusive results.¹⁸ Only with the establishment of airfields and port facilities on Adak and Amchitka, could this combat power be focused to create a decisive impact on Attu and Kiska.

Extended ranges continued to prohibit a direct attack on the Japanese center of gravity operating out of the still distant base at Paramushiro. However, the naval strike force assembled by Theobald's replacement, Admiral Kinkaid, combined with the threat of attack from land based bomber and pursuit aircraft operating out of these newly established bases on Adak and Amchitka, provided the means for indirectly attacking the Japanese center of gravity. Of utmost significance is that these new bases allowed U.S. commanders to dictate the terms of the battle, forcing the Northern Force Commander to react and effectively removed his freedom of action.

Using Kinkaid's strike force, a naval blockade of Attu was implemented in early February. At the same time joint efforts were implemented to increase naval and air bombardment of Attu and Kiska. These combined actions were a direct attack on a

Japanese critical vulnerability. Their sea lines of communication were slowly but effectively severed.

At the same time, these efforts paved the way for the indirect attack on the Japanese center of gravity. Lacking the resources and the capability to physically destroy the fleet, the only alternative was to make it impotent in Aleutian waters. Rapidly dwindling supplies on Attu and Kiska caused by the blockade and the increased tempo of bombing, forced "Admiral Hosogaya to attempt to run the blockade with all the assembled power at his command."¹⁹ The result of this attempt culminated in the major sea action of the Aleutian Campaign. The tactical engagement of the Komandorskis on 26 March 1943 was a decisive U.S. victory, not for the casualties inflicted, but because it ended Japanese naval supremacy in Aleutian and therefore, North Pacific waters. It should be noted that the Japanese force outnumbered the U.S. force exactly two to one in each class of ships. With America's oldest heavy cruiser, the *Salt Lake City* dead in the water, this should have been a Japanese victory. However, the threat implied by land based bombers caused Admiral Hosogaya to break off the action and retreat to Paramushiro. This was a direct result of operational planners maneuvering the appropriate assets to create the conditions for tactical success. More than a tactical victory, this battle effectively achieved the operational result of neutralizing the Northern Force as no further attempts were made to resupply the besieged garrisons on Attu and Kiska. The establishment of U.S. sea control rendered a Japanese center of gravity impotent in the theater of operations

and linked the tactical objectives to the final strategic objective of regaining control of the Aleutians.

Establishing control of the sea lines of communication and air supremacy in the western Aleutians laid the foundation for the orderly transition to phase III and insured U.S. operational commanders maintained freedom of action. However, inaccurate intelligence information, predominate throughout the counter-offensive phase, almost negated the advantages created by successful operational maneuver in phase II of the campaign.

The final two operational objectives in the campaign were the occupation of the islands of Attu and Kiska. The decision to seize the easternmost island of Attu first was perfectly aligned with the basic premise of operational maneuver. The occupation of Attu would leave Kiska to simply "wither on the vine" as it would be sandwiched between two U.S. controlled islands. The capture of these islands would subsequently eliminate the Japanese foothold on American soil and forcefully eject them from the Aleutians. Kincaid's intelligence staff initially estimated enemy troop strength on the island of Attu at 500 then revised that number to 1600. With only nineteen days left to D-day, Admiral Rockwell, the Task Force Commander, was compelled to hastily change the concept of operations and committed the entire 7th Division, 10,000 men to Operation Landcrab.

Actual troop strength on the island was in excess of 2600 well dug in Japanese troops. The operation was not expected to exceed three days and therefore no contingency plans had been built into the basic plan. Only the advantage of possessing the

favorable interior lines of operation created by the amphibious assault and the unopposed landings on the beaches prevented a worse disaster from occurring on Attu. The Japanese were forced into operating from exterior lines and limited by their inferior numbers, could not capitalize on the deficiencies in U.S. intelligence and planning. Operation Landcrab was ultimately successful in securing the operational objective but not because of any grand exploitation of operational maneuver in the counter-offensive phase. Poor intelligence and the lack of any contingency planning except for a small tactical reserve of 3000 troops on Adak extended the operation well into three weeks. "In proportion to the number of troops engaged, it would rank as the second most costly American battle in the Pacific Theater--second only to Iwo Jima."²⁰

With Attu secured, the occupation of Kiska now remained as the final objective to link the tactical and operational objectives to the strategic objective. Learning from mistakes on Attu, operational commanders labored to develop a viable concept to exploit operational maneuver. Unlike Attu, Kiska was subjected to heavy pre-invasion bombardment by naval and air assets operating out of newly established bases on Attu and Shemya. A unified amphibious force consisting of American and Canadian troops was assembled and landed on a deserted Kiska on 15 August.²¹ The Japanese had successfully evacuated the island 3 weeks prior to the landing. Once again failures in operational intelligence invalidated the concept of operations. Fratricide and the harsh environment claimed 313 American casualties. Of

more significance is that this operation diverted over 35,000 troops and countless amounts of ammunition and fuel from the main effort in the South Pacific. Failures in operational intelligence particularly in phase III of the Campaign severely impacted the operational commanders ability to exploit operational maneuver in the assault and occupation of Attu and Kiska.

Operational fires were an integral part of maneuver and were critical in all three phases of the campaign although they were not particularly well coordinated until Theobald was removed from the theater of operations during phase II. Operational commanders in the Aleutians were particularly successful in using "fires" for the following purposes: 1) Disruption of deployment and maneuver of Japanese land based air assets; 2) To facilitate the operational maneuver of U.S. forces and assets especially in Phase II operations; 3) To expedite the arrival of the Japanese at their culminating point.²² The combination of all three of these effects produced results far greater than the sum of the individual operational fires.

The Aleutian theater up to the deployment of the 7th Division lacked adequate forces to mount a major offensive against the Japanese. By definition then, it must be considered an immature theater.²³ Without the use of coordinated operational fires in this immature theater, it would have been impossible to disrupt the deployment of Japanese land based air assets. Bombers from the 11th Air Force and the surface combatants of the naval task force in phase I and II were

instrumental as operational fires in preventing the Japanese from deploying land based air assets by preventing the construction of runways on Attu and Kiska. In the words of a former Japanese Naval Officer, "Intensified Allied air raids against transport caused construction to lag even further. The fact that not even a single air base was available virtually determined the outcome of what had already become a deteriorating situation."²⁴

Lacking required forces for the offensive, the operational fires directed at Kiska and Attu directly facilitated the maneuver of U.S. forces into the western Aleutians by allowing these forces to occupy islands within tactical striking distance of the Japanese virtually uncontested. With only limited means to protect themselves, the occupation and establishment of bases on Adak and Amchitka would have been extremely difficult had it not been for the gaps in the Japanese defense created by operational fires.

The synergistic effect of operational fires in the Aleutian theater is clearly demonstrated by their third purpose, that of forcing the Japanese to reach their culminating point.²⁵ Although Japanese attrition on the islands was minimal during these directed fires, it caused them to consume valuable resources defending themselves and to repair the damage caused by these raids. The islands themselves provided no resources and the Japanese' inability to construct runways placed an even greater emphasis on their sole source of sustainment. This provided the opportunity to place additional leverage against the only Japanese logistical sustainment system, their sea lines of

communication. These were continuously interdicted by U.S. naval and air assets and became increasingly vulnerable to these fires. In a vicious circle, operational fires were the key to speeding the Japanese toward their culmination point and paved the way for successful operations in phase III of the Campaign.

OPERATIONAL PROTECTION AND DECEPTION

Deception is an integral part of protection at all levels of war. In its own right, deception is a passive form of protection. Much like other elements of the operational design for the Aleutian Campaign, limited assets and harsh Aleutian operating conditions restricted active protection measures at the operational level. Therefore, passive protection measures were instrumental in protecting American forces and assets during the Aleutian Campaign.

A classic example of successful deception, occurred in phase I and surely provided protection at the operational level for U.S. forces in the theater. Confirming the enemy's belief that the Aleutians were used for fishing, construction of airfields on Umnak and Cold Bay were disguised as two mythical packing companies; all mail and all radio messages conformed to this myth.²⁶ The construction of the airfield on Umnak in complete secrecy prevented it from becoming an additional target when Dutch Harbor was attacked in early June. It is also theorized that the subsequent discovery of this fully functional air base by the Japanese may have exercised a restraining influence and

precluded any further Japanese offensive action in the central and eastern Aleutians.²⁷

Conversely, failure to protect assets whether through active or passive measures can obviously have serious consequences; this includes protection of individual forces on the tactical level as well. Failure to provide protection on the tactical level can result in less than desirable operational consequences. The invasion of Attu provides a vivid example. Amidst the detailed planning for this operation, clothing was given a cursory priority. Subsequently, "the clothing issued to the 7th division for the Attu campaign proved unsatisfactory for the extremely rigorous conditions of Aleutian warfare."²⁸ As a result, of the 3829 U.S. casualties, 2348 were attributable to exposure and cold injuries. These numbers significantly reduced the effective combat power of the landing force on Attu. This reduction had a significant impact in achieving the operational objective of seizing Attu within three days.

The Japanese evacuation of Kiska must be recognized as the most effective case of operational deception and protection in the Campaign. It secured the safety of over 6000 troops who would be subsequently utilized in other operations and caused the misdirection of critical U.S. resources from operations in the South Pacific.

CULMINATING POINT

With 3829 American casualties in Operation Landcrab, the question must be asked, why was the island not taken when the

Japanese temporarily abandoned it in August and September of 1942. The answer lies in Clausewitz's fundamental concept of the culminating point as it relates to U.S. forces and assets in this Campaign.

The fall of 1942 equates to phase II, a decidedly defensive phase in the American Campaign. Based on force and asset levels in the theater in the fall of 1942, operational commanders did not have the means to establish a strong position on Attu with which to outflank the enemy on Kiska.²⁹ From a culminating point perspective then, operational commanders were desperately attempting to move this point further away from the Japanese aggressors. Clearly in line with operational objectives for phase II, commanders were seeking ways to wear the Japanese down while awaiting the opportunity to recover the islands by crossing over to the offensive. The continued naval and air bombardment of the Japanese strongholds on Kiska and Attu provided the way to wear them down. U.S. forces crossed over to the offensive only after the neutralization of the Japanese center of gravity forced the enemy attack to overextend itself and pass its culminating point.

SYNCHRONIZATION

The effect of synchronization was a decisive factor in phase II of the campaign. The integration of maneuver with operational fires and logistics over time resulted in the desired operational effect.³⁰ This was not the case in phase I and phase III due to

problems among senior leadership, communication, and the climatic conditions in the Aleutians.

Phase I of the campaign poorly integrated the activities of intelligence, logistics and maneuver in an attempt to synchronize defensive operations. Intelligence intercepts in late May pinpointed Japanese objectives as Midway and Dutch Harbor. They also had a clear picture of the strike date and the strength of the Northern Area Force.³¹ The Army and Navy subsequently acted to counter this strike. The result should have been a massing of combat power at Dutch Harbor. However, failure of the leadership to clearly establish operational intent coupled with poor communications between Army and Navy assets effectively diluted this combat power and allowed the Japanese to achieve tactical surprise. U.S. planes based at Cold Harbor never left the ground unaware that the attack had taken place and Theobald's Fleet remained anchored 500 miles to the east near Kodiak.³² As always, the Aleutian weather played no small part in allowing the Japanese to get within striking range of Dutch Harbor.

Operation Landcrab, during phase III, while serving as an example for many other aspects of operational design, provides yet another example from the perspective of synchronization. During the assault on Attu, operational command shifted from the task force commander to the Ground Component Commander, General Brown, once he was established ashore. Brown's inability to direct coordinated fired support from sea and air elements restricted his attempts to exploit any form of tactical maneuver and U.S. forces experienced several instances of strafing by

friendly aircraft during this lapse in synchronization. Aleutian weather and poor communication networks contributed directly to Brown's failure to synchronize these activities. Ultimately, this failure in synchronization resulted in his inability to mass effective combat power at the decisive point and the operation stagnated close to the beaches. Additionally, the failure to integrate and rehearse a valid logistical sustainment plan, resulted in the need to use combat troops to relieve the logistical pile up on the beaches. This failure further diluted the available combat power and detracted from the ability to mass the effects of combat power on Attu.

REGENERATION OF COMBAT POWER

In this secondary theater of operations, it would perhaps be more appropriate to rename this element of operational design, the "generation" of combat power. Phase II of the Campaign was crucial to this element by providing the time to develop combat power in the western Aleutians.

Comparing U.S. strength relative to Japanese combat power in the theater, operational planners were constrained to maintain a defensive posture. "The most the Army and Navy could do in the Aleutians would be to expand and strengthen their forward bases."³³ Additionally, in accordance with operational design, they began operations early in phase II, to speed the Japanese towards their culminating point.³⁴ These efforts and the time factor created by phase II allowed DeWitt to begin coordination with the War Department for additional forces and assets as early

as December of 1942. The subsequent approval and designation of combat forces to the theater facilitated the transition into the final, counter-offensive phase.

OPERATIONAL SUSTAINMENT

The remoteness, weather, and the grand scale of the Aleutian archipelago presented challenges for every aspect of operational design. Operational sustainment was in no way immune to these problems. However, the establishment of theater sustainment bases on Dutch Harbor, Kodiak, and Umnak Island prior to the Japanese attack on the Aleutians provided a significant advantage and the means for expansion into the Aleutians.³⁵

In contrast to the Japanese, U.S. forces never surrendered control of their numerous sea lines of communication.³⁶ By November of 1942, U.S. forces enjoyed the benefits of the simultaneous use of sea, air, and ground lines of communication; although the use of air was often constrained by the severe Aleutian weather and limited cargo capacity of aircraft in the theater.

Although the sea lines of communication were never in jeopardy, the lack of available shipping presented the greatest problems particularly for the deployment of the 7th division in Phase III. From an operational maneuver perspective, the decision to assault Attu before Kiska made sense but it was driven by the lack of naval transports.

The other serious flaw in the supply system occurred with the logistical pile up on the beaches of Attu. This was the

result of operational commanders failing to integrate the details of logistical sustainment into the operational scheme.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, the Japanese occupation represented no threat to U.S security. After the disaster at Midway, the Japanese had been reconciled to merely maintain Attu and Kiska for nuisance and propaganda value. The American efforts were driven to a small extent by the perceived need to eliminate this threat. However, in large part, the objective to remove the Japanese from these barren islands, was motivated and sustained by the psychological need to remove the enemy from American soil. The strategic potential of these islands in operations against the Japanese mainland had long since been negated by the same conditions that made operating in the Aleutians so treacherous.³⁷

Clearly the end results of this campaign provide valuable lessons. However, the modern operational planner must look beyond the obvious to find the intrinsic value of this campaign. Here lies the rich examples of successes and failures in operational design and the lessons that must be carried away from this analysis.

Of utmost importance is the recognition that all factors in operational design are interrelated. No single element is paramount to the others. That is not to say that failing to include an element in the overall design automatically dooms the

plan to failure. At the same time, this failure may manifest itself in the increased attrition rates or the extension in time required to achieve a specific objective.

The physical dimension of the theater must be factored into the planning process as well. Proper training and proper equipment designed to compensate for this dimension must be applied at the lowest levels in order to insure success at the operational level. The use of operational expertise in the planning process will further minimize attrition and help link tactical successes to the operational objective.

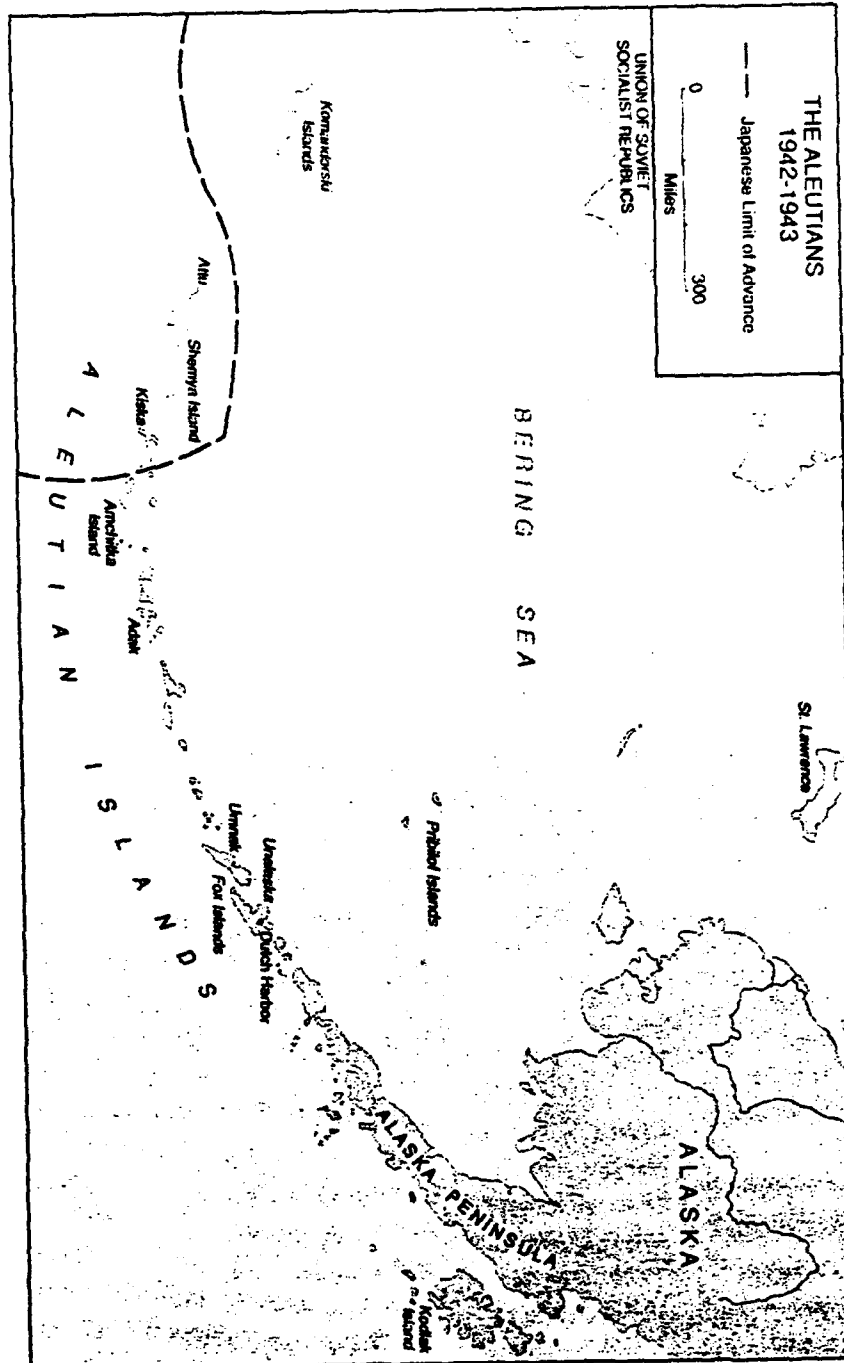
Command relationships within the theater of operations must also be clearly defined, in line with the basic principle of "unity of command". These commanders must, from the outset, develop and clarify their intent in order to insure combat power is focused in the sector of main effort as early in the campaign as possible. Furthermore, joint operations under divided and extended chains of command endanger the success of the operation or campaign and endanger lives and resources. Along the same lines, the decision making authority should remain in the theater of operations with the operational expertise.

Intelligence clearly affects all elements of operational design and is a limiting factor in the operational commander's ability to exploit the effects of maneuver. Recognizing that no type of intelligence will ever be flawless, it is the commander's responsibility to insure contingency planning is incorporated in the overall operational scheme.

Finally, the importance of the logistical sustainment system cannot be underestimated. Commanders must allocate the necessary resources to insure that the infrastructure exists to support sustainment within the theater. They must also insure that the specifics of sustainment are integrated into the lowest levels of each operation and throughout the campaign.

Isolated and remote as a theater of operations, the Aleutian Campaign was forgotten by the general public shortly after it was concluded. The contemporary student of operational art should not make the same mistake. The lessons in operational design provided by this Campaign remain validated by history and continue to offer valuable insight into the future of warfare at the operational level.

FIGURE 1



ENDNOTES

- ¹ The analysis is conducted following the elements of operational design as set forth by Professor Milan Vego, "Operational Design," (Unpublished, Naval War College Research, 1993)
- ² The Aleutians Campaign--June 1942-August 1943, (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993) p.2.
- ³ Carol A. Wilder, "Weather as the Decisive Factor of the Aleutian Campaign, June 1942-August 1943," Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS: 1993., p. 17.
- ⁴ Brian Garfield, The Thousand-Mile War, (New York: Double Day and Company, 1969), p. 28.
- ⁵ Stetson Conn and Byron Fairchild, U.S. Army in World War II: The Western Hemisphere: Vol. 12, Pt. 1 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960), p. IX.
- ⁶ Truman Strobridge, Strength in the North, The Alaskan Command 1947-1967, (Elmendorf AFB, Alaska: 1966), p. 11.
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 18
- ⁸ Stetson Conn et al., U.S. Army in World War II: The Western Hemisphere: Vol 12, Pt. 2 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), p. 228.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 239.
- ¹⁰ Samuel Eliot Morison, History of United States Naval Operations in World War II: Aleutians, Gilberts and Marshalls, June 1942-April 1944: Vol. 7 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), p. 4.
- ¹¹ Carl Von Clausewitz, ed. On War, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 595.
- ¹² Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 100-5, (U.S. Government Printing Office: 1993), p. 2-5.
- ¹³ Varying descriptions of this command structure are presented in the available literature, this is a summary of differing accounts. See, Gilbert Cant, The Great Pacific Victory, (New York: The John Day Company: 1946), p. 56; Stetson Conn, et al., U.S. Army in World War II: The Western Hemisphere: Vol. 12, Pt. 2, pp. 255-60; Garfield, The Thousand-Mile War, pp. 14-15.
- ¹⁴ Garfield, The Thousand-Mile War, p. 15.
- ¹⁵ David C. Evans, The Japanese Navy in World War II, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press: 1986), p. 245.
- ¹⁶ Garfield, The Thousand-Mile War, p. 194.
- ¹⁷ Vego, "Operational Design," p. 10.
- ¹⁸ The Aleutians Campaign--June 1942-August 1943, p. 20.
- ¹⁹ Garfield, The Thousand-Mile War, p. 170.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 256.
- ²¹ Aleutian Islands, p. 24.
- ²² Vego, "Operational Design," p. 11-14.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 13.
- ²⁴ Evans, The Japanese Navy in World War II, p. 249-250.
- ²⁵ Vego, "Operational Design," p. 14.
- ²⁶ Corey Ford, Short Cut to Tokyo, (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons: 1943), p. 17-18.
- ²⁷ The Aleutians Campaign--June 1942-August 1943, p. 8.
- ²⁸ The War Department, The Capture of Attu, (Washington: The Infantry Journal: 1944), p. 5.
- ²⁹ Gilbert Cant, The Great Pacific Victory, (New York: John Day Company: 1946), p. 56.
- ³⁰ Vego, "Operational Design," p. 26.
- ³¹ Conn, et al., The U.S. Army in World War II: The Western Hemisphere: Vol. 12, Pt. 2, p. 260.
- ³² The Aleutian Islands, p. 7.
- ³³ Conn, et al., U.S. Army in World War II: The Western Hemisphere: Vol. 12, Pt. 2, p. 274.
- ³⁴ Vego, "Operational Design," p. 31.
- ³⁵ Robert L. Johnson, "Aleutian Campaign, World War II: Historical Study and Current Perspective," Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS: 1992, p. 184.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 184-85.
- ³⁷ The Aleutian Islands, p. 25-26.

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