



United States Navy

The Battle of Attu

Can you find Attu on a map? H-m-m-m-m! Well, it's at the tip of the Aleutian Islands, which extend out from Alaska. A pretty remote spot. Yet, even Attu has its place in history...

Military Corner

The Aleutian Islands campaign was a military campaign conducted by the United States and Japan in the Aleutian Islands, part of the Territory of Alaska, in the American theater and the Pacific theater of World War II starting on June 3, 1942. In the only two invasions of the United States during the war, a small Japanese force occupied the islands of Attu and Kiska, where the remoteness of the islands and the challenges of weather and terrain delayed a larger U.S.-Canadian force sent to eject them for nearly a year. The islands' strategic value was their ability to control Pacific transportation routes, which is why U.S. General Billy Mitchell stated to the U.S. Congress in 1935, "I believe that in the future, whoever holds Alaska will hold the world. I think it is the most important strategic place in the world." The Japanese reasoned that control of the Aleutians would prevent a possible U.S. attack across the Northern Pacific. Similarly, the U.S. feared that the islands would be used to carry out a full-scale aerial attack on U.S. West Coast cities like Anchorage, Seattle, San Francisco, or Los Angeles.

A battle to reclaim Attu was launched on May 11, 1943, and completed following a final Japanese banzai charge on May 29. On August 15, 1943, an invasion force landed on Kiska in the wake of a sustained three-week barrage, only to discover that the Japanese had withdrawn from the island on July 29.



The campaign is known as the "Forgotten Battle", due to its being overshadowed by other events in the war. Military historians believe the Japanese invasion of the Aleutians was a diversionary or feint attack during the Battle of Midway, meant to draw out the U.S. Pacific Fleet from Midway Atoll, as it was launched simultaneously under the same commander, Isoroku Yamamoto. Some historians have argued that the Japanese invaded the Aleutians to protect their northern flank, and did not intend it as a diversion.

The Japanese invasions and occupations of Kiska on June 6 and Attu on June 7 shocked the American public, as the continental United States was invaded for the first time since the War of 1812. The invading forces initially met little resistance from the local Unangax, also known as Aleuts. Though the U.S. Navy had offered to evacuate Attu in May 1942, the Attuan Unangax chief had declined, and the Unangax were eventually taken to Hokkaido, Japan, and placed in an internment camp.

