Remembering Alaska’s Forgotten Campaign

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Should the campaign be forgotten?

- Campaign fought between 1942 and 1943
- None of its battles are of major military importance
- Alaska was not a turning point for the war in any way
- The campaign transformed popular ideas about Alaska
- Infrastructure created by the war is still in use today
Alaska’s Growing Importance

- Previously untouched wilderness with no modern infrastructure
- Strategic importance
  - Start of WWII: as a naval base to counter Japanese expansion in Asia
- Colonel Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr.’s improves US defenses in Alaska
Alaskan Highway and Northwest Staging Route

• Joint construction project finally gets the road built
• The Highway and Staging Route become a boon to Alaskan pilots
• Lend-lease program with Russia takes off
• Horrific building conditions plague construction
Collateral: The Aleuts

- The Aleuts are the indigenous people of Alaska
- The US Army debated back and forth on an evacuation plan
- Eventual evacuation was sudden and without warning
- Aleuts were forced to live in canneries with minimal supplies
- This resulted in a huge death toll due to disease and starvation
The Japanese Attack

- Reasons for the Aleutian attack included
  - Perceived threat to the Kurile Islands
  - A chance to destroy the lend-lease route to Russia
  - Attempt to split US forces away from Midway
- The Midway plot was foiled, but left US defenses in Aleutians weak
- The Japanese took two islands, marking the first invasion of US soil since 1812
Lackluster battles throughout the campaign

- Dutch Harbor’s inexplicable lack of readiness
  - Both sides hindered by weather and miscommunication
- Failed bombing attempts on Kiska and Attu
- All airplane losses on both sides were mainly due to weather
- The Battle of Komandorski
  - 3 ½ hour naval battle ended with both sides retreating major loss free
The US attack: Retaking the Islands

- **Attu**
  - Weather and bad terrain made the operation difficult
  - Japanese soldiers’ suicides highlights the brutality of war

- **Kiska**
  - Weather prevented the retaking of the island for months
  - A huge force of Canadian and US troops was gathered for the attack
  - Flawless Japanese retreat
  - Non-combat casualties
Conclusion: Forgettable but still Crucial

- After Kiska was retaken, military interest in Alaska quickly waned
- None of the battles fought were significant to the war
- The infrastructure left by the campaign was very significant
- Recognition from US government helped Alaska become the State we know today
Picture credits

http://www.explorenorth.com/library/military/aleutian_war-usarmy.html
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americangreat/paintings/alaska-men/ art/
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Komandorski_Islands