

RED WHITE BLACK & BLUE

THE INVASION OF ATTU: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

(Courtesy of George L. Smith)

The battle of Attu was essentially an infantry battle. The climate greatly limited the use of air power as the island was shrouded in fog and experienced high winds almost every day. The terrain -- steep jagged crags, knifelike ridges covered with snow, and boggy tundra -- made the use of mechanized equipment motorized vehicles impractical.

The American troops, some trained and equipped for fighting in desert climates, some totally inexperienced in combat, had found a most formidable enemy in the Japanese who were fully equipped, thoroughly acclimated, and fanatically determined to hold their strong, well chosen, defensive positions.

The arrival of American forces off Attu was uneventful. A dense fog obscured the island and surrounding area. The beaches quickly jammed up with supplies and bogged-down vehicles. The Army soon realized they wouldn't be able to get their artillery or tracked vehicles across the muskeg. It was apparent the battle would have to be fought by the foot soldiers themselves.

Troops in the front lines began to suffer greatly from the effects of the bitter cold. Hundreds of GIs would eventually have their feet amputated as a result of frostbite and trench foot (roughly a quarter of all casualties would be traced to frostbite). American troops, lost in the fog, walked into enemy cross-fires and were pinned down for hours with no reasonable shelter from the cold.

The Americans continued to slug it out for eight days of nearly perpetual combat as the Japanese forged a bloody withdrawal. Finally, on the 18th of May, 1943, with the added help of the "Fighting Fourth," the American northern and southern forces linked up as per the original plan objective.

Badly outnumbered and sensing possible defeat, the Japanese now killed their own wounded by injecting them with morphine. To make sure the job was completed, they then threw hand grenades into their own medical tent.

On the 28th of May, 1943, Colonel Yasuyo Yamasaki, commander of the Japanese forces on Attu, formed a plan that could possibly turn the tide of battle in favor of the Japanese. In the middle of the night he would lead his remaining force of 800 men (of an initial 3000) through a weak point in the American lines, capture an American artillery emplacement, then use it to pin down the Americans long enough to evacuate his surviving forces.

On the 29th of May, 1943, at 3:15a.m., Yamasaki's remaining troops took advantage of the lingering fog and managed to break through the American lines. Ten minutes later, with the artillery battery located on Engineer Hill in sight, the Japanese commander ordered a banzai attack. They killed several American patients in their field hospital and exploded a propane stove in the mess.

The sleeping Americans quickly rallied their forces and threw the Japanese back into the fog after intense close combat. The failure to carry out their plan effectively destroyed the Japanese morale. 500 of the remaining Japanese committed mass suicide (gyokusai) with grenades held close to their stomachs, chests, and foreheads. Yamasaki attempted a final but fruitless charge later in the day with what remained of his force. During this charge he lost his own life to a .30-caliber bullet. The battle for Attu was over.

The casualties incurred during the invasion of Attu were appalling. The Americans suffered 3829 casualties, roughly 25% of the invading force, second only in proportion to Iwo Jima. On the Japanese side, 2351 men were counted by American burial parties, and hundreds more were presumed already buried. Total prisoners taken: 28 (none of whom were officers). The Japanese fought to virtually the last man.