On May 30, only 28 of the roughly 1,400 Japanese who had been in the valley the day before survived. The rest had been killed in battle or had committed suicide by holding hand grenades to their chests. When the Americans came across the Japanese hospital tents, they made the horrific discovery that all of the wounded had been killed by their doctors. The Americans buried 2,351 Japanese in mass graves on Attu, and it is thought that several hundred more were buried in the hills. Because enemy casualties approached 100%, the Battle of Attu ranks as the second bloodiest battle in the Pacific Theatre (in proportion to the number of troops engaged) falling just behind Iwo Jima. The first combat cold injuries suffered by American forces in World War II occurred on Attu. As a result, major changes in Army footwear, outdoor gear, tents, and food occurred.

The Battle of Attu also caused the Japanese Imperial Navy to briefly redistribute their forces in the Pacific in May, 1943 to protect Japan. U.S. forces took advantage of depleted Imperial Navy strength in the South Pacific and made significant gains in the Solomon Islands.

The tragedy of Attu did not end with the war. When the 24 surviving Attuans were released by Japan after its surrender in 1945, they were not allowed to return to their homes because the U.S. government decided the cost would be too great to rebuild their village.

The battlefield area on Attu was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1985. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service owns and manages the island of Attu as a part of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge.

### Further Reading

**Books**


**Recommended Websites**

2. Aleutians Homepage: www.hwwiww.com

### CASUALTIES ON ATTU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Japanese Casualties</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>349 Dead</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1140 Wounded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200 Severe cold injuries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>618 Disease (including exposure)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Other casualties (including psychotic breakdowns, accidents, drownings, &amp; self-inflicted wounds)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 American Casualties</td>
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**American Casualties**

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<td>2357</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Captured</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Contact Information**

- **Aleutian World War II National Historic Area**
  - National Park Service
  - Attn: Superintendent
  - 2535 Gambell Street
  - Anchorage, AK 99501
  - Tel. (907) 257-2638
  - Fax (907) 257-2510
  - www.nps.gov/aleu

- **Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge**
  - 2355 Kachemak Bay Drive, Suite 101
  - Homer, AK 99603-8021
  - Tel. (907) 235-6546
  - Fax (907) 235-7785

**The Invasion**

“Modern armies had never fought before on any field that was like the Aleutians… We would have to learn as we went along, how to live and fight and win in this new land, the least-known part of our America.”

Cpl. Dashiell Hammett, author of The Maltese Falcon

From June 3 to 7, 1942, Japanese forces attacked Alaska’s Aleutian Islands, bombing Dutch Harbor on the island of Unalaska and invading the islands of Attu and Kiska. Attu’s radio operator, Charles Foster Jones, was killed and his wife Etta, the island’s schoolteacher, taken prisoner. The Aleut (Unangan) residents of Attu were taken to Japan for the duration of the war. Of the 40 captives, 16 (40%) died from disease and starvation.

In May of 1943, after a prolonged air campaign, U.S. troops piled into transport ships to fight the first battle on American soil since the War of 1812. Lasting 18 days, the Battle of Attu was one of the bloodiest battles of World War II, but it remains one of the least-well-known.
On May 11, 1943, 12,500 U.S. soldiers landed on the northern and southern ends of Attu Island. For over two weeks, battles raged over the tiny island. There were few large-scale engagements; as in the rest of the Pacific Theater, the Japanese preferred to employ “small group” tactics, using the rough terrain of Attu to their advantage and lying motionless for hours in foxholes until they could pin down American units with sniper fire. As they moved across the island, Americans had to search every hollow to ensure against surprise attacks and sniper fire.

“The ones who suffered were the ones who didn’t keep moving.... They stayed in their holes with wet feet. They didn’t rub their feet or change socks....”

Captain William H. Willoughby

In addition to constantly being on their guard against the hidden Japanese, the Americans also had to contend with Attu’s weather. In fact, the weather was responsible for more American casualties than enemy fire. Over 2,000 American soldiers were taken out of action due to disease and non-battle injuries while nearly 1,700 were killed or wounded by the Japanese (see back panel for casualty figures). The Army had not taken the weather into account when they supplied the soldiers with their outdoor gear, and as a result many fell victim to exposure and suffered from frostbite, unconsciousness, and fever. Men who had no chance to change out of their sodden, poorly constructed boots for weeks endured “trench foot,” a condition caused by prolonged exposure to a cold, wet, and unsanitary environment. If untreated, trench foot could turn gangrenous and result in amputation. Japanese and American soldiers alike were scorched by 120 mile-per-hour winds, drenched by rain, and blinded by fog. Men had to keep moving to stay warm, even if it meant exposing themselves to enemy fire. Those who could not walk, crawled. When possible, the Americans stripped dead Japanese soldiers of their superior gear, risking being shot by their own troops when they saw the caps, hoods, and waterproof gear of the enemy:

“It was rugged...the whole deal was rugged, like attacking a pillbox by way of a lighttore...in winter.”

Lt. Donald E. Dwinnell

When rations dwindled, soldiers on both sides began to go hungry. On the beaches, some American soldiers threw grenades into the ocean in the hopes of catching fish. Some units went without any food for days when supply planes could not locate them through the thick Aleutian fog. Some malnourished Americans overran Japanese positions after the enemy retreated and fought over the food and ammunition left behind. The Japanese survivors, deprived of their captured rations, began to starve. Dr. Paul Tatsuguchi, an American-trained Japanese medic, wrote in his diary on May 28, “Ate half-dried thistle. This is the first time I have eaten something fresh in months, it is a delicacy.”

“...wound…. At 1800 (hours) took care of all the patients with grenades. Good-bye, Taeki, my beloved wife, who loved me to the last...”

Dr. Paul Nebu Tatsuguchi, May 28, 1943

Much of what is known about Japanese soldiers on Attu comes from the war diary of Paul Nebu Tatsuguchi. Tatsuguchi studied medicine in California before the war. He converted to Christianity and served as a medical missionary of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Japan before being drafted into the Imperial Army in 1941. Tatsuguchi died on May 29 when his field hospital was overrun by U.S. troops. In the evening hours of May 28, American forces occupied the high ground in Chicagof Valley, controlling three critical hills: Fish Hook, Buffalo, and Engineer Hill. The Japanese forces were pushed back to the sea, and the Americans planned to bombard them the next day. Colonel Yamasaki, the commanding Japanese officer on Attu, had 2,600 able-bodied soldiers when the Americans landed. On May 28, he had only 800 men available for combat, plus 600 men who had been wounded over the last two weeks of fighting. Rather than choosing to surrender, which was considered dishonorable, Yamasaki elected to make a daring move. He and his men would counterattack the Americans at their weakest point, capture their artillery on Engineer Hill, and use it against them. They would then sweep through the island to Massacre Bay, raid the enemy’s supplies, and retreat into the mountains to await reinforcements. Most Japanese soldiers saw the plan as a chance for an honorable death, not a great victory. That night, Dr. Tatsuguchi recorded in his diary, “we heard they gave 400 shots of morphone to kills wounded.”

“The last assault is to be carried out. All the patients in the hospital are to commit suicide. Only 33 years of living and I am to die here.... At 1800 (hours) took care of all the patients with grenades. Good-bye, Taeki, my beloved wife, who loved me to the last...”

At 3 a.m. on May 29, Company B of the U.S. 32nd Infantry received an order to march to battalion headquarters to get a hot breakfast, leaving a handful of sentries on guard. Suddenly, the Japanese attacked. Startled, many Americans retreated to the comparative safety of Fish Hook and Buffalo Hills to regroup. Consequently, Yamasaki and his men were able to advance on the artillery on Engineer Hill without meeting any organized resistance.

“What a nightmare, a madness of noise and confusion and deadliness.”

Capt. George S. Buehler reflecting on May 29, 1943

A small number of noncombatant units were stationed on top of Engineer Hill. Under the command of General Archibald V. Arnold, they quickly organized a defense made up of medics, engineers, and service personnel who began hurling hand grenades at the attacking Japanese. Unfazed, the Japanese continued to advance, and desperate hand-to-hand combat erupted as the defenders fought for their lives. The tide turned when the 90th Engineers arrived and forced the attackers back with bayonets and rifle butts, preventing them from reaching the critical artillery. Although the battle continued throughout the day, the Japanese were not able to mount another concentrated attack. Colonel Yamasaki was killed late in the day as he led another wave up Engineer Hill.