

# Operation COTTAGE:

First Special Service Force,  
Kiska Campaign

By Kenneth Finlayson



Shortly after midnight on 14 August, 1943, the soldiers climbed into their small rubber assault boats from landing craft for the two-mile paddle to the barren, fog-enshrouded island. The troops of the First Special Service Force faced a strong wind and choppy seas as they headed for their assigned beaches. Starting at 0130 hours, the campaign to oust the Japanese from the Aleutian island of Kiska, Operation COTTAGE, got underway. It was to be the first combat for this unique Canadian-American unit.

The First Special Service Force (FSSF) was a joint Canadian-American 2300-man regiment created in 1942 for Operation PLOUGH, a special mission in Norway.<sup>1</sup> PLOUGH was to cross German-occupied Norway in winter via the country's snow-covered central plateau, and destroy fourteen hydro-electric dams. These dams supplied nearly 50% of Norway's electricity and were vital to supporting the German war effort.<sup>2</sup> The FSSF was created specifically for this hazardous assignment.

The FSSF was activated on 20 July 1942 at the newly-constructed Fort William Henry Harrison outside of Helena, Montana. American volunteers arrived in a steady stream in July. The first of 900 Canadian troops arrived in August.<sup>3</sup> The unit was organized into three regiments, each with two infantry battalions of three companies.<sup>4</sup> A separate service battalion supported the three regiments. The FSSF Service Battalion was organized with a headquarters company, maintenance company, service company, medical detachment, and communications detachment. A dedicated photographic section documented the Force training using motion picture and still photography. The Service Battalion performed all administrative and maintenance duties and freed the combat units to focus on training.<sup>5</sup>

Colonel (COL) Robert T. Frederick, the FSSF commander, instituted a rugged program of cross-country marches, mountaineering, and parachute training to build an exceptional light infantry force. During the Montana winter, skiing was taught by Norwegian instructors. To support PLOUGH, the Studebaker automobile company developed the T-15 Light Cargo



*Rows of the T-15 Light Cargo Carrier, the "Weasel" produced by Studebaker for use by the First Special Service Force in the PLOUGH operation are lined up at Fort William Henry Harrison, Montana, winter of 1942-43.*



*A joint Canadian-American Retreat ceremony performed at Fort William Henry Harrison, Montana, 1942. The First Special Service Force was a formidable fighting unit that seamlessly blended the soldiers of two nations.*

*Forcemen on a march to Marysville, Montana. The arduous 48-mile road march in khaki shorts was a culminating event in COL Robert Frederick's rigorous training program to prepare the First Special Service Force for combat.*



Carrier; an over-the-snow vehicle nicknamed the "Weasel," to transport men and supplies.<sup>6</sup> The Force was at an extremely high state of readiness when PLOUGH was cancelled in September 1942.<sup>7</sup> Insurmountable logistical problems and insufficient aircraft caused the mission to be scrapped. Without a mission, the continued existence of the Force was placed in jeopardy.

COL Frederick immediately flew to Washington DC to get a new assignment for his unit. The Canadian government agreed in October 1942 to keep its forces in the FSSF if a viable mission could be found.<sup>8</sup> Potential operations were HUSKY, the planned Allied invasion of Sicily, a PLOUGH-like expedition forecasted for the Caucasus region of Russia, New Guinea, and the Allied campaign against the Japanese-occupied Aleutian Islands.<sup>9</sup> As events unfolded, the Force was committed to the invasion of Kiska in the Aleutians.

The Japanese invaded and occupied the Aleutian islands of Attu and Kiska on 6 and 7 June, 1942, to draw U.S. naval strength away from its main effort against Midway, where the Imperial General Staff hoped to deliver a final knock-out blow to the U.S. Navy in the heart of the Pacific.<sup>10</sup> With airfields on the two Aleutian islands they could interdict Allied operations against the Japanese homeland from the North Pacific. The Japanese defeat at the Battle of Midway marooned the Aleutian garrisons at the end of a long, tenuous supply line. Building airfields on each island proved impossible.

The Japanese did not possess adequate construction



*The Japanese bombed the village of Dutch Harbor on Unalaska Island on 3 June 1942. This was one of the few attempts by the Japanese to bring the war to the Allies from their bases on Attu and Kiska.*

equipment to build airfields on the rocky volcanic islands. They were forced to use hand labor with picks and shovels. Their efforts failed on both islands. The two small garrisons of Japanese Army and Navy personnel, 3,500 on Attu and 5,200 on Kiska, withered on their remote, wind-swept outposts. The Aleutian occupation proved to be a "running sore" for the Japanese instead of a platform to attack the North American mainland. The Japanese were impotent. They could do little more than wait for the inevitable Allied assault. With the major Allied operations in North Africa and the Pacific constraining resources and with a complex theater command and control structure, driving the Japanese



*The Aleutian Islands are formed from the partially submerged mountains of Alaska's Aleutian Range. Stretching for over 1100 miles in an arc south and west of the Alaska Peninsula, more than 160 named islands of the archipelago separate the Pacific Ocean from the Bering Sea. Discovered by Vitus Bering in 1741, the sparsely populated Aleutians were home to native Aleuts for several hundred years before the influx of white settlers, trappers, and fishermen changed their traditional way of life. The two main settlements in the chain are at Unalaska (Dutch Harbor) and Adak. The weather in the Aleutians is notoriously cold with high winds, heavy rains, and thick, near continuous fog.<sup>11</sup>*



*Bulldozers dredging sand from Adak inlet to use as fill for the new airstrip. The ability of the U.S. forces to construct airfields in the Aleutians was a major factor in defeating the Japanese forces on the islands.*

from their only hold on American soil was not a priority for the U.S. military.

Overall command of the Aleutians was the responsibility of the Navy. Lacking a unified command structure, operations in the North Pacific Area depended on mutual co-operation by the services. Service interests differed in the theater with the Navy's primary concern being to free up ships for operations in the Pacific, while the Army sought to remove the Japanese threat to mainland North America. This complicated command and control structure, was made more complex by the necessity of including Canadian forces in operations planning.

LTG John L. Dewitt, the commanding general of Western Defense Command, pushed early for an offensive to drive out the Japanese. A week after the occupation of Attu and Kiska by the Japanese, Dewitt petitioned General (GEN) George C. Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff for additional troops to take back the islands as the first phase for attacking Japan via the North Pacific.<sup>14</sup> With the resources of the Allies strained to the utmost by operations in North Africa and the South Pacific, his proposal was rejected. Undeterred, Dewitt developed a more modest plan that, with Navy support, sought to take the Aleutian island of Tanaga as a staging base

**OPERATIONS** in the Aleutians took place in the North Pacific Area (NPA), one of three subordinate commands in Admiral (ADM) Chester A. Nimitz's vast Pacific Ocean Areas Command. The Commander of the NPA exercised operational control (OPCON) of all forces in the theater.<sup>12</sup> The Western Defense Command (WDC) under Lieutenant General (LTG) John L. Dewitt provided the Army forces (roughly 51,000 men). The WDC encompassed Alaska and the northwest coast of Canada. Part of the WDC was the Alaska Defense Command (ADC), a subordinate headquarters under Major General (MG) Simon B. Buckner Jr. Brigadier General (BG) William C. Butler's Eleventh Air Force provided air support to the theater.<sup>13</sup>

for an assault on Kiska. Though favored by the Army staff, the Navy's counter-proposal was to land on Adak, which had better harbor facilities. By mid-August, the negotiations between the services were completed, and on 30 August 1942, 4,500 Army soldiers from the Alaska Defense Command landed on Adak.<sup>15</sup> Better equipped, U.S. combat engineers soon had an airstrip carved out of the volcanic rock, proving ADM William F. "Bull" Halsey's (Commander of the U.S Third Fleet) claim that "one of the four most important assets for winning the war was the bulldozer."<sup>16</sup> Within two weeks, Adak-based aircraft were attacking the Japanese on Kiska 240 miles away. A plan to recapture Attu and Kiska could not be agreed upon by the two services.

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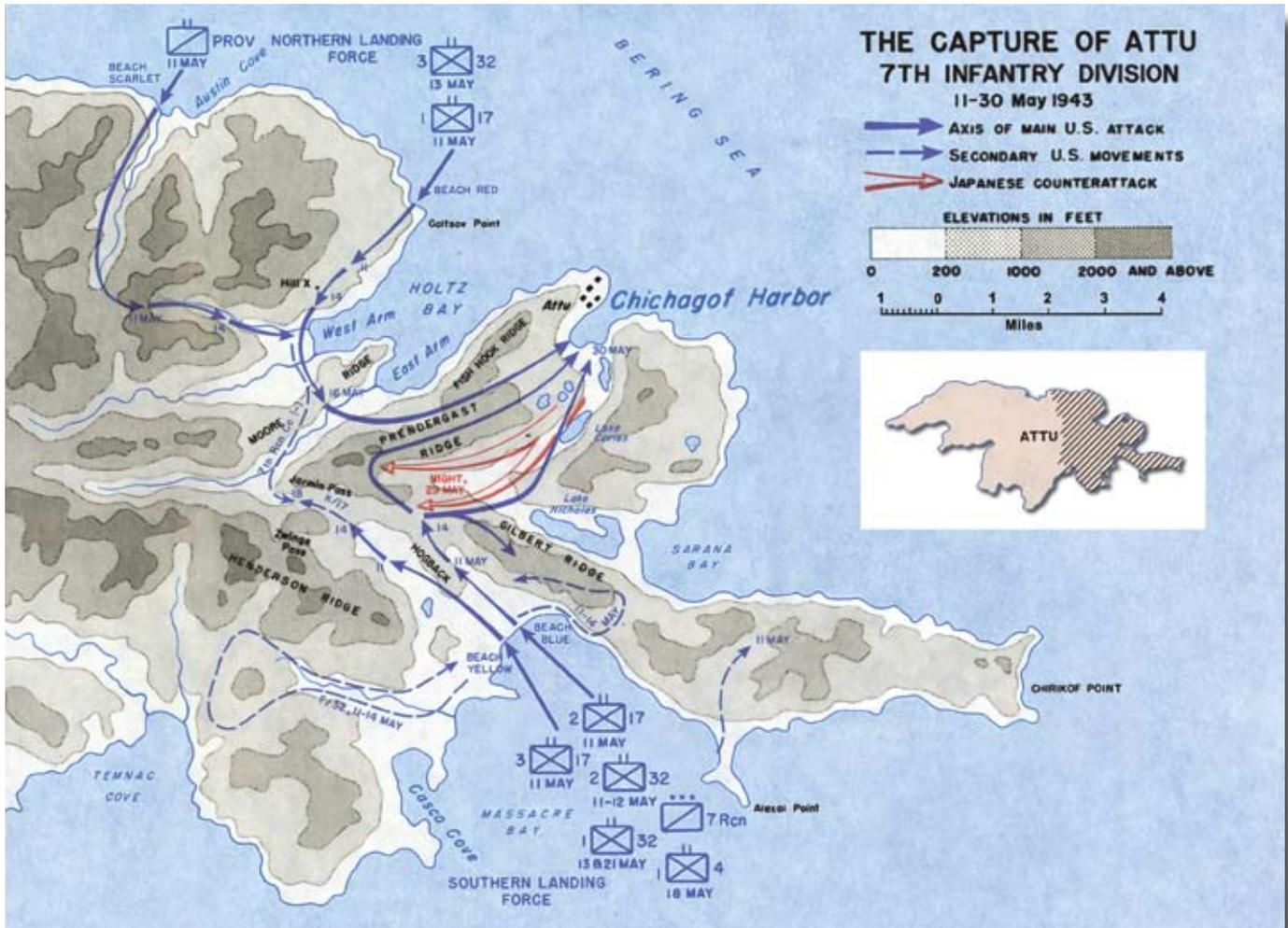
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Operations languished until the end of 1942. In January 1943 Rear Admiral (RADM) Thomas C. Kinkaid, a veteran of the South Pacific campaign took over the North Pacific Area. He pushed for joint operations, and under the impetus of ADM Nimitz's expressed desire to free up naval forces in the North Pacific for operations elsewhere, Army forces landed on the island of Amchitka, 40 miles east of Kiska.

The harsh winter weather prevented any campaigning until the spring. In May 1943, the Allies launched their first assault on the Japanese in the Aleutians. The operation by-passed Kiska and targeted the more remote island of Attu.

Attu Island is the westernmost in the Aleutian chain, nearly 1,100 miles from mainland Alaska. Some 20 miles long and 35 miles wide, it is one of the largest in the archipelago. The Allied invasion was called Operation SANDCRAB. It was the only land battle of World War II fought on U.S. territory. The main landing force was the 7th Infantry Division (7th ID), which conducted amphibious training at Fort Ord, California in April 1943 prior to heading north. A Navy Task Force of three battleships, an escort carrier, and seven destroyers supported the landing. Two naval covering forces of cruisers and destroyers were deployed to block any Japanese attempt to reinforce their troops on the island. The Eleventh Air Force flying from Adak and Amchitka, provided 54 B-24 Liberator bombers and 128 P-38 Lightning fighters to support the invasion forces.<sup>17</sup>

Following several days of delay due to inclement weather, the 7th ID landed on 11 May at three widely separated locations on the eastern side of the island. The final objective was the main Japanese base at Chichagof Harbor. Within five hours, MG Albert E. Brown, the commander of the 7th ID had 3,500 men ashore facing what intelligence reported was less than 1,500 Japanese.<sup>18</sup>



The Allied landings on Attu were designed to converge on the Japanese base at Chichagof Harbor. The landing force suffered heavy casualties. The Japanese fiercely defended the tough terrain. Inclement weather limited the use of air support and naval gunfire.

The troops began to push up the valleys to climb the high ridges they had to cross to get to Chichagof Harbor. They first encountered the Japanese as they ascended.

From well-camouflaged positions on the ridges, determined Japanese troops poured machinegun and mortar fire on the advancing Americans. The attacks rapidly turned into bitter yard-by-yard fights. Poor

weather prevented effective air and naval gunfire support. Reinforcements from the 4th Infantry Regiment of the Alaska Defense Command joined the 7th ID on Attu, bringing the U.S. strength to 15,000. MG Brown was relieved on 16 May. MG Eugene M. Landrum replaced him. It took two weeks for the infantrymen to gain the high ground overlooking Chichagof Harbor. On 29 May, between 700 and 1,000 Japanese troops staged a last-ditch "Banzai" charge against the American positions. In the wild melee that followed, the Japanese were wiped out to the man.<sup>19</sup> This ended organized resistance, although mop-up operations continued for several days. The bloody battle of Attu was over, but the nature of the fight would affect future Allied operations.



A 7th Infantry Division field hospital on Attu. The high number of casualties suffered during the Battle of Attu, affected Allied planning for Kiska. The majority of the casualties were due to cold weather exposure.



7th U.S. Infantry Division SSI



4th U.S. Infantry Regiment DUI



*Forcemen training in seven-man rubber boats at Camp Bradford, Virginia. In the invasion of Kiska, the Forcemen used rubber boats to infiltrate the island.*

The American troops on Attu reported 2,351 enemy dead. Only 28 Japanese surrendered. American casualties were 549 killed, 1,148 wounded, and about 2,100 were put out of action by disease and injury, mostly trench-foot.<sup>20</sup> Only the battle of Iwo Jima surpassed Attu in terms of the rate of casualties sustained by the American forces. This costly battle impacted the American approach to taking Kiska. The need for units better trained to fight in the harsh environments caused the First Special Service Force to be ordered to the Aleutians.

In March 1943, prior to the battle of Attu, the Force was still training at Fort Harrison, Montana. Two months before, COL Frederick visited MG Buckner at the Alaska Defense Command headquarters at Fort Richardson. Buckner asked the Army staff to assign the FSSF to him for the upcoming campaign, but LTG Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Allied commander in the Mediterranean, wanted the FSSF for Operation HUSKY, the invasion of Sicily.<sup>21</sup> The Army General Staff decreed that prior to being committed to any theater, the FSSF would undergo amphibious training in April and May, and then be evaluated by the Army Ground Forces (AGF) command. Still unassigned, the Force marked the end of its training at Fort Harrison with a parade in downtown Helena on 6 April 1943. On 11 April they boarded five trains headed east to Virginia.<sup>22</sup>

Camp Bradford near Virginia Beach, Virginia, was the home of the Naval Amphibious School, (now the Naval Amphibious Base, Little Creek). Army units destined for the European Theater cycled through for amphibious training. There the Forcemen learned how to board various Navy landing craft and how to exit when the vessel hit the beach. The USS *Neversail*, the concrete landing craft mock-up, was used for learning boarding techniques. The well-trained, cohesive Forcemen set records for the speed with which they could climb fully-loaded down the cargo nets into the landing craft.



*Soldiers in the close quarters of a U.S. troopship. The Forcemen, double-bunked four high on two Liberty ships, suffered considerably during the stormy passage to the Aleutians.*

Training in the use of small rubber boats (similar to today's RB-7s) to infiltrate ahead of the landing craft was part of the program. After Camp Bradford, the FSSF moved to Burlington, Vermont for their unit evaluation.

At nearby Camp Ethan Allen, the Force was tested on its individual and unit proficiency by the staff of the XIII Corps in accordance with AGF policy for units scheduled for overseas deployment.<sup>23</sup> In conjunction with the evaluation, the FSSF received some new American volunteers, did more rubber boat training on Lake Champlain, and polished their raiding and reconnaissance skills. The unit set extremely high standards in virtually every area, and passed with flying colors. They were ready for deployment to North Africa. The movement order finally came on 9 June 1943, but it was for the Aleutians and the invasion of Kiska.

The heavy casualties on Attu convinced RADM Kinkaid that he needed additional ground forces to invade Kiska. In concert with LTG Dewitt, the request was sent to GEN Marshall, who offered the First Special Service Force for inclusion in the invasion force. MG Buckner heartily endorsed the addition of the FSSF, and after completing their evaluations, the Force loaded trains for the West Coast, departing Burlington

on 26 June. On 3 July they reached San Francisco where they prepared for the voyage to Alaska.

The 2,460-man Force sailed for the Aleutians on 11 July after drawing winter clothing and equipment. One of the lessons learned on Attu was the need for adequate raingear, boots, and sleeping bags to deal with the cold, wet conditions on the islands. Canadian Private (PVT) Jack Callowhill of 1st Company, Second Regiment recalled, "We got our winter issue on the boat.



*A Forceman cleans his M-1 rifle in a Bell tent on Amchitka. His knee-high shoepacs and the improvised boardwalk helped to traverse the soft muskeg of the island.*

The mukluks were just the thing for the muskeg."<sup>24</sup> The Force Headquarters, Second Regiment, and the Service Battalion travelled in the Liberty ship SS *John B. Floyd*. A sister ship, the SS *Nathaniel Wyeth* carried the First and Third Regiments. Liberty Ships were designed for cargo, and when converted for use as troop transport, proved slow and uncomfortable.<sup>25</sup> The eleven-day voyage was a memorable one.

Shortly after the convoy cleared San Francisco Bay it encountered a storm that battered the ships unmercifully for four days. PVT Thomas O'Brien, 5th Company, Second Regiment said, "I was one of those who got sick on that trip, and did I ever. It was rough as hell. I never got out of my bunk for five days. That's how rough it was. I think ninety percent of the guys were sick."<sup>26</sup> Sergeant (SGT) Kenneth Betts, 1st Company, Second Regiment recalled the chaos below decks. "On our Liberty ships, the bunks were stacked eight or ten high. We were packed in there like sardines and we were rolling so violently that the bunks were torn right off the wall. It was a hell of a mess."<sup>27</sup> PVT Kenneth Gay, 3rd Company, First Regiment, said "They had welded those bunks in and the rolling just broke the frames."<sup>28</sup> It was with undisguised relief that the Forcemen saw Adak Island on 23 July.

Five Army infantry regiments were already training on Adak Island. Frederick determined that there was not room enough for the FSSF and the next day the unit sailed to Amchitka, 40 miles east of Kiska, and established a bivouac site on the island.<sup>29</sup> The troops quickly became acquainted with the vagaries of the Aleutian weather and terrain. PVT Harvey Watts of 4th Company, Third Regiment remembered how difficult it was to walk on the spongy, water-logged tundra. "You would sink up to your knees with each step. The mud could pull your boots off."<sup>30</sup> Ironically, most of the Army units had the Weasel, which proved to be ideal for negotiating the soggy muskeg. The Force, for whom the Weasel was originally designed, had not brought theirs. Once ashore, the men found that establishing bivouac sites was a labor intensive exercise.

The Force erected their pyramid-shaped Bell tents, two per nine-man section, out on the tundra. PVT Jack Callowhill said, "We rolled back the muskeg and dug down to the bedrock. Then we drove our tent pegs into the volcanic rock."<sup>31</sup> The men settled into a three-week routine of training and waiting for the start of operations. Some of the cagey Forcemen supplemented



*In order to pitch their Bell tents in the tundra, the Forcemen rolled back the muskeg and dug down to the volcanic bedrock. They drove their tent pegs into the rock to hold the tents up in the nearly continuous heavy winds.*

their diet with the local fauna. PVT Kenneth Gay said, "Little streams would run along the ground and disappear under the muskeg. We would carry a line and hook and if you used the pull tab from your cigarette pack, which was red, you could catch these little six-inch trout."<sup>32</sup> Once the bivouac was established, the Force trained hard while waiting impatiently for the start of Operation COTTAGE.

The main assault on Kiska was given to the Amphibian Training Force 9 (ATF-9), known as "Corlett's Long Knives," after its commander MG Charles H. Corlett. The First Special Service Force, as the key unit in the ATF, was to lead the initial amphibious assault on the island. For the invasion, ATF-9 was composed of four U.S. infantry regiments, the 17th, 53rd, 87th Mountain and 184th, the Canadian 13th Infantry Brigade and a detachment of the U.S. Alaska Scouts, (2 officers and 18 enlisted men) along with the 2,460-man First Special Service Force. ATF-9 had more than 34,400 men, three times the estimated 11,000 Japanese on the island.<sup>33</sup>

A powerful naval task force was supporting the Kiska invasion. RADM Kinkaid had three battleships, the USS *Pennsylvania* (BB-38), *Idaho* (BB-42), and *Tennessee* (BB-43), the heavy cruiser, USS *Portland* (CA-33), the light cruiser *Santa Fe* (CL-60), and seven destroyers available.<sup>34</sup> Two fast attack transports, the *Heywood* (AP-12), and the *J. Franklin*



ATF-9, "Corlett's Long Knives," SSI  
(Courtesy Ken Joyce)



Alaska Defense Command SSI



17th U.S. Infantry Regiment DUI



87th Mountain Infantry Regiment DUI



184th U.S. Infantry Regiment DUI

# Operation Cottage

## Kiska Island, 15-16 August 1943



*The First Special Service Force was the lead element of the landing forces for both the Northern and Southern Sectors in the invasion of Kiska. The First and Third Regiments landed in rubber boats to secure the beaches and patrol inland before the main landing forces arrived.*



*Men of the First Regiment command group huddle on Beach 9-Blue on D-Day 15 August 1943. The white triangular shape behind the men is a beach marking panel erected to guide the subsequent waves of troops to the beach.*

*Bell (AP-16) carried the soldiers of the landing force.*

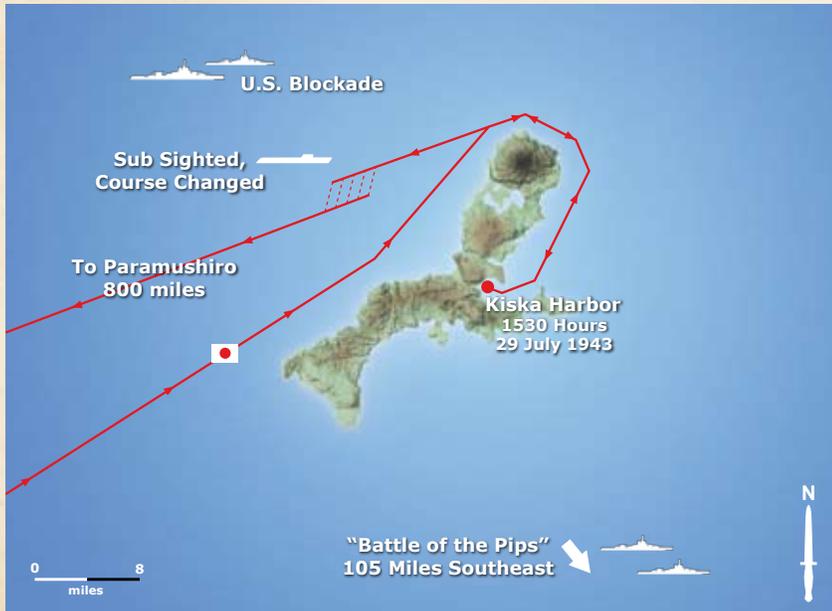
The concept of Operation COTTAGE involved amphibious landings at two locations named the Northern and the Southern Sector on the 22-mile long island. On D-Day, the first landings would be in the Southern Sector. The First Regiment, FSSF, under Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Alfred C. Marshall would infiltrate by rubber boats on the west side of the island. The Force would secure the landing beaches for the U.S. 184th and 17th Infantry Regiments. On D+1, the FSSF Third Regiment, led by LTC Edwin A. Walker would land in rubber boats farther north and secure the beachhead for the U.S. 87th Mountain Infantry

Regiment and the Canadian 13th Infantry Brigade.<sup>35</sup> The two landing forces would conduct a pincer movement aimed at the main Japanese base at Kiska Harbor on the east side of the island. The U.S. 53rd Infantry Regiment and the Second Regiment, FSSF were in reserve. The second Regiment's Forcemen were at the airfield on Amchitka, ready to parachute on Kiska to reinforce either sector as needed. A key part of the operation was a feint by a naval task force on the eastern side of the island to draw the Japanese away from the western landing beaches. D-Day was set for 15 August.

Three weeks prior to the invasion the Allies began a daily bombardment of Kiska from the air and sea. The Eleventh Air Force stepped up their bombing campaign and by the time of the landings had dropped 425 tons of bombs on the island. The naval task force added another 330 tons of explosives during their shelling of Kiska before the assault.<sup>36</sup> The marked slackening of Japanese anti-aircraft fires at the end of July was attributed to the effectiveness of the bombardment.<sup>37</sup> The invasion commenced on 15 August under a heavy naval bombardment.

The First Regiment and COL Frederick's command group boarded the destroyer USS *Kane* and one Landing Ship, Tank (LST) late in the day on 13 August. The Third Regiment rode in a single LST. The three vessels joined the main convoy sailing from Adak to be in position for their assault on Kiska at midnight on the 15th. The First Regiment with their attached team of Alaska Scouts pushed away from the Navy vessels at 0030 hours and began the arduous two-mile paddle against the current.

# THE JAPANESE EVACUATION OF KISKA ISLAND



Rear Admiral Masatomi Kimura's naval task force slipped through the allied blockade around Kiska and evacuated the Japanese forces on the island. Using the treacherous northern approach, the task force used the heavy fog to cover its movement. In 55 minutes all 5,200 troops were on board and the Japanese retraced their route safely through the blockade.

The Japanese Navy's undetected evacuation of the Aleutian Island of Kiska was a testament to the patience, seamanship, and luck of Rear Admiral (RADM) Masatomi Kimura. The Allied recapture of Attu Island in May 1943 had cut the Kiska garrison off making the defense of the Aleutians untenable. The Japanese Imperial General Staff decided to evacuate the island.<sup>1</sup>

A Japanese attempt to reinforce its garrisons on the islands before Attu was invaded failed. A strong naval force under Vice Admiral Boshiro Hosogaya was stopped when RADM Charles H. McMorris prevailed against the superior Japanese force at the Battle of the Komandorski Islands on 23 March 1943.<sup>2</sup> From that point, the Japanese faced an Allied blockade and were forced to resupply their forces by submarine. After Attu fell, submarines were dispatched to Kiska to evacuate the garrison. On 23 June 1943, the loss of several submarines caused the Japanese to seek an alternative. Only 820 of the 5,200-man garrison were rescued by submarine. Numerous submarines were sunk while returning to Japan.<sup>3</sup> The Imperial General Staff decided to switch to surface ships. This high-risk mission was given to Rear Admiral Masatomi Kimura, a veteran of operations in the North Pacific.

On 11 June 1943 RADM Kimura was given command of the First Destroyer squadron. From his base on Paramushiro Island in the Japanese Kurile Islands, Kimura led a force of two light cruisers and ten destroyers, including the *Shimakaze*, the newest Japanese model and the only one equipped with radar.<sup>4</sup> The Japanese admiral planned to use the persistent fog in the Aleutians to

screen his passage through the Allied naval blockade. He and his veteran destroyer captains rehearsed sailing formations under strict radio silence as much as their severe fuel restrictions allowed and waited for the weather to cooperate. Kimura planned to approach Kiska from the north instead of the traditional southern route. The northern route was fraught with uncharted shoals and rocks making navigation difficult. A 7 July attempt was aborted when the fog dissipated. On 21 July, the task force steamed out of Paramushiro on the 800 mile voyage to Kiska. Critical fuel shortages dictated that this would be the final evacuation attempt.

On Kiska, the troops assembled nightly at Kiska Harbor to await their rescue. Some marched more than five miles each night over the tundra, only to trudge back before daybreak. Many made this journey eight times, and morale was low. On 28 July, after his final refueling point 500 miles southwest of Kiska, Admiral Kimura began his stealthy approach. In a phenomenal stroke of luck, the American destroyers

on blockade were lured away to chase a "phantom fleet" (the "Battle of the Pips," pips referring to radar contacts). Then they were sent 105 miles southeast of their normal blockade position to refuel. In thick fog, Kimura's fleet slipped through the blockade and negotiated the treacherous northern approach. The ships dropped anchor in Kiska Harbor at 1530 hours on the 29 July 1943.

Alerted to their impending rescue, the garrison troops had been hastily summoned to the pickup point at Kiska Harbor six hours ahead of schedule. In their haste, food, weapons, and clothing were abandoned. Men streamed in from all points on the island. Ten landing craft on the island, supplemented by twelve brought by the task force immediately began ferrying the troops out to the ships. In an incredible time, just 55 minutes, 5,183 men were loaded and the fleet backtracked around the northern tip of Kiska and steamed for Paramushiro. They arrived safely on 1 August.<sup>5</sup> So stealthy was the fog-enshrouded operation that the Allied Air Force and Navy continued to bomb the unoccupied island until the invasion on 15 August. Audacity, weather, and luck had brought good fortune the Japanese; a disaster was averted on Kiska.

## Endnotes

- 1 David C. Evans, ed., *The Japanese Navy in World War II: In the Words of Former Japanese Naval Officers*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 252.
- 2 S. E. Smith, *The United States Navy in World War II*, (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1966) 257-269.
- 3 Evans, 254.
- 4 Evans, 256.
- 5 Evans, 272.



Colonel Robert T. Frederick, First Special Service Force commander, rests during operations on Kiska, 15 August 1943. The "Long Knives" patch of Amphibian Training Force 9 is on his right shoulder.



The invasion of Kiska. The initial assault by the First Regiment, FSSF, on 15 August was north of Link and Lame Hills. The Third Regiment landed at West Kiska Lake, moving on D+1 up on Ranger and Riot Hills. The Japanese Main Camp was the focus of the invasion force.

They headed for their landing site at Quisling Cove (designated Beach 9-Blue). Coming ashore at 0120 hours, the Forcemen moved quickly to secure the other two landing beaches around Quisling Cove. They set up colored panels and lamps to mark the landing zones for the Southern Sector follow-on forces, scheduled to land at 0630 hours. The other Southern Sector landing beaches were 9-Yellow and 10-Scarlet (Lily Beach). Once the beaches were secure, the Force companies moved cautiously inland to establish defensive positions on the high ground overlooking the center of the island.

A line of hills dominated the approach to Kiska

Harbor. The hills, named Link Hill, Lawson Hill, Larry Hill, and Lame Hill in the operations order, varied in height from 1,300 to 1,500 feet. 1st and 4th Companies seized Larry Hill, 2nd and 3rd Companies moved along Limpid Creek to occupy Lame Hill, while 5th and 6th Companies secured Lily Beach and ascended Link Hill.<sup>38</sup> The companies dug in and sent out reconnaissance patrols to locate the Japanese. The Force headquarters followed the First Regiment with some difficulty.

COL Frederick and his headquarters element were to paddle in to Quisling Cove behind the initial landing wave. Two of the small rubber boats, overloaded with

*Forcemen rest and clean weapons following a patrol on Kiska. Despite the fact that the Japanese had evacuated the island before the invasion, the Force patrols were at risk from the overzealous Allied units that landed behind them.*





*Allied forces landing after the First Special Service Force had secured the beaches.*

communications equipment and generators, were barely afloat in the icy sea. The men could make no headway against the ebbing tide. They were carried helplessly out to sea where they drifted until picked up by a Navy minesweeper at dawn.<sup>39</sup> Frederick and his depleted headquarters landed at Beach 9-Blue on the heels of First Regiment. The main body of the Southern Sector landing force under the command of COL E. M. Sutherland began to come ashore at Quisling Cove shortly after dawn.

At 0620 hours the first elements of the 87th Mountain Infantry Regiment and the 17th Infantry Regiment waded ashore from the landing craft at the three beaches. Troops continued to arrive throughout the day and by evening, 6,500 men were on the island and the Southern Sector beachhead was secure. The Force units continued to push patrols out and guided the infantry to their defensive positions on the ridgeline. The Forcemen moved carefully as jittery American infantry tended to fire at the slightest provocation. Mindful that the Japanese on Attu had not revealed themselves until the Allied

troops were driving inland, the American forces warily pushed towards the main Japanese Camp. No contact was made on D-Day. Frederick stayed on the island all day, and moved his headquarters back to the USS *Kane* that evening to supervise the Northern Sector landing by the Force the next day.

terrain than the units in the Southern Sector. The northern end of the island was dominated by the 4,000-foot Kiska volcano. East and West Kiska Lakes blocked the southern route to Kiska Harbor. South of the lakes was a trio of hills, Riot, Ranger, and Rose, rising nearly 1,400 feet across the center of the island. If the Japanese defended the high ground, they would be difficult to dislodge.

Shortly after midnight on 16 August, the Third Regiment loaded their rubber boats and began the mile-long pull in to the island. The Navy planners indicated that the landing area for the Third Regiment was a shingle beach and a good landing site, an assessment that proved to be false. Getting in to the beach proved difficult for the soldiers. PVT Harvey Watts of 4th company recalled, "We had trouble paddling through the seaweed to get to the beach."<sup>40</sup> Once through the thick kelp, the men encountered a beach strewn with huge boulders.

The first units ashore struggled getting the rubber boats across the spit of land. PVT Richard Hilton of 2nd Company said, "The rocks were big, 10-12 feet high and we were afraid they could be mined."<sup>41</sup> One of Third Regiment's missions was to send an element across West Kiska Lake to secure the area at the base of Ranger Hill. This required the men to carry their rubber boats from the beach across a narrow spit of land and re-launch them for the journey across the lake.

First Lieutenant (1LT) T. Mark Radcliffe's platoon of 1st Company was the first to launch their boats in the lake for the two-mile paddle to their objective. Once on the lake, the men began their stealthy movement towards the far shore. The already tense situation was further exacerbated when the cloud cover that shielded their movement began to break up. 1LT Radcliffe said "We hadn't seen the sun or the moon for a month and a half. When we were right in the middle of this lake, the bright, bright moon came out."<sup>42</sup> Exposed and helpless out on the water, the Forcemen paddled furiously for the landing site.



*An artist's rendition of 1LT Mark Radcliffe's platoon paddling across West Kiska Lake. During the crossing, the clouds parted and the men were silhouetted in the moonlight.*

*The Japanese 2-man midget submarines on Kiska. PVT Kenneth Gay's platoon was detailed to guard the facility against the souvenir hunting GIs.*



Reaching the far side of the lake, the 1st Company beached their boats and moved up the slope of Ranger Hill. Coming off the lake, the men encountered increasingly strong winds. Radcliffe said, "When we got up to the beach area, the wind picked up. It was blowing so hard, it was blowing guys with their loaded packs right over. That place was horrendous."<sup>43</sup> By 0300, the Third Regiment units were digging in along the ridge between Ranger and Riot Hills. At dawn on the 16th, the U.S. 184th Infantry Regiment, the Canadian 13th Brigade and other support units, including Navy Seabees (Engineers) began coming ashore in the north and heading inland. Still, the Force had encountered no Japanese; it was becoming obvious that the enemy had left.

On the 16 August 1943, at approximately 1000, Force patrols from the Northern and Southern Sectors converging on the main Japanese Camp at Kiska Harbor, confirmed that there were no enemy troops on Kiska. Frederick, who had followed the Third Regiment ashore, sent word to the Second Regiment on Amchitka. The pre-arranged coded message was "Baby needs a new pair of shoes." For the men of the Second Regiment, on alert on the Amchitka airfield on 15 and 16 August, that meant they would not get to jump.<sup>44</sup>

PVT Jack Callowhill said, "Everyone was on the airstrip. We had a rigger section [from the FSSF Service Battalion] and about 600 jumpers. We had 24 airplanes [C-47's] and we were in 25-man sticks. We were on the aircraft for 20 minutes, then everyone got off and we layed down on the runway [still wearing parachutes]. We did this for a couple of hours on the 16th, and then they called it off."<sup>45</sup> By then, troops were combing Kiska for any sign of the Japanese.

PVT Charley Mann was with the 4th Company, Third Regiment. "There were lots of vehicles on the island. The Japanese were using Ford trucks, 1936 to 1939 vintage. I did see a wooden Japanese landing craft and a couple of anti-aircraft weapons."<sup>46</sup> On Kiska, the Japanese had established a base for their three midget submarines, including a marine railway for launching and recovering the small subs. PVT Kenneth Gay and his platoon were sent to guard the submarine facility at Kiska Harbor and to prevent GIs roaming the island from stripping the vessels. "There was one of the midget subs in dry dock, and we pulled guard on it," said Ken Gay.<sup>47</sup> The Force was sent to some of the nearby islands to check for the Japanese.

On the 16th, the First Regiment minus the 1st Battalion searched Little Kiska Island at the mouth of Kiska Harbor. On the 17th, the 1st Battalion, First Regiment was sent to search Segula Island, twelve miles northwest of Kiska



*Men of the Second Regiment on Amchitka wait beneath their C-47 aircraft. The Second Regiment was the Force reserve and was prepared to conduct a parachute assault onto Kiska to reinforce the invasion.*



*Japanese forces on the island left behind most of their equipment when they abandoned Kiska on 29 July 1943. This anti-aircraft gun was one of several still on the island when the FSSF landed on 15 August.*

after an aircraft reported the possible presence of the Japanese. They found the bodies of two fur trappers who had starved to death some years before.<sup>48</sup> Three days after landing, the Force was pulled off the island.

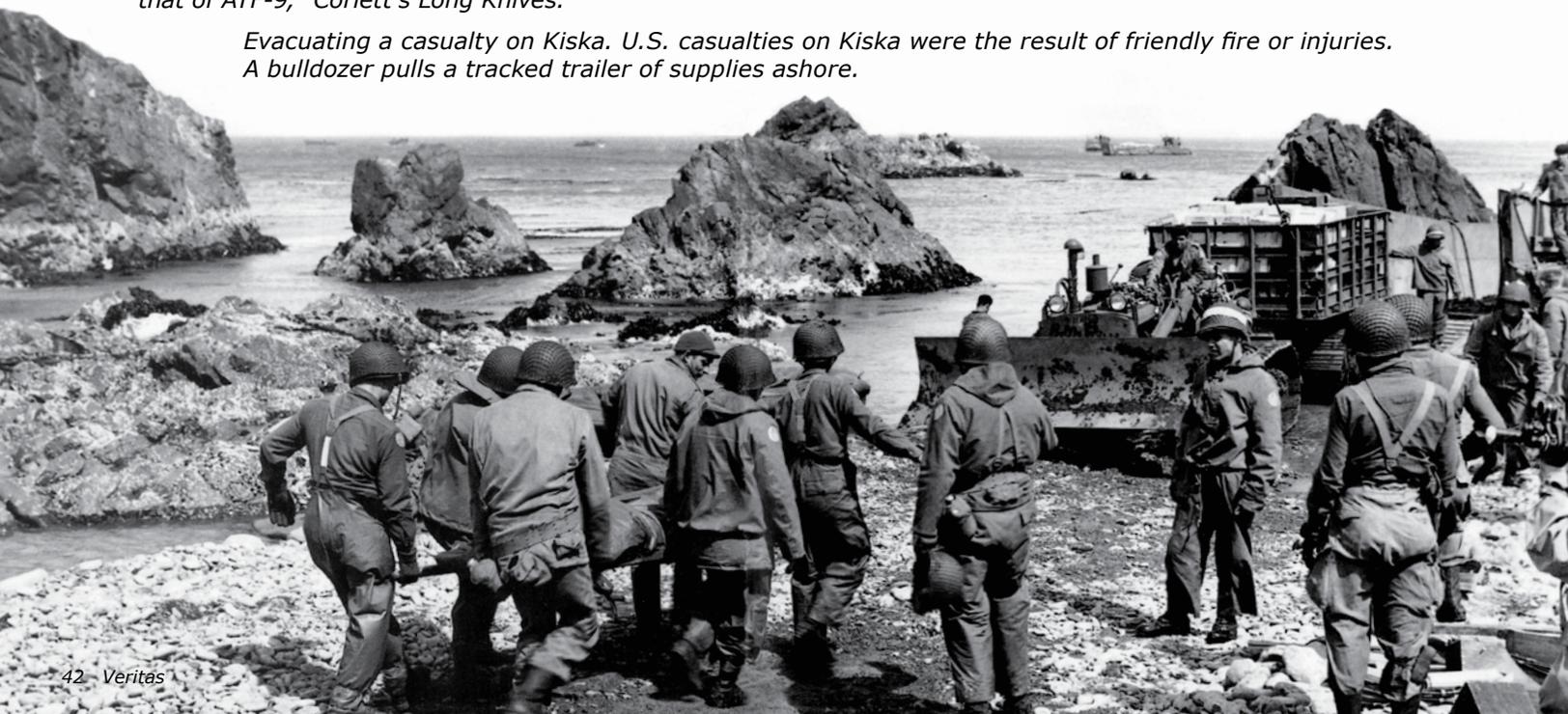


*A Forceman in an abandoned Japanese defensive position on Kiska aims a Type 96 light machinegun. The hurried Japanese evacuation meant a wealth of souvenirs for the occupying troops.*



*Two Forcemen examine a Japanese Type 89 50mm grenade launcher, known to the GI's as a "knee mortar," found during a patrol on Kiska. The man on the right is wearing both the First Special Service Force patch and that of ATF-9, "Corlett's Long Knives."*

*Evacuating a casualty on Kiska. U.S. casualties on Kiska were the result of friendly fire or injuries. A bulldozer pulls a tracked trailer of supplies ashore.*



On 18 August 1943, COL Frederick received a message: "HIGHEST AUTHORITY DIRECTS THAT YOU RETURN SPECIAL SERVICE FORCE TO SAN FRANCISCO WITHOUT DELAY – NIMITZ."<sup>49</sup> The First and Third Regiments boarded the transport *J. Franklin Bell* that had just discharged troops and supplies of the 87th Mountain Infantry Regiment at Kiska, and sailed to Adak, arriving on 19 August. The Second Regiment and the Service Battalion broke down the Amchitka camp and loaded all Force equipment on the *John B. Floyd*, which also sailed to Adak. The troops on the *Floyd* transferred personnel and equipment to the transport *Heywood*. The *Bell* departed Adak on 23 August with the *Heywood* sailing a day later. Unlike the journey north, the return voyage was swift and uneventful and the *Bell* arrived in San Francisco on 30 August followed by the *Heywood* on 1 September.<sup>50</sup>

The Force disembarked at Camp Stoneman, on the Sacramento River in Pittsburg, CA, where most of the cold-weather equipment was turned in. "We gave back all our winter gear. We never got those mukluks back," said PVT Richard Hilton wistfully.<sup>51</sup> The Force had orders for Europe. Following a short period of leave and more training at Camp Ethan Allen, Vermont, the unit boarded the *Empress of Scotland*, a converted luxury liner, at Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia on 28 October 1943, bound for Casablanca, Morocco.

The Aleutians "dry run" gave the Force a shakedown that no training program could have accomplished. The FSSF proved it was a highly-trained, well-disciplined combat unit that could accomplish its mission despite the adversities of extreme weather and terrain. They later demonstrated their combat capabilities during fierce fighting in the mountains of Italy, at Anzio, and later in southern France. ♣

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## Endnotes

- 1 The First Special Service Force is one of the most well-documented units in World War II. Numerous books have been written about the Force, including a number of recent studies. While not a complete compendium of books about the Force, the following volumes represent the majority of the most current works. Robert H. Adleman and George Walton, *The Devil's Brigade* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1966); Robert D. Burhans, *The First Special Service Force: A Canadian/American Wartime Alliance, The Devil's Brigade* (Dalton, GA: Lee Printing Company, 1947); Anne Hicks, *The Last Fighting General: The Biography of Robert Tryon Frederick* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 2006); Kenneth H. Joyce, *Snow Plough and the Jupiter Deception* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2006); John Nadler, *A Perfect Hell: The Forgotten Story of the Canadian Commandos of the Second World War* (Scarborough, Ontario: Doubleday Canada, 2005); Mark J. Nelson, *With the Black Devils: A Soldier's World War II Account with the First Special Service Force and the 82nd Airborne* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2004); Robert Todd Ross, *The Supercommandos: First Special Service Force, 1942-1944, An Illustrated History* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2000); Joseph A. Springer, *The Black Devil Brigade, The True Story of the First Special Service Force: An Oral History* (Pacifica, CA: Pacifica Military History, 2001); James A. Wood, *We Move Only Forward: Canada, The United States and the First Special Service Force, 1942-1944* (St. Catharines, Ontario, Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2006).
- 2 The smelting of aluminum and manganese, and the processing of bauxite were heavily dependent on the electricity produced by these hydro-electric dams. Joyce, *Snow Plough and the Jupiter Deception*, 28.
- 3 The initial Canadian contingent for the First Special Service Force was 52 Officers and 847 enlisted men. While evenly dispersed throughout the Force, the Canadians as a group were called the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion in matters of national administration. The Canadian strength would decrease throughout the life of the FSSF, because no replacements came from the Canadian Army. Joyce, *Snow Plough and the Jupiter Deception*, 65.
- 4 Burhans *The First Special Service Force*, 22; Ross, *The Supercommandos*, 48-49.
- 5 At Fort Harrison, the First Special Service Force was supported by an eight-man aviation detachment. The detachment was disbanded in June, 1943 in Vermont, prior to the unit's movement to the Aleutians. In March, 1944, the FSSF acquired the Ranger Cannon Company when the Rangers were disbanded after Anzio. The Cannon Company had half-tracks mounting 75mm howitzers and supported the Force in Italy and France. The photographs in this article are largely the products of the Force's organic photographic section. Ross, *The Supercommandos*, 49.
- 6 After a production run of 600, Studebaker modified the T-15 vehicle by moving the engine from the rear to the front. It was redesignated the T-24. In its standardized form, it was fielded as the Cargo Carrier, Light, M-24. The Force never received their required allotment of the vehicle. Burhans, *The First Special Service Force*, 6, 23, 43.
- 7 A combination of factors including the impact of denying the electricity to the Norwegian civilian population, inadequate heavy airlift to carry the Weasels, the lack of a viable extraction plan for the men, and competition with a similar British-Norwegian plan resulted in the cancellation of PLOUGH. Joyce, *Snow Plough and the Jupiter Deception*, 90; Burhans, *The First Special Service Force*, 35.
- 8 Joyce, *Snow Plough and the Jupiter Deception*, 92.
- 9 Joyce, *Snow Plough and the Jupiter Deception*, 94.
- 10 David C. Evans, ed., *The Japanese Navy in World War II: In the Words of Former Japanese Naval Officers* (Annapolis, MD, Naval Institute Press, 1986), 245.
- 11 Lieutenant Commander John Tatom, USN, *Summer Fogs and Winter Winds of the Aleutian Islands and How to Fly Despite Them*, Fleet Air Wing Four Manual, 1943, <http://www.hlswilliwaw.com/aleutians/Aleutians/html/summerfogs-winterwinds.htm>.
- 12 Louis Morton, *The United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific, Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1962), 421.
- 13 Stetson Conn, Rose C. Engelman and Byron Fairchild, *The United States Army in World War II, The Western Hemisphere: Guarding the United States and Its Outposts* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1964), 266-268; Morton, *The United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific*, 478.
- 14 Morton, *The United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific*, 421.
- 15 Morton, *The United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific*, 423.
- 16 Admiral William F. Halsey's four most important assets were the submarine, radar, airplanes, and the bulldozer. Halsey, 1947, quoted in "Radar Returns", Vol 2. No. 4, Spring 1987, <http://www.radarreturns.net.au/assets/issues/RR%20Vol2%20No4.pdf>.
- 17 George L. MacGarrigle, *Aleutians: The US Army Campaigns of World War II*, CMH Pub 72-6, (Washington DC, Center of Military History, 2003), 16-17.
- 18 MacGarrigle, *Aleutians*, 18.
- 19 Conn, Engelman, and Fairchild, *The United States Army in World War II, The Western Hemisphere*, 279-295.
- 20 MacGarrigle, *Aleutians*, 19.
- 21 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force*, 52; Albert N. Garland and Howard McGaw Smyth, *The United States Army in World War II, Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1965), 5.
- 22 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force*, 53.
- 23 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force*, 57.
- 24 John E. Callowhill, 1st Company, Second Regiment, First Special Service Force, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 19 January 2008, Kissimmee, FL, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 25 The 225 Liberty Ships built during World War II were designed as cargo carriers. The conversion to troop carrier use was necessitated by the need for more troop transport. Inadequate facilities for accommodating large numbers of troops made a voyage in the Liberty ship a trying experience. Charles Wardlow, *The United States Army in World War II, The Transportation Corps: Movement, Training, and Supply* (Washington DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1956), 145-148.
- 26 Springer, *The Black Devil Brigade*, 55.
- 27 Springer, *The Black Devil Brigade*, 55.
- 28 Kenneth Gay, 1st Company, Third Regiment, First Special Service Force, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 19 January 2008, Kissimmee, FL, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 29 Hicks, *The Last Fighting General*, 89; Burhans, *The First Special Service Force*, 65.
- 30 Harvey Watts, 4th Company, Third Regiment, First Special Service Force, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, Fort Bragg, NC, 14 September 2000, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files.
- 31 Callowhill interview.
- 32 Gay interview.
- 33 Ross, *The Supercommandos*, 55.
- 34 Department of the Navy, United States Navy Combat Narrative, "The Aleutians Campaign, June 1942-August 1943, (Washington DC: Naval Historical Center, 1993), <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/USN-CN-Aleutians.html>.
- 35 Stanley W. Dziuban, *The United States Army in World War II, Military Relations Between the United States and Canada, 1939-1945*, (Washington DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1959), 258.
- 36 Morton, *The United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific*, 423.
- 37 There had been mounting evidence that the Japanese had evacuated the island despite some pilot reports of receiving ground fire right up to the date of the invasion. This most likely resulted from the aircraft flying too close to exploding bomb debris on low-level runs over the island. Ross, *The Supercommandos*, 58.
- 38 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force*, 72-73; Ross, *The Supercommandos*, 61-63.
- 39 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force*, 74; Ross, *The Supercommandos*, 62.
- 40 Watts interview.
- 41 Richard Hilton, 2nd Company, Third Regiment, First Special Service Force, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 19 January 2008, Kissimmee, FL, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 42 Springer, *The Black Devil Brigade*, 59.
- 43 Springer, *The Black Devil Brigade*, 59.
- 44 Ross, *The Supercommandos*, 70.
- 45 Callowhill interview.
- 46 Charles Mann, 4th Company, Third Regiment, First Special Service Force, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 19 January 2008, Kissimmee, FL, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 47 Gay interview.
- 48 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force*, 82; Ross, *The Supercommandos*, 70.
- 49 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force*, 82; Ross, *The Supercommandos*, 70.
- 50 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force*, 84; Ross, *The Supercommandos*, 71.
- 51 Hilton interview.