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SCOPE MILITARY OPERATIONS IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

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My first glimpse of the Aleutian Islands was from a porthole on the Army transport, St. Mihiel. It was the most desolate, forbidding terrain I have ever seen. From the ocean's edge the snow covered mountains reared their peaks into the hovering, ever-present overcast that we were to learn to curse for its shutting out of the sunshine that we had taken for granted the larger portion of our lives.

The Aleutian Islands are a volcanic chain of high mountains rising out of the North Pacific between Alaska and Siberia. There among fogs and sudden storms, the world is still in the making. Volcanoes blow rings of steam and smoke into the atmosphere, and active ones can be seen from almost any island. Islets pop out of the water and then mysteriously vanish again. Earthquakes make and unmake harbors, cliffs, beaches, and caves.

The shortest route between the United States and Japan lies through Alaska and the Aleutians. From Attu to Tokyo is only 1,750 miles. From Attu to Paramushiro in the Northern Kuriles is 650 miles. Whoever controls the Aleutians has a flanking position on the whole North Pacific Ocean.

In June of 1942, the Japs seized Attu and Kiska

and remained a constant threat until August 1943 when they were finally driven off. To defend the Aleutians against attack, thousands of Americans were stationed on the various island bases.

Of all the United States outposts the Aleutians are probably the wildest and most inhospitable. There are no trees on the islands. In the summer the valleys are covered by green tundra, and the temperature seldom goes above 60°. In the three summers I was there, the warmest day was 65°. The islands are enveloped in almost perpetual fog. Sometimes there are as many as 250 rainy days a year and as few as eight clear days. Flying is always dangerous, and navigation of ships through the narrow rocky channels of the islands is a task for skilled hands only.

Our transport moved westward of Dutch Harbor on the eastern tip of Unalaska Island. Until this time those of us aboard were positive our destination was Dutch Harbor, the navy's so-called Pearl Harbor of the North. In a matter of hours we nosed into the sheltered cove of Chernofski. The battalion of infantry was soon aboard several fishing barges, and the grizzled old fisherman headed for the rough water of the Bering Sea again. In about 5 hours we had slowly struggled through

the treacherous currents of Umnak Pass, and we were on the black sand beaches of Umnak Island.

Once ashore we found a small garrison of troops, a battalion of the 153rd. Infantry Regiment, an artillery battery, an anti-aircraft battery (improvised), two companies of 802nd. Engineers, and a quartermaster detachment. We moved inland from the beach a short distance and pitched pup tents on the marshy tundra. Then we started getting acquainted with our new surroundings.

The terrain was swampy bogs of grass and moss, volcanic ash, and rock. Vegetation consisted of grasses and, to our amazement, trees and bushes were non-existent. One of the first thoughts of our training days was that no concealment from air observation existed except the overcast that hovers over the islands. For nasty climate and terrain these islands are in a class by themselves. They are the weather factory of North America; where the warm winds of the Pacific and the icy blasts of the Arctic meet and brew the foul weather of the islands.

After getting organized and looking with distaste upon our new surroundings, we fell to work to accomplish the job at hand. It did not take long to formulate an estimate of the situation and to realize how inadequate our equipment and supplies were for the wet,

cold type of climate of the Aleutians.

We fell to work unloading barges of ammunition, rations, tentage and organization equipment. The beach work was backbreaking as everything was done by hand--slowly and laboriously. Our mission became apparent when barges of airplane runway steel started arriving. The 5,000 pound bundles were broken open and stacked on the beach prior to a trek inland to a location that the Air Corps Construction Engineers had selected for a runway. We carried the sections of runway steel inland approximately three miles. Here is where the term "piss-anting" sprang up. Seeing the men moving single file inland from the beach site, carrying sections of runway steel for the airstrip we were to build, reminded us of ants.

The only available engineer equipment able to pick its way across country to a limited distance was bulldozers which were needed to level the runway strip. Everything else had to be broken down into man-sized loads to be carried. The deep mud swallowed any wheeled vehicles that were able to get through the sand dunes at the beaches.

In approximately two weeks a makeshift airstrip was ready for planes. When a P40 squadron arrived,

we felt that at least we had furthered the war effort a little.

The fact that we were rushed to the Aleutians in a haphazard manner did pay off on June 2nd and 3rd, 1942. The Jap was casting a two-pronged offensive at Alaska and at Midway. Admiral King chose to throw his biggest defensive punch toward Midway and fight with what was on hand in the Aleutians.[1]

The battle began on June 2, 1942. That day the weather was so thick that a person standing on one end of the runway was unable to see a P.B.Y. landing until it was almost on the runway. Jap carrier planes hit Dutch Harbor. Anti-aircraft fire drove them off, and knocked down some. The new field at Umnak was not notified immediately that the attack on Dutch Harbor was in progress. Therefore, the fighter planes at the field did not get to the Navy base until it was too late. The following day the fighter planes made their weight felt.

In the meantime a P.B.Y. on patrol, easing through a rift in the overcast, popped out over a Jap task force--two carriers, cruisers, and a screen of destroyers. Ducking in and out of the overcast, he radioed for help. Another P.B.Y. led Army Flying Fortresses and Marauders

1. Time Magazine. March 22, 1943. Page 49.

from the Army Base at Cold Bay to the spot. They blasted through the fog, got a hit on one of the carriers, and sent the vessels scurrying out of range.[2]

The following day the Jap threw his second air attack at Dutch Harbor. One group of planes on the way to strike Dutch Harbor flew across the new field we had constructed. Some P40's in the air at the time immediately attacked them and there was a nice show while they knocked down four surprised Jap zeros. At Dutch Harbor the Army P40's from our new field were waiting for the second thrust. Between them and anti-aircraft fire, twenty attackers were knocked down and a battle was won. Dutch Harbor was safe from an attack that if successful could have endangered all of Alaska and might have been a threat to the United States' Northwest.

After the Japs withdrew westward and established themselves on Kiska and Attu, our immediate concern other than getting supplies ashore was to make a ground reconnaissance in order to draw up defense plans for our island base.

An outpost system was set up to function purely as a warning system to enable the troops of the garrison who were working on the beach, building roads and extending the airstrip, to take up a perimeter defense.

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The plan was to hold a small area near the beach and control the supply dumps that were gradually building up. In a location where all supplies had to be carried upon the backs of men, it set a premium on logistical support. With the weight of equipment it was necessary for troops to have, individuals could only carry enough clothing, ammunition, and food for three days. After that it would be necessary for a resupply by sending as many or more troops as we could maintain in a fight to the rear to "piss-ant" supplies forward.

After deciding how we would defend, outposts were set up on all likely landing beaches of which there were three other than the one at our beachhead. One was placed on the Bering Sea approximately 20 miles north of the airstrip and connected with the command post by wire. It was manned by two rifle squads. Another was located approximately 25 miles west of the airstrip on the Pacific Ocean. This was manned by a rifle platoon (minus one squad) which established a lookout at a sheltered cove located 10 miles directly north on the Bering Sea. All three outposts were tied by wire to the battalion command post switchboard. The outposts were supplied by sea; once a month a tug beached a barge load with rations and coal for the

troops manning the lookouts. The rocky ledges and cliffs along the beaches prevented caterpillar trains from reaching the outposts by land.

Personnel manning the outposts were rotated every two weeks in order to acquaint everyone with the terrain and give them a rest from the beach work. Another security method was to send a platoon leader and three or more men on a patrol around the edge of the island. This was one of the toughest assignments anyone could draw. The group would carry as little equipment as possible and then load up with rations, consisting of rice, raisins and smoked salmon which the tugboat operators taught us to prepare.

The trip around the island was very rugged, as walking on the sandy beach or in the tundra almost broke your legs and back. When patrols came to impassable places, they had to climb one side of the mountain and slide down the other. At times patrols tried to take short cuts on clear days, but the fog would close in within a period of 10 to 15 minutes and visibility would be reduced from 25 to 50 yards, thus hampering operations. At times like these patrols often got lost. Then they would locate a mountain stream and follow it to the beach, re-orient themselves

and continue their mission. When a group would stagger in from one of these patrols, they would be totally exhausted and often completely out of food. The patrols did accomplish many things. They learned the terrain, checked on the outposts, insured that Japs would be detected if they moved in at a remote spot, and learned how to live in the wet, cold climate.

Our life soon became a monotonous routine of construction work. Some men, building the badly needed roads, did pick and shovel work. Others were on the airstrip improving and lengthening it. At the beach the work was done on the ration dump or coal pile for a twelve hour shift, then a march back to the company area through the bottomless mud was necessary to complete the day. The work went on in two shifts a day seven days a week. Finally the endless grind was interrupted on August 1st, 1942, when Company "I" 138th Infantry and Company "A" 802 Air Corps Construction Engineers received orders to move westward to another island and build a runway for emergency landings of the planes that were bombing the island of Kiska.

When we moved out, we were short of equipment, because a Williwaw had struck suddenly and crushed the

dock where equipment was stacked. Half of our tentage and other supplies went into the sea, and no resupply was available.

After the storm had subsided and the seas had calmed, the remaining equipment was loaded on barges and shuttled across to the same harbor where we had debarked. Here the ship "Chericoff" loaded us and moved slowly out into the foggy Bering Sea.

Aboard the ship we found a heavy weapons company of the 37th Infantry, commanded by Captain Owen B. Moore from Dutch Harbor. The task force for the new island stepping stone consisted of one rifle company, one heavy weapons company, and one engineer company. Captain Otha B. Rawlings, the senior officer, took command. The ship captain told us that his orders were to land the units on Atka Island. In a few hours two destroyers from Dutch Harbor joined us to escort the ship. When we pulled into a bay at Atka Island, a Navy sea plane landed alongside, and Colonel Jesse Graham boarded the ship to take command of the troops. The landing craft that was supposed to arrive at the same time we did, for some reason, did not arrive. A short time later a Navy supply ship was torpedoed and sunk by a submarine, so the ship captain decided

to land the troops in life boats. The troops were unloaded two platoons at a time. My group was the first ashore. No doubt we were an unmilitary sight. One life boat with a motor towed two others in shuttling the troops from ship to shore.

Ashore there was a small Aleutian village that had recently been bombed and partially burned. We rapidly moved inland to take some high ground. The troops that were following hit the beach and started unloading equipment from lifeboats as fast as possible.

The following day a fishing tug showed up with two barges. Within five days the ship was discharged, and work was under way on a landing strip in the sand dunes along the beach.

By the time a ship had arrived with runway steel, the leveling of the runway strip was approximately half completed. The engineer company leveled the runway, and the infantry companies maintained outposts, unloaded cargo from the ships, performed the beach work, and laid runway steel. The Jap opposition was by seaplane bombing and submarine activity. The presence of Jap scout planes that were keeping a check on the progress of the runway spurred the men to get the runway in as rapidly as possible. The anti-aircraft

defense consisted of passive measures. There were about ten 20 millimeter Navy guns on the beach that were too heavy to move from the shoreline, and, as a result, they were not in positions to fire. They were abandoned until roads could be built for moving them inland.

Our chief problems were weather and the tundra. Even the hillsides were swampy, except at the places where black volcanic rock protruded.

The troops moved inland about a mile and a half. Holes were dug into the hillsides for pyramidal tents. When the tents were not dug in the height of the sidewalls, the constant wind whipped them to shreds in thirty to forty-five days.

Outposts were set up by a minimum number of troops. All others were used at the beach and on the runway. The work was pushed to the limit of the men's endurance day after day. Because of the heavy physical work and long hours of duty, many men suffered rupture.

It was S.O.P. for any man who made a trip to the beach, regardless of how fatigued he was, to carry a sack of coal or something needed in the company area upon his return trip.

In the construction of the runway, equipment broke down rapidly. Within three weeks, twenty

engineer dump trucks and six 2½ ton G.M.C.'s all broke axels on the same side except one. Parts were not available, and the work load was increased by the failure of mechanical equipment.

Coal, oil drums, rations, and so forth had to be dragged, pushed, or carried off the beach into the protection of higher ground. This was a precaution against the dreaded Williwaw, freak wind of the Aleutians. It would strike with such sudden force that within twenty minutes it seemed as if the howling wind and churning waters would tear away the rockbound coasts.

In spite of weather and mechanical failures of equipment, construction was pushed on the runway, and it was sufficiently completed for fighter use prior to the landing on Adak.

On August 30, 1942, Adak Island was occupied by United States forces consisting mainly of the 4th Infantry Regiment, one battalion of the 37th Infantry and 138th Infantry, plus a heavy compliment of engineers. The landing was unopposed and had the appearance of a planned and co-ordinated military operation. Prior to the landing, Alaskan scouts were put ashore by submarine, and they scouted the portion of the island where the landing was made to insure that the Japs did not surprise the landing group.

Ashore the engineers went to work building a fighter plane strip. By the fourth day a test plane landed on it, and by the tenth day it was ready for bomber use.

An engineer officer received a promotion because of a plan he proposed for construction of the landing strip. A dyke was built to channel a stream, and the old stream bed was smoothed out with a minimum of work, and runway steel was laid. By September 14, 1942, bombers had begun to pound Kiska every day with complete fighter escort.[3] The work on Adak from the day of the initial landing has progressed until it is now the largest Navy and ground force base in the Aleutians.

American troops landed on Amchitka Island only 60 miles from the main Jap base Kiska, on January 12, 1943. The landing was executed beneath an umbrella of fighters from Adak. Everything was proceeding according to plan when a Navy destroyer nosed into Constantine Harbor. Aboard were nine scouts of the Alaska Combat Intelligence Platoon and thirty infantrymen. They had the assignment of paddling ashore in rubber boats and staking out landing beaches and troop-dispersal areas for the occupation force which was due in a few hours.

3. Life Magazine. May 1, 1943. Page 5.

Landing operations began and troops went ashore through icy waters. The temperature of these waters was 38° with a variation of only 2° between summer and winter.[4] They began stocking supplies in the wind shipped snow, and digging in for some kind of shelter. They survived immediate but ineffective bombings and started work at once on an airfield. By February 16th, tons of steel mats for plane runways were ashore, and P-38 fighters were sweeping up into the gale swirled fog to paste Kiska. Thirty-five days after it was occupied, a runway was completed, and Amchitka had air protection.

The commander of the Amchitka operation was Brigadier General Lloyd E. Jones.

May 11, 1943, American troops landed on Attu at three beaches. At Scarlet Beach on the northern shore of the island a provisional battalion landed well ahead of the main forces. The northern landing force came in at "Red" Beach just around the point to the north of Holtz Bay. The southern landing force moved onto the beaches of Massacre Bay. These three landings calculated to pen the Japanese on the eastern end of the island and push them as rapidly as possible from their main installations in Holtz Bay area.[5]

4. Yank Magazine. June 11, 1943. Page 9.
5. Orr, 1st Lieutenant Robert D. "Report on Attu Operations." May 11-16, 1943.

Twenty days later the American troops had taken the island. In the cold, rain and mountain fog which sometimes limits visibility to less than 100 feet, the fighting was brief and bloody. Jap losses were 2,400 killed and 25 captured. American losses were 566 killed and 1,442 wounded. Attu was not an easy battleground for Americans. Its coastline is rocky and precipitous which makes landings difficult. The small Jap force preferred death to surrender. Instead of defending the beaches they withdrew to the hills and made the infantrymen dig them o t with rifle and bayonet.

The taking of Attu outflanked Kiska and Agattu Islands, and moved American forces within 750 miles of Parmushiro (a big Japanese Naval base now in the hands of Russia) and even closer to the present Russian submarine base in the Komondorski Islands. Bases on Attu give the United States a chain of naval and air bases that control the north Pacific.

The Aleutian campaign was completed with the American landing on Kiska August 15, 1943. A United States-Canadian force moved in on the last Jap foot-

hold in North America. The invasion of Kiska Island can probably be considered the most perfect dry-run ever conduced by American forces. A large task force was assembled, trained, and specially equiped for what appeared to be a mission of extreme difficulty. Operations were carried out until perhaps the third day after the initial landing with all out defense or counter-attack by the enemy expected at any time. There was no absence of realism in this "maneuver". It was a very real operation until our forces definitely ascertained that the Japanese had evacuated.

Disembarking from scores of landing boats, allied soldiers found instead of 10,000 fanatic Japs whom they had expected, only vacant gun positions, booby traps, wrecked material, and an uncompleted runway. In the tundra and mud of the island were cunningly constructed dugouts and implacements, knitted by a web of telephone lines. Around Gertrude Cove were installations, hangars, and dumps that revealed the accurate effects of sea bombardment in contrast to the poor showing made by air bombing which was not very destructime to the small well-hidden targets. Up from the bay, littered with sunken or beached Jap ships, the shores were strewn with caches of tinned kelp, crackers,

rice, fish, and refuse. On a bleak hillside stood the crossed logs of the Shinto gateway, standing guard over installations of the island.

The Japanese evacuated the island under the watchful eyes of the Air Corps and Navy and vanished into the Pacific Ocean as silently as they had arrived in 1942.

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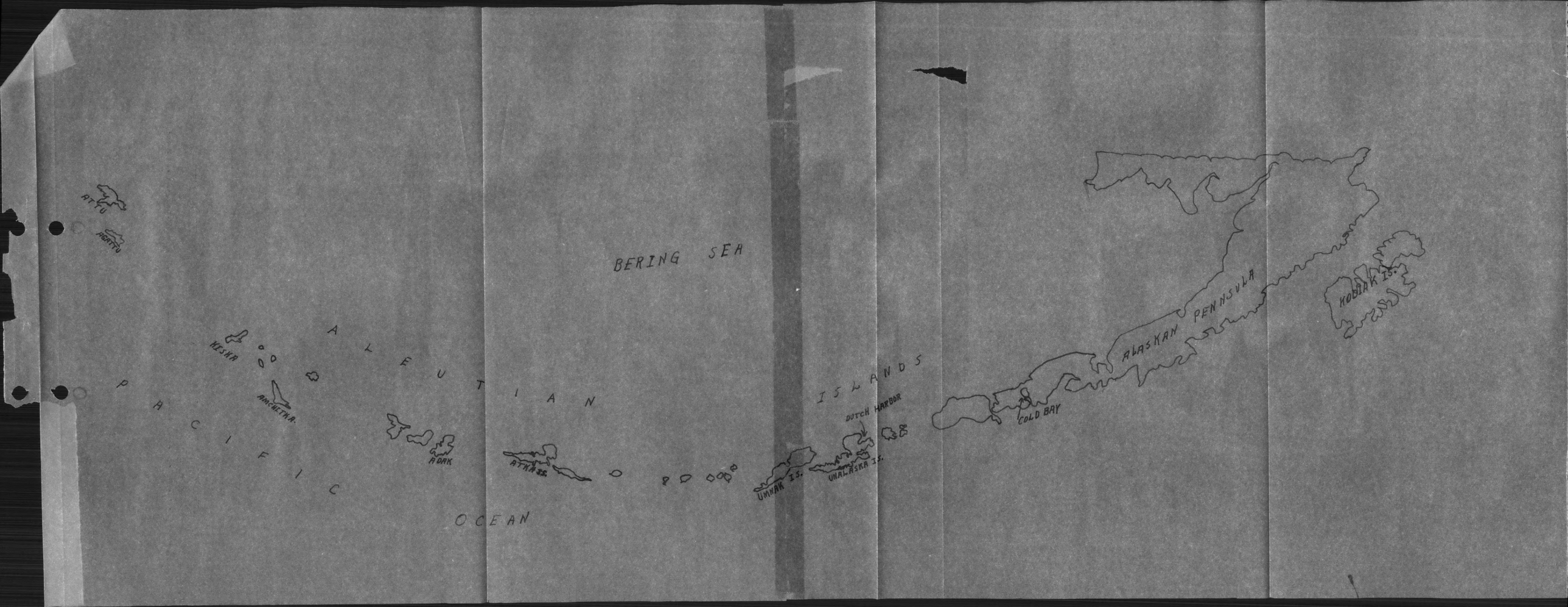
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