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OPERATIONS OF TASK GROUP 87
(ELEMENTS OF 87TH, 153RD, AND 184TH INFANTRY
AND SUPPORTING UNITS) AT KISKA
15 JULY - 25 AUGUST 1943
(ALEUTIAN ISLAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal experience of an Assistant S-3)

Type of operation described: BEACH LANDING

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operation of Task Group 87 from its inception during June of 1943 to the conclusion of the Kiska operation in August of 1943. The greater share of the material is written from memory, but substantiated by other persons present. The only reference material available, confirmed dates of the operation.

The Aleutian chain was a remote, neglected, group of islands until the Japanese attack on Dutch Harbor in the early spring of 1942. It had long been recognized by army authorities as a stepping stone to United States possessions and to the mainland proper. Public interest was not aroused, however, until the Japanese landed occupation forces on Kiska and Attu.

Information of these islands was meager and consisted mainly of brief weather reports. Experience gained by the army as it moved westward, island by island, was the foundation for operations against the Japanese at Attu and Kiska. The army profited by experience, but, in some instances, the failure to heed experience cost heavily.

Maps, though limited, portrayed the terrain fairly accurately. The hills and mountains were as steep, rough and barren as pictured. The maps didn't show the soft, spongy tundra that covered these islands of rock. The tundra that made it impossible for any vehicle, including track laying, to move cross country. Foot troops had difficulty marching even on the level and distance had to be measured in hours

instead of miles.

The Aleutian Islands are noted for being cold and fog bound. That is a mild description of a country that sees the sun so seldom that the sunny days are numbered. The fog hangs for days, rolls up without warning, and drops from out of nowhere. The wind blows continually, gales frequently reach a velocity of 150 miles per hour. It is wet; a cold wet that penetrates everything.

The hours of daylight are long in summer, often only a grey dusk showing that midnight is at hand. The winter days are short, six hours of light being the maximum during the heart of the winter.

Troops must be acclimated to these conditions before they can be expected to produce the results that are desired of them. Physical conditioning is not enough. Troops must be mentally conditioned to the fog, wind, and isolation. It was learned that basic training and battle indoctrination was not sufficient. Men had to be conditioned to the way of the Aleutians, physically and mentally.

FORMATION OF TASK GROUP 87

The Battle of Attu left the main Japanese forces in the north Pacific isolated on the island of Kiska. The Air Corps and the Navy patrolled the area and bombed and shelled the Japanese while ground forces prepared to finish the job started at Attu.

Army Technical Force No. 9 was established to perform the mission of capturing Kiska. This Force was composed of five similar Task Groups. Each group composed of three Battalion Landing Teams, reinforced.

Experience gained at Attu taught that the troops must be acclimated to the weather of the Aleutians. Special equipment

was essential in these islands and it was necessary that the operating personnel be trained to handle it. Therefore, in June of 1943, the forces that were to be ATF No. 9 began to assemble on the island of Adak for training and indoctrination. A combination of troops, wise in the ways of the Aleutians, and troops fresh from the United States were to be used.

Task Group 87 was composed of the Headquarters, Special Units, and the 2nd Battalion of the 87th Infantry; the 1st Battalion of the 153rd Infantry; and the 1st Battalion of the 184th Infantry. This Group was reinforced by Engineers, Field Artillery, Anti-aircraft Artillery, Ordnance teams, Signal Corp teams, Quartermaster Beach details, Medical clearing companies, and Air Corps and Navy Liaison teams. Special troops were available to operate cats, bulldozers and snow jeeps.

The three Infantry battalions were designed to operate as separate landing teams. Each team would be loaded individually, conduct individual landing operations, and operate as separate battalions until they secured their first objective on Kiska. They would then revert to Regimental control.

A good share of the troops in TG 87 had the opportunity to train together for several weeks prior to the actual landing. The final phase of training was a full-scale landing on the beaches of Great Sitkin Island. This practice was cut short and the troops returned to Adak to learn that the date of the landing on Kiska had been set up two weeks, the 15th of August instead of the 1st of September.

PLAN OF ATTACK BY TG 87

It is essential to have a knowledge of the terrain on Kiska to fully understand the plan of attack. The island is approximately 25 miles in length and varies from 2 to 8 miles in width. The ground rises from rocky beaches on the south to

abrupt cliffs on the north. These cliffs form a wall along the north beach which, in some places, is 100 feet in height. A few small caves allow entrance to the island and the hills that rise steeply from the shore line. The Japanese believed the steep cliffs and mountains to be their defense on the north shore.

The Island was divided into a North and South sector. The southern section of the South sector was assigned to TG 87.

A small inlet, called Quisling Cove, was selected from a study of photographs as the most suitable landing beach. It was estimated that three to five landing craft could be beached at one time. The high hills immediately ashore were expected to give some shelter from the Japanese radar and afford a fair chance of landing first troops in secret.

Troops from the Special Service Forces were to have their initial test during this operation. They would go ashore in rubber boats during the hours of darkness preceding D-Day and by their own methods silence the Japanese outposts and patrols.

The 1st Battalion of the 184th Infantry was to land, move to the left and up Persian Ridge. They would follow the ridge line and occupy positions along Persian Ridge and Larry Hill. TG 17 landing on D-Day would be on their left flank.

The 2nd Battalion of the 87th Infantry would, on landing, move to the right and up Russian Ridge. They would follow the ridge past Lead Hill to Lard Hill and occupy the high ground running generally east and west in front of the Task Group beach.

The 1st Battalion of the 153rd Infantry would follow the 2nd Battalion of the 87th ashore. They would move to the right and up Russian Ridge. They would occupy the high ground

along Russian Ridge.

The Japanese had taught us at Attu that it was safest to occupy the ridge lines. Our troops, when in position, would occupy the ridge line and have a perimeter defense on the three land sides of the beachhead. It was believed that, in spite of the short distances involved, our troops would do well to be in position and dug in by night. Once positions were organized, the drive towards Gertrude Cove would begin.

The supporting units landing after the assault troops had cleared would establish beach and anti-aircraft defenses. Skeleton crews would man all beach defense installations, while the balance of the troops assisted with the landing of supplies. Assault troops were relieved of any responsibility, as regarded the landing of supplies and equipment other than that carried ashore with them.

The plan of loading ships and initial operation made it essential that all details be fully understood before the convoy sailed from Adak. Once at sea, there would be no chance to change plans. The question in the minds of all was, "Will the beach at Quisiling Cove be what we expect?" There had been no attempt to make any reconnaissance other than by air, due to the desire for secrecy and surprise.

A study of photographs showed a possible landing beach to the west of Quisiling Cove at Kernel Cove. Final plans included an alternate plan for the 1st Battalion 153rd Infantry. This plan was to be adopted if the beach at Quisiling Cove would not allow troops to land as rapidly as expected. The 153rd Battalion Landing Team would leave the convoy and proceed to Kernel Cove. They would land there and move to the east to Lead Hill and Russian Ridge. The wisdom of an alternate plan was proven when our forces came to land on Kiska.

THE LANDING, D-Day

The convoy formed in Adak's outer harbor on the evening of 13 August. This had been a rare day in the Aleutians. All day land based planes had been able to fly to Kiska and return free of fog. Mission after mission had been flown. The final G-2 report was eagerly awaited to learn the latest and last information that would be received until radio silence would be broken on D-Day. It was learned that the camp appeared deserted, no anti-aircraft fire had been received, but there had been some small arms fire directed at the planes. There was speculation as to the probable meaning of this.

The convoy cleared the harbor of Adak the night of 13 August and turned north into the Bering Sea. The fleet was to approach Kiska from the north to secure the protection of the high ground on the north shore.

Original plans called for the convoy to anchor several thousand yards off shore to lower the small boats. It was a decided surprise to find our ships on the morning of D-Day about 1500 yards off shore, practically within swimming distance.

The Special Service Forces had moved ashore commencing at 0230 but, as yet, no word had been received from them and there was no sign of personnel on the beach or mountain slopes.

The landing craft were lowered and the first wave formed and headed for shore at 0600.

The fog which had been expected to assist in covering the movements of our forces was completely lacking. This was disconcerting because everyone had acquired a feeling of security when covered by fog. The naval guns could be heard shelling the installations on the south side of the island, and from this all derived a certain feeling of satisfaction and some security.

The first landing craft approached the beach only to learn what aerial photographs had failed to disclose. Huge rocks just below the surface of the water prevented the craft from approaching the beach with any speed. Boats crept in. They limited landings to one boat at a time. Troops moved ashore slowly, most of them by jumping into the icy water and wading to the beach. The rubber boats brought in by the Special Service Forces were used to build temporary docks which aided, to some extent, in speeding operations. A bulldozer, worked into shore and unloaded, was used to push rocks aside and clear a landing beach that would handle two small craft.

Landing operations were slowed down to such an extent that the alternate plan was put into effect and the 153rd Battalion Landing Team moved down to Kernel Cove to debark. The beach here was good and the 153rd was able to land all troops very rapidly. However, the cliffs were so steep and slippery that it was well past noon before they were off the beach.

The TG 87 Advance Command Post was ashore by 0900 and the switchboard set up. Wires carried forward by wire teams moving with the battalions were tied in. Reports of "No enemy contacted" were received from the 87th and the 184th Battalions as they moved up the ridges and on toward their objective.

The quiet that prevailed over the entire area was awesome. Every person was tense with expectation. Each man, as he toiled up the slopes of the ridges, watched those above him and wondered at what moment the first shot would ring out and which man would be the first to fall. The suspense was terrible and was rapidly producing mass jitters.

The first report from the Special Service Forces was relayed to us at approximately 0915. This now famous report was the first indication as to enemy movements. It stated, "Enemy outpost over-run, all personnel have left. Hot coffee still on the stove." The message was passed on and everyone felt relieved. Some positive action would soon follow. Surely the main garrison knew of the landing by now and would make a move that would permit our troops to gain contact with them.

The fog which had deserted our forces earlier rolled in about 1300. Gradually, the peaks disappeared and soon the entire island was blanketed with a dense, grey cloud. The two battalions that landed at Quisling Cove were proceeding slowly but without difficulty toward their objective. Wire communication was maintained with them without serious trouble.

The main party of the TG 87 Command Post arrived ashore at 1200 and a permanent CP was established on the high ground just off the beach. Radio communication with the 153rd Battalion Landing Team was attempted but, due to the high ground between forces, contact could not be made. The Field Artillery Liaison Officer finally managed to make contact with the Artillery Liaison Officer who was with the 153rd Battalion Landing Team and from him learned that they were on the west side of Knee Hill. Time about 1400 hours.

The 87th team reported at 1600 that they were in the vicinity of their first objective. They reported the fog, rain and a high wind made progress along the ridge line difficult and that they were proceeding to dig-in for the night.

The 184th team reported, at this time, that they were well out on Persian Ridge, but would not be able to reach their objective, Larry Hill, by darkness. They were instructed to

"dig-in" in their present position for the night.

A runner from the 153rd team arrived at the CP at 1700. He carried an overlay showing the position of the battalion as being on the low ground west of Russian Ridge and just east of Kernel Lake. They reported very difficult terrain and slow progress. The runner was sent back with instructions for the battalion to stop there for the night and to set up extensive listening posts. The fog and wind prevented effective use of patrols. A wire team was sent back with this runner to carry a line to the battalion CP.

Disposition of troops on the evening of D-Day was as follows:

The 184th Battalion on the high ground of Persian Ridge, but short of Larry Hill.

The 87th Battalion at the junction of Lard Hill and Russian Ridge.

The 153rd Battalion just west of Russian Ridge, but not occupying the high ground that was their objective.

These positions left a wide gap between the 184th Battalion and the 87th Battalion. There was, also, a wide opening between the 87th Battalion and the 153rd Battalion. Instructions were issued to the battalions to organize listening posts and close in patrols to cover these openings.

The supporting forces on the beach were in position and had cleared additional space so that supplies and ammunition were pouring ashore. A hospital was set up and functioning. In spite of the early landing difficulties, the plan for the first day had materialized almost on schedule.

The first elements of the Special Service Forces gradually drifted back to the beach beginning at 1700. They had encountered no Japanese within the limits of their patrols.

The complete absence of enemy information continued to baffle our troops. It was expected that some type of surprise attack would be attempted during the night. Orders were issued that all men not on duty would be on guard. Every officer available checked guard all during the night to prevent men from sleeping and thus becoming victims of a surprise attack.

The night was quiet except for the sporadic fire of jittery riflemen that pictured a Japanese in every shadow cast by the weird rock formations as the fog whipped and swirled around. The wind moaning over the ridges and through the crevasses sounded like nothing except enemy patrols calling to each other. Each burst of fire was accompanied by the thought that "This is it!" Dawn came, however, with no contact with the Japanese reported.

D-DAY PLUS ONE

The battalions of the 87th Task Group were ordered to move out and secure their initial objectives where necessary, to strengthen positions, tie-in with adjacent units, and wait for developments. Strong patrols were sent to the south and west.

The second day on the Island of Kiska was a day of tense expectation. Operations proceeded normally except that the combat troops waited and waited. Reports from patrols were sporadic. Radios refused to work. The continued fog and rain shorted out all sets, except those that could be covered with tarps and rubber blankets. Wire and runners were the only dependable means of communication.

Late in the afternoon the patrols reported in with the old story, "Every indication of enemy, but no personnel found." The reports from TG 17 on our left and troops in N sector were the same. Final patrols to report in were from Gertrude Cove and there they found the camp deserted. Patrols from

other units reported the main garrison at Kiska as evacuated. (This report on D plus two).

It seemed that the Japanese must have some trick in store for our troops. The Navy and Air Corps had kept the island bottled up for weeks - it was impossible that the enemy could have escaped.

All troops were alerted to be doubly watchful during the night. Every precaution was taken to prevent any surprise tactics. The night passed, but not uneventful. The fog and wind again played havoc with nerves and the price paid this night was figured in lives of our own troops.

THE FINAL DAYS

Extensive patrols were sent to comb the island. Higher Headquarters refused to believe that the Japanese had escaped. The crater of Kiska Volcano and every cave on the island was searched before it was safe to say that the enemy had fled.

The Japanese did escape from under our eyes. Documents found among their effects proved their plans were well organized. We found them carried through to success. They left in haste but not in confusion. The manner in which weapons were destroyed or made inoperative showed that, although they expected to make good their escape, they were ready to make a defensive stand should their plans fail.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

A study of this operation discloses good and bad points. The preparation and orders for carrying out this mission were carefully drawn and very thorough. A complete study of the mistakes of Attu had been made and it was evident that every possible effort was exerted to avoid duplicating those errors. It is realized that amphibious operations were still in the experimental stage at this point; however, the following comments are believed to be justified.

1. Orders were complete. It was realized that reconnaissance on the ground was impossible for any unit commander. Therefore, it was to the advantage of all to have the highest Headquarters possible complete the order. This was done and as a result the entire operation was coordinated throughout.

2. Orders were thorough but contained no alternate plan for any unit. It must be recognized that unforeseen circumstances may make any plan inoperative. This is especially true when all reconnaissance of an unknown area is restricted to maps and aerial photographs.

3. The lack of beach reconnaissance prior to landing operations. The demand for secrecy was paramount in this operation; however, the secrecy which prevented reconnaissance could have cost the success of the operation. Two Battalion Landing Teams loaded in small boats were at the mercy of enemy fire for a period of two hours because a beach was not as expected.

4. Unity of Command. A more complete coordination between ground and sea forces would have prevented extensive waste. The Navy insisted on sending supplies ashore according to schedule, even though it had been requested that they be held aboard ship. The lack of storage space, the mud and rain, and the fact that the supplies could not be moved out overland resulted in tremendous waste.

5. Interpretation of Intelligence. Air reconnaissance had found and reported signs that indicated unusual circumstances. The magnitude of an operation of this type demands that all intelligence be carefully studied and interpreted. It would seem that the indications at this time would have called for more extensive reconnaissance before the force was committed.

6. The value of attack at an unexpected point is well illustrated in this operation. The Japanese were positive that the terrain of the north shore of Kiska would prevent a landing. The defense installations in the TG 87 sector were all pointed to defend the island from attack from the south. Small outposts were the only defensive positions found along the north shore. Had the enemy chosen to remain and defend Kiska they would have been seriously handicapped, because their permanent defense installations, dug into the rock, did not allow the weapons to fire to the north.

7. The tactical phase of the operation was emphasized to such an extent that the administrative phase was neglected during the final preparatory stage. All levels of supply accomplished a remarkable piece of work in equipping the troops. These same troops abandoned tons of valuable equipment upon embarkation. Everything from 37 mm A-T guns to field ranges, sleeping bags, and individual weapons were found after the troops moved out of their bivouac area.

It is only just to give credit to the officers and men that planned and prepared this operation. The ease with which all phases of the operation were carried out, excepting the landing, shows that no effort had been spared. The operation proved many theories of amphibious training that were adopted and used in the countless landings of U. S. troops that followed.

LESSONS

The following lessons were learned:

1. Surprise in attack is desirable. It should not be accomplished, however, at the sacrifice of other principles.

2. A leader should always have an alternate plan ready to be used if need be.

3. Reconnaissance is never ending.
4. Do not neglect any means of communication. The elements can undo the best man has to offer.
5. Attack from an unexpected quarter is worth the additional effort required to carry it through.
6. Fighting troops have all they can do to carry out their assigned mission. Relieve them of service duties.
7. Unity of command is essential.
8. A leader must be prepared to accept the unexpected regardless of how improbable it may seem.