

# SAVE OUR HISTORY

## ALASKA'S BLOODIEST BATTLES



Bombed during a Japanese air raid on Dutch Harbor, the SS *Northwestern* sits today as a relic of the WWII battle.

### CURRICULUM LINKS:

*Save Our History®: Alaska's Bloodiest Battles* would be useful for History, American Culture, Politics, Geography and Current Events courses. It is appropriate for middle school and high school students. Teachers should watch this program before showing it to students to make sure it is appropriate for their age group.



Moss covered Quonset huts at Ft. Tidball.

### VOCABULARY:

Using a dictionary ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)) or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

**Archipelago**  
**Coup**  
**Dissipate**  
**Indigenous**  
**Nemesis**  
**Projectile**  
**Quonset huts**  
**Recoil**  
**Reconnaissance**  
**Turret**

**On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, thrusting the United States into World War II just days later.** For the next four years the United States and Japan fought for control of the Pacific Islands. Some of the most important battles of the war took place on islands whose names have become synonymous with the Pacific Theater—Guam, Guadalcanal, Corregidor, Midway. But few are aware that some of the fiercest fighting took place in Alaska's Aleutian Islands, a chain of rugged volcanic islands curving 1,200 miles west from the tip of the Alaska Peninsula. United States forces encountered Japanese soldiers and fought hand-to-hand for control of the island of Attu for over two weeks in May of 1943. *Save Our History: Alaska's Bloodiest Battle* recounts the story of this intense chapter in World War II history.

The Battle of Attu ended with an American victory, but both sides lost many soldiers to combat and disease. Today, some of the only physical artifacts that remain to document the battles on the Aleutian Islands are the rusting and decaying weapons and Quonset huts dotting the landscape. The memories and recollections of the surviving men who spent some of the most difficult days on those islands also offer a powerful addition to the historical record on the Battle of Attu and other conflicts in the Aleutian Islands. This documentary will introduce students both to the concept of historic preservation and a little-known but crucial chapter in the history of World War II. Students will explore the role of the Pacific Theater in World War II, reflect upon the role of first-person testimony in history, and gain a new understanding of the diversity of experiences among soldiers who fought in World War II.





The Coast Guard LORAN station is the only building on Attu today.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- 1.** When was the Battle of Attu? What were the major challenges faced by U.S. and Japanese forces in this battle?
- 2.** What was the outcome of the Battle of Attu, and how do you think it affected the power balance during World War II?
- 3.** Today, historical artifacts from World War II remain scattered on the Aleutian Islands. What are historical artifacts? How can artifacts preserve and “tell” history?
- 4.** Many of the primary resources historians use to write history are first hand accounts. What are first hand accounts? How do you think these stories affect your understanding of the Battle of Attu?
- 5.** What are Quonset huts? Why did the United States Armed Forces use them during World War II? What was their advantage?
- 6.** While the Aleutian Islands may have been battlefields to the soldiers and sailors of these armies, they were home to the Aleuts. What happened to those who lived on the Aleutian Islands during these battles? Do you think this was a fair policy?
- 7.** What do you think life was like on the Aleutian Islands before the World War II battles took place there? Do you think the major powers had any responsibility after World War II to make amends to the islanders displaced by these conflicts?
- 8.** Discuss the dangers pilots faced when flying in the Aleutian Islands. What were the particular risks soldiers faced in the battles described in this documentary?
- 9.** Today most wars are fought from a distance, but in the Battle of Attu the American and Japanese soldiers fought in hand-to-hand combat. Discuss the evolution of military tactics and technology since this battle.
- 10.** What is significance of the Battle of the Aleutians in the broader context of World War II? Why do you think this story has not been widely recorded in the history of the war taught today?





A gun turret sits abandoned after protecting the Navy's deepwater port on Kodiak Island.

## ACTIVITIES:

- 1. Mapping the Islands.** The Aleutian Islands are a chain of rugged volcanic islands about 1,200 miles west of Alaska. Ask students to create a map illustrating the chain of these islands and show the points where the Battle of Attu took place. Then, ask students to discuss the location and strategic significance of these islands in the context of WWII.
- 2. Reporting and Recording.** Ask students to review what they have learned about the Battle of Attu from watching this documentary. Then, ask them to supplement their knowledge through further research online or at the library. Ask students to write a short newspaper article about the battle and its significance in the larger context of WWII. These articles can be framed as if they were reporters transmitting the news immediately afterward, or could be historical articles that describe the events in retrospect.
- 3. A Forgotten Front.** While the history of WWII has been well-documented in some respects, there are still many important chapters in the war that are under-examined. The Battle of Attu is among the phases in the war that are unknown to many students and to the general public. In a short essay of 2-3 pages, ask students to write about this question: What was the significance of the WWII battles in the Aleutian Islands, and how does knowledge of these battles add to your understanding of the struggle to control the Pacific during the war?
- 4. Preserving the Past.** This documentary highlights the many artifacts from the World War II era that are still in the Aleutian Islands. While some of these artifacts have been preserved, others have not been restored or maintained for many years. Ask students to write a letter to a friend or to a newspaper arguing for the importance of preserving artifacts from this conflict. Working in small groups, students may also want to draw up a design for a museum or exhibition plan about the Battle of Attu.







The HISTORY® Channel team thanks the Coast Guard crew on Attu's landing strip.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

### FURTHER READING:

Mazer, Harry and Tristan Elwell. *Heroes Don't Run: A Novel of the Pacific War*. (Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2005)

Mitchell, Robert J. et al. *The Capture of Attu: A World War II Battle as Told by the Men Who Fought There*. (University of Nebraska Press, 2000)

Myers, Walter Dean. *The Journal of Scott Pendleton - A World War II Soldier, Normandy, France, 1944*. (Scholastic, Inc., 1999)

Perras, Galen Roger. *Stepping Stones to Nowhere: The Aleutian Islands, Alaska, and American Military Strategy, 1867-1945*. (U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2003)

### WEB LINKS:

Learn more about the Battle of the Aleutian Islands on History.com:

[history.com/topics/battle-of-the-aleutian-islands](http://history.com/topics/battle-of-the-aleutian-islands)

Additional background on the Aleutian Islands:

[history.army.mil/brochures/aleut/aleut.htm](http://history.army.mil/brochures/aleut/aleut.htm)

World War II in The Aleutians: A Brief History:

[hlswilliaw.com/aleutians/Aleutians/html/aleutians-wwii.htm](http://hlswilliaw.com/aleutians/Aleutians/html/aleutians-wwii.htm)

United States Navy Combat Narrative: The Aleutians Campaign:

[ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/USN-CN-Aleutians.html](http://ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/USN-CN-Aleutians.html)

**Note to Educators:** A companion to this documentary and study guide is available online at [history.com/classroom](http://history.com/classroom). History teacher Paul LaRue of Washington High School in Washington Court House, Ohio, has created a lesson entitled "Half-Hour History" based on this program. This lesson includes special handouts, primary sources, and student responses to the documentary and course assignments. Educators can log on to download and print the complete lesson.

