

Alaska's Cutthroats



Sergeant George Gray stood on Attu Island's Cold Mountain, looking down on the gulches and lower areas of Engineer Hill. His mission, as part of an unconventional band of army scouts known as Castner's Cutthroats, was to spy on the enemy and report their position to the command post. But he was puzzled by what he saw: "odd-looking spurts and explosions." Not trusting his eyes, he found a pair of binoculars. He peered through them, and the scene below came into focus.

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Japanese soldiers were tapping hand grenades on their helmets to start the fuse, but instead of throwing them, they were holding them under their chins or against their stomachs. The odd-looking spurts were hands, arms, heads, and other body parts being blown apart by the grenades. Gray was not easily shocked—he'd seen plenty of dead bodies—but what he had just witnessed staggered him. It was "as strange an experience as anyone could think of," he wrote near the end of the war. "Certainly the most bizarre of my lifetime."

The May 29, 1943, scene was the macabre climax of the successful American fight to take back the Aleutian island of Attu from the Japanese, whose remaining soldiers opted to kill themselves rather than surrender. While one of the lesser-known victories

in America's Pacific Campaign, the Battle of Attu involved some of the bloodiest hand-to-hand fighting of World War II. It was also the centerpiece of the Allied effort to end Japan's only campaign in the Western Hemisphere—one on American soil, no less. And it was notable for another reason: the motley but rugged group of U.S. Army scouts that included Gray—many of them native Alaskans accustomed to the area's harsh climate—played an essential role in the American victory there.

The Japanese invasion of Alaska began on June 3, 1942, when carrier planes bombed Dutch Harbor, on the Aleutian island of Unalaska, where the United States had a small naval facility. Four days later, the Japanese invaded Attu and Kiska, on the westernmost portion of the 1,000-mile chain of isolated volcanic islands—an area with such violent weather and treacherous terrain that it has been called "the loneliest spot this side of hell."

Unopposed, they easily captured 47 American civilians on Attu and a 10-man navy weather team on Kiska. The Japanese believed that seizing the Aleutians, in an attack which ran parallel to the attack on Midway, would prevent the United States from building air bases there from which to attack Japan; help disrupt American shipping operations to the Soviet Union via the north Pacific; and provide potential air bases for an attack on the Russian Kamchatka Peninsula, in the event of war with the Soviet Union.

Soon after the Japanese landed in the Aleutians, however, they discovered what the U.S. military already knew: the hostile weather could be a formidable enemy. The sun rarely emerges from behind a thick and relentless fog. Rain, snow, and hurricane-force winds called williwaws are frequent, yet hard to predict, making mere survival a challenge.

Despite this brutal environment, the Aleut people had thrived there for 9,000 years. The Aleuts were highly skilled fishermen, spearing fish and harpooning seals and whales while expertly navigating the turbulent Bering Sea in animal-skin boats. On land they were adept hunters and trappers, particularly of the Arctic blue fox.

Colonel Lawrence V. Castner, intelligence chief of the U.S. Army's Alaska Defense Command, took advantage of those survival skills after the army had given him the go-ahead to organize the 1st Alaskan Combat Intelligence Platoon in November 1941. The platoon, quickly dubbed the Alaska Scouts, was to specialize in commando-style fighting, intelligence gathering, mapping, and surveying. The idea was based on the success of the Philippine Scouts, a military unit created in 1901 to strengthen American forces in the Philippines. Castner's father, Major General Joseph Castner, was one of its early commanders.

Colonel Castner, a masterful swordsman with a jagged scar running down his chin, recruited 66 men for the intelligence platoon, which would eventually be split into smaller units that would work and fight independently. The most crucial part of their job was to observe the enemy without being detected and send reports back to the commander, who would make strategic and tactical decisions based on their information.

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It wasn't easy to become an Alaska Scout. The qualifications were stringent, and Castner handpicked them all—trappers, hunters, fishermen, dogsledders, miners, and prospectors. He also chose Native Alaskans—Aleuts, Eskimos, and American Indians. "They have one thing in common," he said. "They're tough."

George Gray had the qualities Castner was looking for. Gray was a prospector, Alaska homesteader, and an expert at wilderness survival. When he joined the army in 1942, he taught soldiers field sketching, scouting and patrolling, skiing, snowshoeing, and signaling, among other military subjects. Within his first few months in the army, Gray was asked if he wanted to transfer to the Scouts. "I should say so, emphatically!" he replied. "Within 30 minutes I had an application for transfer on the first sergeant's desk."

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One trait Gray and the other Scouts shared was their dislike of the military's rules and regulations. The Scouts seldom used rank and they didn't wear uniforms. Some preferred to wear fringed buckskin jackets and cowboy-styled hats. "We're a punk-looking outfit," said Larry Beloff, an owner of two gold mines in Alaska who was nicknamed Diamond Jim because he always wore a diamond ring and a diamond-studded watch. "I guess the Army never saw anything like us before. When the colonel picked us out, the brass hats took one look and threw up their hands."

"We didn't have any insignias, because the more insignias you have, then that's the first one to get shot," said Sergeant Ed Walker, who was a hulking 6 foot 4 inches tall and an accomplished basketball and football player. Walker found the regular army uniform ill-fitting, and was relieved to be able to wear whatever he wanted.

Even Colonel Castner didn't wear any rank or identifiers. One day, while he was down by the creek scrubbing a frying pan, a soldier came up and asked Castner what unit he was with.

"Castner's Scouts," he replied.

"Castner's Scouts?" the soldier said. "I saw a couple of them guys; looks like Castner's Cutthroats to me."

The name stuck. One Cutthroat who epitomized this image was Castner's right-hand man, the hard-bitten and fiercely loyal Major William J. Verbeck. Verbeck was fluent in the language and customs of Japan, having lived there as a boy. Verbeck was also a highly skilled warrior, and it was his job to teach the Cutthroats how to fight like commandos.

The Cutthroats were taught how to handle all types of weapons and allowed to carry any one they wanted. Verbeck always carried a knife, which a surgeon had custom designed for him so that when he stabbed someone the blade would go in and out with ease. George Gray and Simeon "Aleut Pete" Pletnikoff each chose to carry an M1 semi-automatic rifle. It was a reliable gun—unless sand got in it—and it could be filed down, making it fully automatic. Ed Walker opted for a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR), which had consequences he hadn't initially anticipated. "I chose the BAR, which can spit out 20 rounds of ammunition swiftly," he said. "So I was in the number-one boat every blasted landing we made."

The first secret landing that Castner's Cutthroats made was on Adak, in the central Aleutians. The United States desperately needed an airstrip closer to Kiska and Attu to launch bombing raids against the Japanese invaders. The Cutthroats were sent in to scout and survey the unmapped island.

In the middle of the night on August 28, 1942, two submarines surfaced with 37 Cutthroats on board. They climbed into five rubber rafts and paddled through the icy water, four miles to shore. There were no Japanese on Adak, and the U.S. Army

quickly moved in and built an airstrip.

Soon after, the Cutthroats scouted and secured the island of Amchitka to the west, just 45 miles from Kiska, where the army built another airstrip and began bombing Kiska, and later Attu. The United States also set up a naval blockade to prevent Japanese supply ships from reaching the islands. But the occupying forces continued to hold on.

The Americans decided to reclaim Attu first, and devised a plan—Operation Sandcrab—involving a three-pronged attack on the Japanese garrison under the command of Colonel Yasuyo Yamazaki. To carry out the attack, the army called in a combat-ready force: the 7th Infantry Division, stationed at Fort Ord, California. The troops, approximately 15,000 in all, were divided into three groups: the Northern Force, the Southern Force, and the Provisional Scout Battalion. The Southern Force was to sweep through Attu's Massacre Valley and advance to the northwest to meet up with the Northern Force and Scout Battalion near the center of the eastern portion of the island. Together, they would move toward Chichagof Harbor, trapping the Japanese.

Castner's Cutthroats would lead the way.

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On the morning of May 11, 1943, thick fog blanketed the island of Attu. A plastic whaleboat, 1,000 yards from the narrow shore of Beach Red near Holtz Bay, bobbed in the rough water. Corporal Willis "Bad Whiskey Red" Cruden held a compass while Gray and the other Cutthroats pulled the oars through the tumultuous sea, their knuckles white and their joints stiff. Everyone was listening for the sound of gunfire, but all they heard were the oars slapping the freezing black water.

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Their job was to reconnoiter Beach Red as a landing spot for the Northern Force troops. Another group of Cutthroats would go in ahead of the Southern Force and the Scout Battalion. The beach was small and surrounded by steep jagged cliffs, and the army wasn't sure if a landing was even possible, but Bad Whiskey Red expertly navigated the boat through the fog and onto the beach. The Cutthroats quickly disembarked, fully expecting to be shot. Instead, they encountered silence. An all-clear signal went

to the boats waiting offshore and the troops began landing.

Before the 7th Infantry Division even set foot on Attu, however, it was already heading for disaster. The division had been training in the Mojave Desert for duty in North Africa; when it had been called to action only weeks earlier, cold-weather clothing was in short supply. So the light infantrymen were sent to Alaska in short-sleeve fatigues, canvas field jackets, and non-waterproof leather boots. Commanders knew this was far from ideal, but assumed the battle would last no more than three days, so the summer-weight clothes and lack of mountaineering skills weren't considered a problem. They were wrong.

The Cutthroats wasted no time getting started on their secondary mission: to reconnoiter the surrounding territory and contact the enemy. They climbed the steep rocky ridge, checking the area for Japanese, and saw none. The soldiers from the Northern Force quickly closed in on them, but as the climb proceeded they had trouble keeping up. Within a few hours their leather boots were soaking wet, and the smooth soles provided little traction, causing their freezing and water-logged feet to slip on the rocky, muddy, and snowy terrain.

The Americans didn't catch their first sight of the Japanese until 3 p.m. when the fog lifted enough to see. But the Cutthroats were too far away to fire on the enemy. An hour later, the patrol spotted seven more Japanese soldiers along the beach on the other side of Holtz Bay, also too far away.

Darkness and fog soon closed in on the Cutthroats and the infantry following them. They were high on a ridge directly over the Japanese camp at Holtz Bay—an advantageous position—but the fog obscured their view. So they were ordered to descend from the ridge and to bivouac on the mountainside until morning. Under protest, Gray reluctantly complied.

"Giving up the high ground was to me...like pulling good teeth," he said. "The night was spent miserably for all of us. We had no shelter or bedding of any kind, just the clothing we wore, and a cold, raw, wet wind blew the fog around us all night." In the morning, Gray took a 10-man team back to the beach to retrieve the sleeping bags and food rations. He left Bad Whiskey Red behind with the others.

Soon after the party left, the fog lifted, revealing a horrible miscalculation. During the night, under the cover of the fog and the howling wind, the Japanese had climbed up from the other side of the mountain to the ridge and were now looking down on Bad Whiskey Red and the others. They had taken the high ground the Cutthroats had abandoned. When Gray and his team returned several hours later, they learned that Bad Whiskey Red was dead—shot through the heart by a Japanese sniper.

For the next two days, the Northern and Southern Forces and the Scout Battalion were pinned down and made little progress. Many troops were stuck in water-filled foxholes, their feet submerged in icy water. Hundreds of men suffered from frostbite and trench foot, which literally brought some soldiers to their knees, forcing them to crawl.

After two days of observing the enemy from the mountainside parallel to the battle line, Gray received orders on May 14 to lead his patrol forward and draw Japanese fire, creating a diversion so the infantry could advance into Holtz Valley. From his vantage point he could see that the infantry was already moving ahead, throwing off the plan. He grabbed his rifle and three grenades and charged forward.

The Japanese immediately started blasting their machine guns at him. Gray dove into a shallow pool of water. The spray of bullets kicked mud into his face. When the firing shifted direction, he crept toward a large boulder that jutted out from the mountainside, just 150 yards from the Japanese. His patrol caught up behind him and they inched their way up onto a small ridge right above the Japanese.

Artillery shells and jagged shrapnel flew all around the Cutthroats. Exploding grenades nearly destroyed their ear-drums. Gray wasn't sure they were going to come out of it alive. But the Cutthroats were unharmed, with holes in just their helmets and clothes. Below them, the Japanese were either dead or retreating. The infantry stormed past Gray and advanced down the mountain.

The next day, May 15, the Northern Force finally broke through the Japanese defenses in bloody hand-to-hand combat. After several hours of fighting, the Americans gained control of Holtz Valley. They were unaware they had destroyed Yamazaki's defense, but soon discovered that the hills in Holtz Valley were honeycombed with caves stockpiled with food, clothing, and ammunition; Yamazaki's supplies were now out of his reach.

For the next two weeks, the Cutthroats scouted and patrolled the area, informing the troops of the enemy's position. The Northern and Southern Forces and the Scout Battalion, now combined as one, had formed a semicircle around the Japanese and pushed them toward Chichagof Harbor and the Japanese stronghold at Attu Village.

Cut off from their supplies, the Japanese were starving, low on ammunition, and desperate. Reinforcements weren't coming. They were on their own—but Yamazaki wasn't about to surrender. He gave orders to his 800 remaining men. Above all, they were to maintain their honor by adhering to the bushido code of the samurai warrior.

In the predawn hours of May 29, George Gray and his team hiked back into camp, which was now located on the edge of a cliff overlooking Chichagof Valley. They had just patrolled the immediate area and were glad to return. It hadn't been easy navigating in the dark and, to Gray, the rain felt like marbles pelting his face. But when he looked out over the cliff he saw something he would never forget: "Below us the entire valley, stretching about three miles long, from Chichagof Harbor to Engineer Hill, was criss-crossed in all directions by fiery streaks from trench mortar shells, 37mm cannon projectiles, .50- and .30-caliber machine gun bullets and tracers..., making a weird Dante's Inferno of the valley," he recalled.



Hidden by fog and darkness, and armed with bayonets tied to sticks and any other available weapons, Yamazaki and his 800 men had broken through the American front line. They charged forward into four American camps in the Sarana and Chichagof Valleys. Plunging their bayonets into the sleeping American soldiers, the Japanese screamed, "We die—you die, too!"

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It was a full-force banzai attack. Yamazaki's plan was to raid the American supply of food, weapons, and ammunition on Engineer Hill.

Too far away to help, Gray and his team helplessly witnessed the attack as it raged on for hours, moving farther away from them and closer to Engineer Hill. By mid-afternoon the banzai attack was over. The 500 remaining Japanese soldiers knew that they had been beaten but would never surrender. Pulling the pins of their grenades, striking them on their helmets, and holding them under the chins, they committed one of the biggest mass suicides of World War II. In the end, only 28 Japanese survived to be taken prisoner; more than 2,300 lay dead on the barren island. Of the Americans, 549 were killed in action and 1,148 were wounded. Most of another 2,100 men had suffered severe injuries from the cold.

Japanese troops on Kiska knew they were next. During July, the United States bombed and shelled the island from air and water. On August 15, Verbeck and his

group of Cutthroats were the first to go ashore. Their mission was to reconnoiter the area for the 34,000 waiting American and Canadian troops. They found no enemy, gave the go-ahead, and the troops landed without opposition. But as they moved inland, the dense fog returned and, along with it, the sound of explosions and gunfire.

When the fog finally began to clear, there were more than 300 casualties—and a devastating surprise. The troops had been firing their weapons at each other; the Japanese were no longer on Kiska. A cruiser and destroyer force had slipped through the Allied task force and evacuated the entire 5,183-man garrison nearly three weeks before the landing. "There being no Japanese there was the luckiest day of my life, I'll tell you," Cutthroat Ed Walker said.

This marked the end of the Aleutian Islands Campaign. The Cutthroats spent the rest of the war in relative safety, scouting and mapping the northern edge of Alaska, field testing military equipment, teaching survival and wilderness skills to other soldiers, and conducting search and rescue operations from their base at Fort Richardson in Anchorage.

In 1944, Colonel Castner received the Distinguished Service Medal for organizing and leading the group that had been so instrumental in wresting the chunk of American soil away from an invading enemy. And he in turn rewarded his team of Cutthroats with high praise for their work, which he called "cool, impartial, correct, and the best."

*Samantha Seiple is a former competitive intelligence specialist and librarian, and is the author of the young adult book *Ghosts in the Fog: The Untold Story of Alaska's WWII Invasion* (Scholastic, 2011), which tells the story of the Aleutian Island Campaign. While researching her article on the Alaska Scouts known as Castner's Cutthroats, she tracked down their last surviving member, Ed Walker, who graciously gave an interview. (Walker died in October 2011 at age 94.) Her website is samanthaseiple.com.*