WW2 in Alaska – TEACHER NOTES

1910 - 1940 –

* 60,000 people live in Alaska (total population)
* Alaska largely undeveloped
* Juneau is economic center (Anchorage is small town on Ship Creek)
* No roads to Alaska
* Very few airports
* Naval bases built at Kodiak, Sitka and Dutch Harbor

December 7, 1941 – Pearl Harbor – IN HAWAII, NOT ALASKA

* Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.
* More than 2000 Americans killed. US declares war on Japan.
* Alaska moves from a remote outpost to a target for the Japanese.

June 3, 1942 – Japanese bomb Dutch Harbor – IN ALEUTIAN CHAIN

* Attack lasts 2 days. Docks and buildings burned and bombed. Some ships also bombed. Craters remain. Some aircraft destroyed, unknown wounded. 7 fatalities.
* Blackouts imposed in communities, families seek shelters in dugouts.
* Japanese had predetermined targets of fuel tanks and ships. One bomb released prematurely hit wing of native hospital at Unalaska. Some employees hurried to shelter.
* Fuel tank farm hit – 4 steel tanks destroyed. Planes moved on to fire at ships in the harbor. Strafed the ship and oil dock area but didn’t hit targets. US used antiaircraft fire from the USS Gillis (2000 rounds). Japanese target the USS Gillis but hit the USS Northwestern and the dock. Warehouse and ship burned for three days. Boilers start up about a week later restoring electric power to the station.
* Japanese bombers aimed for fuel tanks on Powerhouse Hill but instead hit a 37mm gun position killing two of the gun crew. They turned to bomb steel seaplane hangar, penetrating the roof creating a 15m hole. 5 more bombs dropped on the harbor. Ten bombs dropped on ammunitions magazines but none hit their target. One gunman killed. P-14 Aleutian tigers scrambled to intercept enemy.

June 7, 1942 – Japanese begin invasion of Attu & Kiska

* 1 government official executed on Attu and 42 Aleuts rounded up and shipped to Japan as prisoners of war.
* Of the 42 sent to Japan, more than 20 eventually die in Japan, mostly from starvation and tuberculosis. The rest are returned as POWs after the War.
* 10 man weather team on Kiska captured and sent to Japan (all survive).
* Japanese place guns on Kiska – including one pre-World War 1 British Naval gun that guarded the harbor entrance.

June 12, 1942 – Aleut “Evacuation” / Internment begins.

* First, a Japanese scouting plane spotted by white teacher.
* Naval commander orders the evacuation of Atka, 550 miles East of Attu.
* US Military crew burns village to the ground. Atkans board military ship and start voyage east. Arrive at canneries, defunct herring factories, and abandoned gold mine buildings in SouthEast Alaska.
* Remaining 9 Aleut settlements in islands evacuated. Many occupied for military use.
* Residents receive little to no warning about departure, destination. Aleuts not consulted, although some leaders requested a strategy and notification.
* \*\*Mandatory evacuation for anyone 1/8 native; no whites evacuated\*\*
* Some allowed to bring one suitcase, others carried nothing at all
* Ships travel at night on the ocean without lights
* More than 881 Aleuts evacuated, 118 eventually die
* Medical supplies limited, no doctors, sanitation non-existent (honey buckets for group of 200, only one outhouse located above the beach relying on surf), no electricity
* Drinking water discolored.
* Some camps see 18% fatality rate
* Some Aleuts allowed to work in nearby towns – liquor becomes an issue, also fights between different groups
* Some help from Tlingit people in SE, including provision of food and supplies
* Aleuts evacuated after the attack on Dutch Harbor and the Japanese would never push farther East again in WW2 – racial discrimination
* Many sent to the Pribilof Islands for the annual government seal hunt (valued at millions). Some as young as 14 sent, despite danger from war zone. Disobedient Aleuts told they would permanently lose all privileges as an island resident.
* Aleuts told the fur would be used for lining Aviation jackets for pilots – that was a lie – 125,000 seals clubbed in 1943, all furs sold to a company in St. Louis for 1.5 million, all $ sent to US Government. Aleuts worked virtually as unpaid labor.

March 1943 – Battle of the Komandorski Islands

* US Admiral Kinkaid blockades ships so that Japanese troops cannot get supplies to the islands they have taken in Alaska (Attu and Kiska).
* Japanese ships attempt to deliver supplies on March 26, 1943 but US spots them and the Battle of the Komandorski Islands begins.
* Japanese fleet outnumbers US fleet and inflicts damage, but after several hours, the Japanese withdraw, apparently fearful of US bombers and running low on fuel and ammunition. The US sends fake radio messages to trick the Japanese, saying that air cover (bombers) are on their way. Japanese don’t know the extent of the damage they’ve inflicted on the US fleet, and they are afraid of the bombers, so they retreat, even though they were winning at that point. The fog is heavy so the two sides cannot see each other very well.
* US wins, technically

May 12-29, 1943 – Battle of Attu – US retakes Attu – “Operation Landgrab”

* 2900 Japanese soldiers, 15,000 US soldiers, 2 weeks of fighting
* Japanese had taken over island for a year. They didn’t contest the US troops landing but took up positions on high ground as they were greatly outnumbered.
* US troops suffer more losses from frostbite, gangrene, trench foot than enemy fire
* Food shortages characterize misery as troops crisscross barren island, fighting small fierce battles while scouring rocks for booby traps, snipers, and dug-in troops.
* Japanese use mini submarines to damage US ships, they claim they destroy a cruiser offshore but this is a false report to encourage their own men and scare off the Americans.
* By May 28, Commander Yamasaki assesses situation. US had established naval and air superiority. 17 Japanese planes intercepted, 6 shot down. Food and supplies low.
* Out of 2900 original Japanese troops, fewer than 800 are alive after 2 weeks of fighting. 600 of those were wounded. Left with 2 days of food. Battalions defeated. Japanese commander knows there will be no evacuation because the fleet of large transport submarines I-boats turned back by the US Navy.
* Commander prepared to destroy hospital patients still alive. 400 shots of morphine given to kill the wounded. Japanese commander estimates strength of US forces at 14,000. Japanese burn documents as planes bomb Japanese positions. Writes in diary.
* The Battle of Attu ends in a dramatic banzai charge with 500 Japanese soldiers blowing themselves up holding grenades to their bodies at the base of Engineer Hill. One of the largest banzai charges in the war in the Pacific.
* A few desperate Japanese flee to the mountains. When cornered 3 months later, every Japanese solder left behind commits suicide.
* Overall - US landing force Attu suffers 549 killed, 1148 wounded, 1200 injuries from the cold, 614 disease casualties, and 318 other casualties including self-inflicted wounds, psychiatric breakdowns, drownings, and accidents.
* US forces find 2351 Japanese dead bodies, plus hundreds more buried in the hills. 28 prisoners taken, no officers taken.
* US Victory

August 15, 1943 – Battle of Kiska Island – “Operation Cottage”

* Japanese have been at Kiska Island since June 1942. Japanese add 1200 troops to bring force to 2450 men and 18 float planes, multiple midget subs, 6 Mavis bombers, and P38s.
* Just after the Japanese take the island, US brings 5 cruisers and 9 destroyers to try to dislodge invaders but weather turns them back.
* US recaptures islands of Attu, Shemya, Amchitka, and Adak from Japanese. May, June and July – US bombs enemy installations. US Planes drop more than 300,000 pounds of explosives in one day. Encounter heavy Japanese anti-aircraft fire. Planes bomb around the clock. Navy bombs also.
* The US believes the Japanese have 9,000 men on Kiska.
* Japanese believe the US has more than 15,000 troops.
* Japanese troops in desperate situation – starving, injured, knew it would end like Attu. Secretly, the Japanese make plans with three cruisers and 11 destroyers to evacuate remaining 5,300 men. Two destroyers crash into each other in the fog, but destroyers slip by the US and get men and arrive back in Paramushiro, Japan by August 1.
* On Aug 15, two weeks later, US troops begin their attack on Kiska, thinking the Japanese are still there. US has 15,000 men, including 5,000 troops from 87th Mountain combat team, 5,300 Royal Canadian Infantry, and 2,500 special forces paratroopers and amphibious troops. The US troops storm ashore. They find a few dogs and massive enemy underground defense system. They have invaded a deserted island of Kiska.
* Sadly, the communications between troops landing on opposite sides of the island are not good – and the US/Canada troops fire upon their own forces - ~100 soldiers wounded by friendly fire
* US retakes Kiska in August 1943, effectively ends the Aleutian Island Campaign
* US continues to fly occasional bombing raids against Japan’s Kuril islands to fuel Japan’s perception that it was threatened from the US Northwest.
* Hollow victory at Kiska

1943 – Al-Can Highway Built

* Built to supply Alaska military rather than flying supplies to Alaska
* 1500 miles through untouched wilderness – engineering marvel
* Completed in just 8 months, under budget
* Used 4 African -American regiments – very unusual for the 1940’s because troops were segregated

April 1945 – Aleut Internment ends

* No documents for activity between May 1944 and April 1945.
* Aleuts not allowed to return home until April of 1945. Navy refuses responsibility, Army as well, Alaska Indian Service chosen for rehabilitation of Natives
* Aleut houses ransacked by soldiers and government contractors, possessions scattered, many homes destroyed. Three groups not permitted to return to their villages (Makushin, Biorka, Kashega). All Aleuts taken to Russian POW camps not permitted to return to their island homes. Communities vandalized, icons taken, houses destroyed, possessions damaged. Boats, furniture, fishing gear never replaced.
* Many live in tents or Quonset huts for a year before homes are rebuilt. – conditions worse than the camps because of the weather. Merchandise diverted or lost.
* At the nearby German POW camp, not one death occurred.
* Tremendous trash and debris remain – pollution and hazardous waste.
* Hangars, chemical drums, vehicles, generators, magazines, live munitions, boilers – left at 12 sites. Children entertain themselves placing powder from ununsed 50cal machine gun shells in empty beer cans and igniting them. Nine cases of exposed TNT found. Cleanup costs estimated at $98 million in 1979 dollars.
* Loss of culture, loss of elders, psychological trauma, deaths of young children,
* Resettlement eroded traditional way of life
* Foxes and caribou slaughtered by US troops
* Salmon and herring spawning areas destroyed
* Heirlooms form Russia cannot be recovered – stolen family memories

1945 and beyond – Impacts of the War

* Anchorage becomes hub of military and economic activity
* More than 300 military installations built in AK ( airstrips, bases, defense locations,
* 150,000 military personnel assigned to AK
* $3 billion spent in Alaska – gains national attention
* Paved the road to statehood
* Resident population grows to 150,000 by 1950

1980 –Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians Act

* Act amended to include Aleuts, not just Japanese sent to CA camps
* 200 testimonies collected
* Loss of culture
* Many Aleut volunteered for service

1988 – Aleutian and Pribilof Islands Restitution Act – compensation for damages and loss of life

* Payments made to surviving victims of internment camps (but at least ½ of the original Aleuts evacuated are dead by this time)
* The remaining 450 survivors are paid $12,000 each
* Trust fund created for community and churches – allocated $6.4 million for community use ($5 million allocated for 6 communities to benefit elderly, children, and cultural preservation and $1.4 million allocated for rebuilding churches) – but doesn’t begin to cover costs of damages
* \*\* Government apologized for “race prejudice, wartime hysteria, and failure of political leadership” \*\*