

On February 8, 1943, a light snowstorm delayed the planned departure of No. 14 Fighter Squadron from the Sea Island Airport. That night Arnold wrote his sister that he was leaving Vancouver in the morning, and he couldn't write much because he had a lot to do. *"Have quite a trip ahead of us—over 2,500 miles, which will take us west of Dutch Harbour. We will be under U.S. command, and they're so secretive that we don't know our own address as yet."* Audrey would let her know the new address and to please write her, as he knew she would be lonesome. He would appreciate a line, too, but *"Don't expect to hear from me very regularly though, as the mail service is pretty grim."* The squadron departed on February 11, 1943 for Dutch Harbour in the Aleutian Islands.



*Number 14 Fighter Squadron RCAF, leaving for Alaska February 1943. Arnold is second from right.*

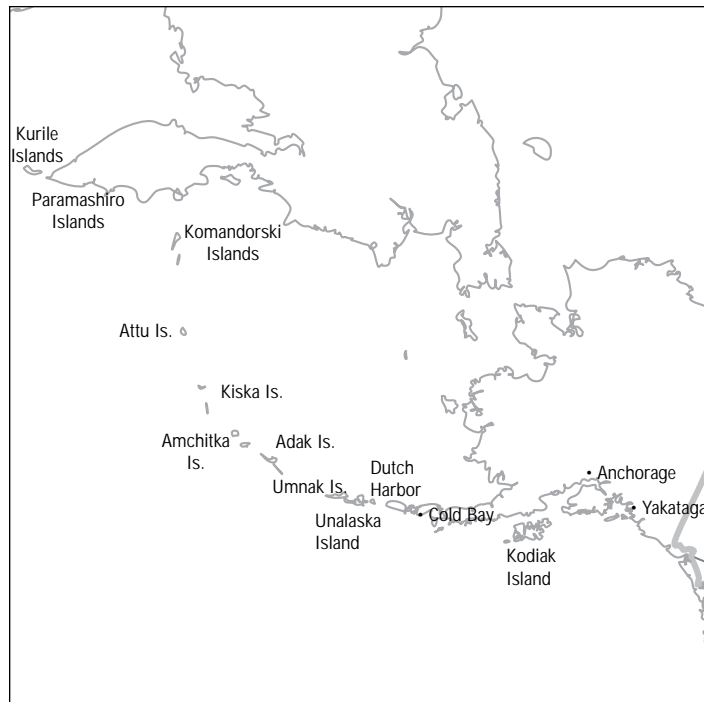
## Chapter 17

### “It was a terrible place to live”

Early in 1943, Canada and the United States had a force of 40,000 in Alaska, defending against 7,500 Japanese on the islands of Kiska and Attu. The Japanese believed this was an effective use of their troops, because the Americans and Canadians had a force five times larger defending the islands against the smaller number of Japanese. The Allied Supreme Command decided that the islands should be taken back, to release manpower badly needed for other theatres of war. In the fall of 1942, the commander of the Eleventh Air Force had requested the posting of a second RCAF fighter squadron to Alaska. Finally, in January, Group Captain G. C. McGregor notified Alaska Defence Command that Western Air Command had approved the transfer of No. 14(F) to Alaska, to be under the command of the USAAF.

■ ■ ■

Upon hearing of the approval, Colonel W. O Butler invited McGregor and his Wing Commander, W.E.E. Morrow, to join a tour of inspection of Alaska defence bases. They travelled first to the new base at Fort Glenn, on Umnak Island, off the tip of the Alaska Peninsula. Because of the rugged terrain on the islands, the naval facilities were 75 miles northeast at Dutch Harbour. Barges ran back and forth to transport supplies and staff. When the



*Alaska and the Aleutian Islands*

Japanese bombed Dutch Harbour the previous June, the airstrip at Fort Glenn was still under construction and barely operable. In January, the inspection tour found many new buildings and a greatly improved airstrip.

Their next stop was at Adak, the second largest island in the chain, which the Americans had occupied just four months previously. It now had an airstrip and a harbour and resembled a small city. After diking and draining a tidal flat, engineers had constructed the airstrip and covered it with inter-

locking steel matting; this was accomplished in just eleven days. The steel matting was an invention of the Americans and became widely used in the Second World War.

They continued west to Amchitka, just sixty miles from the Japanese base on Kiska. The island had been occupied just three weeks previously in a roaring storm. Conditions there couldn't have been worse. The southeast half of the island was little better than a swamp. A huge amount of work was necessary to make the base operable, but it was only a short distance from Kiska, which was desirable because of the short range of fighter aircraft.

When the inspection tour ended, McGregor proceeded south to brief No. 14(F) on their impending trip.

■ ■ ■

The bad weather that delayed No. 14(F) on the trip north from Sea Island was an ominous sign of what was ahead. They were fogged in for four days at Port Hardy, on the northern tip of Vancouver Island, after which they flew to the American base at Annette Island, just off Prince Rupert.

McGregor had decided to fly the coastal route to avoid the intense cold of the interior. But coastal waters were poorly charted. There were stories of earlier flights using road maps to chart their course along the coast. They followed a limited number of radio beams stationed along the coast, but the Kittyhawks did not have beam-receivers, although the Canso accompanying them did. There was no radar, and weather reports were not available

during flight. Weather changes in this northern region could be dramatic, swift and dangerous.

At Annette Island they waited eight days for rain, low clouds and mist to clear, before taking off in a clear blue sky for Yakutat, Alaska. To their right was the beautiful Coastal Mountain range. On their arrival at Yakutat, the base was completely socked in with dense cloud. After circling several times they flew another 125 miles on near-empty gas tanks, to Yakataga. In the next four days the Canso made trips to Anchorage to bring gasoline back to the thirsty Kittyhawks.

■ ■ ■

Several weather systems meet in the North Pacific: frigid water and air from the Bering Sea north of the Aleutian Islands encounter the temperate Japanese Current south of the islands. These two systems are churned by strong, cold winds that blow eastward from Siberia. Winds and fog move quickly in all directions along the uncharted rugged and rocky coastlines of the islands, often shrouding their many volcanic peaks. The predominant weather pattern, moving from Japan eastward, favoured a Japanese advance up the islands, with a break in the weather. When flying down the Alaska Peninsula and across the North Pacific towards Japan, the Americans and Canadians had to fly into unknown advancing weather with no meteorological information.

McGregor had led a tragic trip from Anchorage to Fort Glenn the previous July. When the flight ran into advancing bad weather, McGregor ordered the Kittyhawks to turn back, but

five had crashed into an unseen peak, with the loss of all pilots. A devastated McGregor returned to Cold Bay alone.

■ ■ ■

No. 14(F) was delayed two weeks again at the Elmendorf base near Anchorage, and detained again at Naknek, when heavy winds from across the Gulf of Alaska buffeted their small aircraft. When the squadron finally reached their airfield, after a five-week journey, the whole ground crew rushed out to meet the fifteen Kittyhawks flying in, in formation. The ground crew had arrived earlier and commenced setting up their new base at Berry Field, a satellite of Fort Glenn.

■ ■ ■

Living conditions in the Aleutians were grim, as was the mail service. The men slept in metal Quonset huts and other prefab huts, and on Amchitka they slept in tents. At Berry Field they had electricity, but as they moved forward they relied on candles or Coleman lanterns in their living quarters. Heating in their living units consisted of a small stove with a limited ration of coal or oil. The ground was boggy and muddy underfoot. The closer they got to the Japanese, the more primitive their living conditions became.

The squadron was hit with a spell of very cold weather after arrival at Berry Field. Flying Officer C. F. Griffin later wrote of their experiences with the RCAF in Alaska: “. . . *only those who have lived in the mud, the williwaws, the penetrating cold, the rain and sudden fog, can fully appreciate the loneliness*

*and hardship of existence in that bleak region.*" Williwaws are winds that seem to come from all directions at once, and were known to lift and carry items to new locations—even aircraft.

In late March, the squadron was split into two echelons that would alternate on operations at Amchitka. The first echelon of twelve pilots advanced westward to Adak in a Douglas Dakota, on the last day of March. Because of a shortage of space, Alaska Defence Command had agreed that the Canadians should rotate on operations with the American pilots and fly the American P-40K1s (or the Kittyhawk, as it was known to the Canadians.) The pilots bunked in with the American pilots for two nights, until they got their own huts.

At Adak they were hit again with another two weeks of very bad weather, with snow and strong winds. When the winds hit 105 miles per hour, the wind-measuring anemometer broke. How much harder it blew after that was not known. The pilots kept busy for the duration of the storm, plugging the cracks in their huts that let in cold draughts.

By mid-April, the new Adak base was well developed, with a busy harbour. The radio station at Adak had instant communication with Kodiak on mainland Alaska, and with ships and aircraft throughout the chain. Adak was becoming more heavily populated with the stepped-up preparations for the forthcoming invasions of Kiska and Attu.

In mid-April, the pilots moved further west to Amchitka, where they relieved the RCAF squadron,

No. 111(F), whose pilots were going on a rest. After arriving, they spent the remainder of the day getting settled in their tents and procuring high boots needed for walking in the mud. In the evening, the pilots of No. 14(F) met with the pilots of the USAAF No. 11 Fighter Squadron, and arranged their rotation schedules. The rotation was for four days—operations, alert, defence and a day of rest.

■ ■ ■

To take back the two islands, the strategy was to invade Attu first, the one furthest away. This would isolate the occupation force on Kiska. The P-40s could not fly the distance to Attu, so their task was to keep up a constant bombing and strafing barrage on Kiska. The U.S. navy also was setting up a barricade around the islands, to interfere with any reinforcements that the Japanese might be sending to their occupation forces.

The Japanese never got their airstrip in full operation because it was constantly bombed. One thing the Japanese did have on Kiska was a radar installation, which they had salvaged from the SS *Prince of Wales*, a British ship that they had sunk off Singapore in December 1941. When the Kittyhawks rose in the air to begin their trips to Kiska, the Japanese knew they were coming and prepared a barrage of flak and anti-aircraft fire to greet them. Amchitka was so close to Kiska that at night the lights of Kiska could sometimes be seen from the north tip of Amchitka.

On the trip to Kiska, the usual routine was to look for a break in the clouds, at about 1,000 metres,