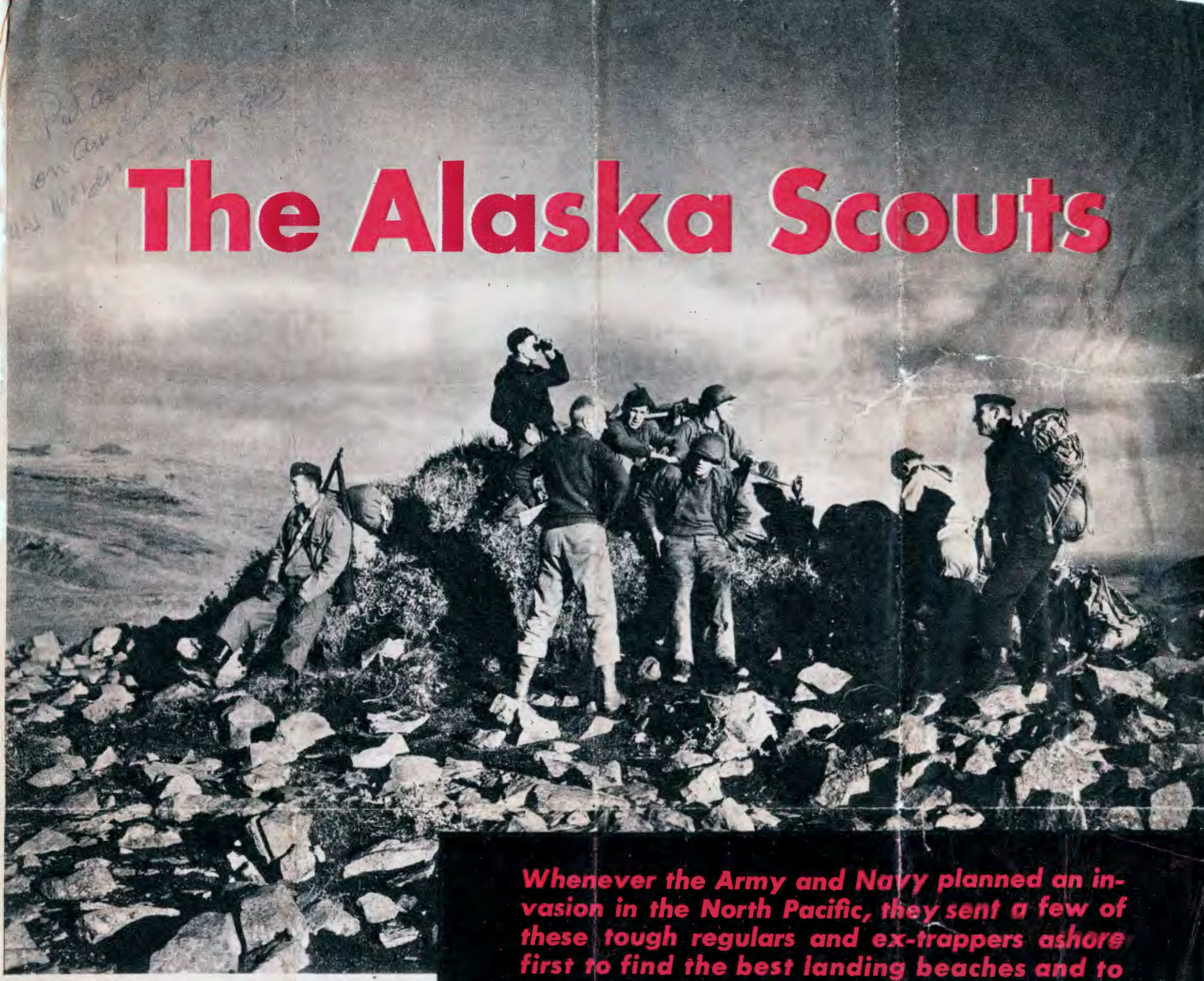
The Alaska Scouts



Whenever the Army and Navy planned an invasion in the North Pacific, they sent a few of these tough regulars and ex-trappers ashore first to find the best landing beaches and to locate the Japanese positions.

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HEADQUARTERS, ALASKAN DEPARTMENT—You can't bring the war in the Aleutians into a bull session up here without someone mentioning the Alaska Scouts. But that's not hard to explain. They led the way.

Any yardbird in the Aleutian Chain will tell you that on the four biggest amphibious operations of the North Pacific campaign — Adak, Amchitka, Attu and Kiska—it was the Scouts who, in darkness, first paddled ashore from submarines or destroyers or troop transports to stake out landing beaches and locate the enemy.

The Scouts are not supermen and they're not a band of bloodthirsty thugs who eat raw meat. They're especially adapted to their assignment, sure. But that's because most of them are sourdough trappers and miners and fishermen who know how to get around in Alaska and on the Aleutian Chain. Several of them are Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts. A few more are old-line dogfaces with years of service at the Territory's old Chilkoot Barracks. Until shortly before the U. S. went to war, Chilkoot was the only permanent garrison in Alaska. It was really there that the idea for the Alaska Scouts was born.

But the real organization didn't come into existence until Nov. 19, 1941, a few weeks before Pearl Harbor, at the headquarters of what was then the Alaska Defense Command. That morning Col. Lawrence Vincent Castner, ADC intelligence chief, called a corporal and three privates into his office. Norton M. Olshausen of San Francisco, Calif., was the corporal. The privates were James H. Radford, a stringy hillbilly from Tennessee; Donald O. Spaulding of Rexburg, Idaho, and William B. (Sam) Bates of Ogden, Utah, two of them pre-war veterans of Corregidor. Everybody knew everybody else, because when Col. Castner had been a captain several years before, he was their CO down at Chilkoot.

The colonel told them he'd gotten authorization from Lt. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr., head man of ADC, to form an Alaska Combat Intelligence Detachment. "I've picked out you four for a starter," he said.

The colonel had also picked out the officer who was to teach the men the meaning of combat intelligence. This was a long-legged major—now lieutenant colonel—with a jaw like an anvil and a military career probably almost as spectacular as he himself made it out in tongue-in-cheek bull sessions. His name was William J. Verbeck.

"I really gave those boys hell," Lt. Col. Verbeck recalls. "Fifteen hours a day. Hardening marches through the snow out in the woods. Sketching and map making. Day after day of shooting every weapon a man can carry over his shoulder or on his back."

When war came, Col. Castner got the nod to expand his Scouts to a platoon of 24 men and one officer. That original platoon was handpicked from a collection of ruggedly independent characters who probably would have been a pain in the chair-knuckle to the commander of any ordinary outfit. Most of them wanted no part of Army routine. But Col. Castner knew a way to put their woodsmen's wiles and hardy attachment to the outdoors to vital military purpose.

Finding the right officer was not so easy. He finally settled on Lt.—now Capt.—Robert H. Thompson of Moccasin, Mont. In brute strength Thompson was as rough a customer as the men he was to lead, and the colonel was certain he could work with the platoon without snowing under the basic individualism which made them valuable. Today there isn't a man among the Scouts who wouldn't crawl on his stomach to hell with a sack of hand grenades if Capt. Thompson or Lt. Earl C. Acuff suggested it. Lt. Acuff, who hails from Moscow, Idaho, was assigned to the platoon when it was expanded later to 66 men.

By the time the Japs tried their sneak into Dutch Harbor, the Scouts had been split into small detachments and sent out as intelligence reporters to Kodiak, the Pribilofs, the secret bases at Cold Bay and Umnak, and Dutch Har-

bor itself. From the brow of Ballyhoo Mountain at Dutch Harbor, Spaulding—now a staff sergeant—and his detachment observed the Jap attack on Dutch Harbor. Their reports on the raiding flights and the Japs' tactical maneuvers were called by Col. Castner "cool, impartial, correct and the best" received by ADC Intelligence.

THE Japs' feint at Dutch Harbor was their last advance toward North America. From then on the Yanks were headed west—with the Scouts leading the way. When we made one of the most important decisions of the Aleutian campaign, the decision to take Adak and fortify it as a main base, two Scout detachments, one under Col. Castner and the other under T/Sgt. Woodrow W. (Hank) Farrington, landed on the island from submarines on the nights of Aug. 27 and 28, 1942. Several days later they directed the occupation of Adak by blinker lights from shore with the help of two Navy signalmen and a radioman who volunteered to go with them.

Before the public back home even knew of the Adak occupation, Lt. Col. Verbeck, Capt. Thompson, S/Sgt. Edgar M. Walker of Merced, Calif., and Sgt. Joe Kelly, an ex-miner and trucker from Fairbanks, Alaska, were already scouting the next stepping stone, Amchitka, a 15-minute flight by Zero from Kiska.

Nine Scouts and 30 volunteers from the Infantry went ahead of the main landing forces at Amchitka on Jan. 12, 1943. Under the very nose of the Japs, and in the face of a rising storm that made the undertaking hazardous, the advance party sought out the safest beachhead. Then, as soon as landing operations of the main force were in progress, the Scouts struck out for the northern tip of Amchitka and established an OP from which they could see the shores of Kiska through breaks in the fog. A few days later, when the Japs began daily attacks on Amchitka, Scouts spotted the enemy seaplanes almost as soon as they left their Kiska anchorage.

Seven months later four Scouts, all Alaskans, were the first Yanks to set foot on Kiska. They were Sgt. Clyde Peterson, a Sitka fisherman, and Pvts. Stanley Dayo of Livengood, Chuck O'Leary of Nome, and Billy Buck, a half-Eskimo from the fishing village of King Cove.

But in the months between, the Scouts had their toughest assignment. It began in a veil of fog that made Holtz Bay on Attu a blind passage the morning of May 11. A special reconnaissance group with commando training had been picked to lead the 7th Division onto Attu. The Scouts were picked to lead the recon group.

Capt. Thompson, then still a lieutenant, commanded the biggest detachment of 25, which loaded into two Higgins boats with 10 days' rations, radio equipment, hand grenades, full ammunition belts and extra bandoleers. Each Higgins towed a string of smaller boats, called "plastic whaleboats." A thousand yards from shore the Scouts transferred into these noiseless boats and rowed through the fog toward Red Beach.

At the same time two other Scouts, Cpl. George Bishop of Fairbanks and Cpl. Raymond F. Conrad of Dubois, Wyo., were guiding another patrol ashore at Scarlet Beach. Conrad had transferred into the Alaska Scouts only two weeks before and said: "I'm only along for the experience." He got his experience; later he also got a Silver Star.

On the southern shelf of Attu at Massacre Bay still other patrols of Scouts were stealing onto the narrow strip of beach. One of the first casualties of the battle was Sgt. Clyde Peters of Anchorage, Alaska. Peters was accompanying Col. Edward P. Earle, regimental commander, on a reconnaissance foray high on a ridge when the first shots fired by the Jap defense entrapped them. Col. Earle was killed by mortar fragments. Peters, with 11 bullet wounds, was lugged to the beach by sweating medics, and the Scouts never saw him again. For months Pete was carried on their books as "killed in action" until finally one of the boys got a letter from him, mailed from a hospital in California.

Over on the Holtz Bay side the day after Peters was wounded, the only Scout killed in the Aleutian campaign was shot down. He was Cpl. Willis (Red) Cruden of Talkeetna, Alaska, an old seaman who had been trapping in the interior for several years. "He always said," Cpl. Philip N. Kendrick of Nome recalls, "that if he had his way about it, he'd never venture more than a half-mile from the sea again." He never did. He was cut down on a mossy Attu slope by a sniper's bullet through the heart.

The Scout mixing flapjack flour is S/Sgt. Robert Lee Garr of North Bend, Oreg. In the Army for 10 years, he's spent five of them in Alaska.

Two more Scouts, Cpl. Albert L. Levorson from the Badlands of South Dakota and Pfc. Theron G. Anderson, once a ranger at Mount Rainier National Park, were given the sweet task of guiding 50 infantrymen over saw-toothed Sarana Ridge to wipe out a strong Jap machine-gun emplacement, spotted from aerial photos. They discovered that the Japs were also well fixed with mortars capable of outdistancing anything the Yanks had on hand. The patrol's radio equipment went sour, and the only way they could get word back to the CP was by sending the two Scouts.

By this time the Japs had closed in behind them on the crest of the range. Together Anderson and Levorson skulked their way through snow, down deep ravines slippery with moss and over rocks wet by waterfalls. When the Scouts were within sight of the American lines, the Japs spotted them and opened fire.

The shots roused the Yanks in the valley, and they cut loose at the jagged sky line. Anderson and Levorson were sewed up in the cross-fire for several hours. They finally made the valley in darkness. The next morning artillery and machine-gun bursts kept the Japs above the fog line busy, while Levorson scaled the sheer cheek of the mountain again to tell the infantrymen to hold on and that help was coming.

On the last day of the battle Cpl. Conrad and Cpl. Edward R. Bagby of Medfra, Alaska, were pacing a patrol of Infantry down the rocky slant of Chichagof Ridge toward the beach. They were spread wide, gunning for Jap stragglers not already killed by their own grenades.

"Our job was really finished," Conrad says. "We had already located the enemy's general whereabouts for the Infantry, but Bagby and I went along for the hell of it."

It turned out to be a small-scale massacre.

"We almost stumbled over the first Jap we saw. He was wrapped up in a blanket. When he heard us, he peeked at us from under the blanket, then covered up his head. He wouldn't surrender and he wouldn't fight. We shot at him a couple of times, and after he was mortally wounded he pulled out a grenade and blew himself to pieces. A fragment of the grenade hit one of the infantrymen in the finger.

"A little farther down we dumped some grenades into a stovepipe that was smoking over one of those half-burned huts. Ammunition was stored there. After the explosion it looked like a bomb had hit the place. We didn't stop to count how many Japs had been hiding in there.

"On a low mound within 100 yards of the beach we caught sight of three more Japs and two others diving into a cave. The infantrymen went to work on this bunch. By this time Bagby and I were getting interested, so we pulled ahead to see what next. Through his glasses Bagby spotted a Jap crawling toward a big boulder with a hollow behind it. Bagby pegged away at him five or six times, and we saw the Jap struggle over the ground and finally kill himself with a grenade. I saw one stand up and start running toward the rock, and I shot him.

"Bagby and I held a little conference. We'd been pretty lucky in some tight spots up to then, and we didn't want to stretch our luck too thin. We measured our chances. We didn't figure there could be more than four or five Japs behind that rock, and it would be a hell of a lot of fun to smoke 'em out."

So, yard by yard, Conrad and Bagby began their advance, one sliding forward on his stomach while the other lay in a position to cover him. On the way down the slope they killed four Japs who peeked out to try to take a shot at them.

"We guessed then there must be at least one more," says Conrad, "but it was getting risky. Bagby decided to crawl back and bring up some grenades. I played possum until he got back."

For an hour and a half they waited for the Infantry patrol to catch up with them. They covered the rock, and every time they decided it was safe to advance, another bullet came zinging past them. When they heard the patrol coming behind them, they prepared to close in.

"I had never thrown a grenade in my life," Conrad admits. "Personally, they scare the wadding out of me, but I hated to admit to Bagby I was a coward. So I let one go. I even held it a few seconds after pulling the pin so it would explode just right. It cleared the rock by six inches."

In a few seconds a Jap came running out with his clothes on fire. He had been lying in plain sight near the end of the rock and Conrad and Bagby thought he was dead, but the grenade set dry grass afire around him and finally set his clothes ablaze. At that moment the first man in the Infantry patrol crawled into sight. He drew a bead and shot down the burning Jap. Then he made the mistake the two Scouts had been making. He thought that was the last of the Japs. He crept to the mouth of the hollow behind the rock and looked in. A Jap bullet killed him.

Conrad and Bagby continued to inch forward, and Jap rifles kept poking up over the edge to fire on them. By the time the patrol finally arrived in force, they were close enough to see into the hollow. There were still four live Japs, but Conrad and Bagby left them for the patrol to exterminate. The two Scouts had disposed of eight Japs in the 90-minute point-blank duel. They were awarded the Silver Star.

BETWEEN missions the Scouts as an organization like nothing better than hitting the sack, except hiking off into the hills for some fishing or shooting. It took a year before they moved into a barracks building at their home station, and then it was only because their winterized tents had been dismantled during their absence.

On the march they eat better than anyone in the Aleutians. They lug along their own side meat for frying-grease and use a hip-pocket stove to cook up sourdough flapjacks and hamburgers from dehydrated beef. They carry all this in addition to ordered field equipment.

On Attu they advanced unerringly on a warehouse containing a hundred cases of *sake*, the potent Jap rice wine. At Kiska they unearthed a cache of *Suntory* whisky, and when that was gone, they brought out a supply of Jap bamboo gin from somewhere.

The biggest difference between the Scouts and other dogfaces is their sacktime conversation. Once in a while they work around to women, but only when they weary of their favorite topic—winding snares to trap blue fox.

The ranking NCO of the outfit, T/Sgt. Farrington, probably has more military service in Alaska than any enlisted man in the Territory except veteran members of the Alaska Communications System, who are practically Alaska pioneers. Farrington has 13 years in the Army, 10 of them in Alaska.

All the Scouts resent the nickname "Castner's Cutthroats," which someone pinned on them more than a year ago. They insist they're just a bunch of peaceable guys who like to be left alone and that not one of them, probably not even Lt. Col. Verbeck, has ever cut anybody's throat. But if they happen to bump into the prune-picker who first dreamed up that colorful catch-phrase, it might be another story.

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