

Battle for Attu finally commemorated with plaque

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Attu Island — The Japanese remember the "forgotten war" and now perhaps more Americans will recall the World War II struggle for a 1,000-mile chain of islands known as the Aleutians.

About 30 people, most of them U.S. Coast Guard personnel, gathered on a wind-worn hill on Attu Thursday and paid homage to the hundreds of American service men who died in the 15-month Aleutian Campaign.

The crack of two vintage Springfield rifles was muffled in the fog and drizzle masking Massacre Bay as taps sounded for the men who died in the soggy muskeg of places like Fishhook Ridge and Terrible Mountain.

The Japanese have placed several memorials where thousands of their countrymen were killed or committed suicide in the final bitter battle here, but until Thursday there was no physical sign in recognition of the American effort.

Perhaps it is understandable: Attu is at the extreme western tip of the Aleutians, only 2,000 miles east of Tokyo and 720 miles north of Japan's Kurile Islands, while it is more than 6,000 miles west of Washington D.C.

But many Americans have forgotten — or perhaps never knew — that when Japanese troops stormed ashore at Attu's Chichagof Bay on June 7, 1942,

it was the first time foreign troops had occupied U.S. soil since the War of 1812.

The island was undefended, populated by some 40 native Aleut villagers and two representatives of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs who operated the radio station. Charles F. Jones was gunned down in the attack. His wife and the villagers were carted off to Japan, where they spent the duration of the war.

Less than a year later, Operation Landcrab put thousands of American soldiers ashore in what was expected to be a relatively easy stepping-stone battle to prepare for an assault on a much larger Japanese garrison on nearby Kiska.

As happened so often in the Aleutian campaign, American commanders miscalculated enemy strength and underestimated the Aleutians — their weather and geography.

The battle of Attu turned into what historians have called "19 days of hell." Some 550 Americans were killed and more than 3,000 others were put out of action. More than 2,600 Japanese died.

On his first visit a few months ago to the only remaining settlement on Attu, a Coast Guard navigation station, Father Joseph W. McCloskey was struck by the absence of American monuments in the Aleutians.

He found it especially puzzling because relatives of the fallen Japanese have erected memorials at several locations, and in 1950 the U.S. Navy

placed a brass plate honoring Col. Yasuya Yamasaki, the fallen commander of the Japanese troops.

So the ebullient Navy commander, the chaplain at the Coast Guard base at Kodiak, organized a community fund-raising effort to remember the Americans who fought and fell in the Aleutians.

Shunning state or federal aid, McCloskey sought contributions from service clubs and veterans and fraternal organizations in Kodiak. He quickly raised the some \$300 he needed to buy the granite marker set in place Thursday.

"When I started this, I had no idea of the interest this project would generate," said McCloskey, who until 15 years ago was a Catholic priest in his home-

town of Philadelphia. "It seems as though quite a few people have been wondering about this for years and were just waiting for someone to do something about it."

He said he had offers of thousands of dollars, but purposely kept the project small, "simple, yet reverent."

So Thursday, when Capt. B.S.

Beach, the Coast Guard's commander at Kodiak, tugged the cover off the 350-pound stone, the "forgotten war" was remembered once again.

Beneath the seals of the Army, Navy and Coast Guard, are the words, "Dedicated to those brave Americans who served and gave their lives in the Aleutians during World War II."