

# THE ALEUTIAN CAMPAIGN

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THE Aleutian campaign of 1942-43 marks the first time that units of the RCAF served under American operational command. This alone would make it worthy of our attention but there are, of course, other reasons for taking a backward glance at this rather obscure campaign which was conducted in an obscure part of the world.

Approximately 500 RCAF personnel served in the Aleutian theatre, 11 of whom received the United States Air Force Medal, one the OBE, one the DFC, four the AFC and two were mentioned in despatches. Eight others lie buried in the U.S. cemetery in Kiska, while the names of four who have no known graves are inscribed on the Commonwealth Air Memorial on Green Island in Ottawa.

Although such strange-sounding names as Naknek, Umnak, Adak or Amchitka may hold little meaning for most of us, for the members of the RCAF Aleutian expedition they will undoubtedly conjure up memories of the worst flying weather in the world, of a war that came in fits and starts, and of unfulfilled ambitions to meet Japanese *Zeroes* in air combat.

The story of the Aleutian campaign begins early in May 1942 when the tide of war was running strongly in Japan's favour. The Japanese High Command, having decided to "go for broke" in the North Pacific, assembled a tremendous striking force which, according to Mastake Okumiya and Jiro Horikoshi (co-authors of the book entitled "Zero"), included "350 vessels of all types, more than 1000 war planes, and more than 100,000 officers and men". Their double objective was to oust the Americans from Midway Island and then to strengthen Japan's position by establishing strong perimeter bases in the Aleutian Islands, which extend like the links of a giant chain about 1,200 miles westward from the Alaskan peninsula.

Unfortunately, from the Japanese point of view, before this formidable armada left its home waters American intelligence sources had alerted Washington as to its probable purpose and destination. Ottawa, too, was kept informed and it was at this point that the RCAF came into the picture. The U.S. War Department had to bolster its Alaskan air defences immediately and suggested that Canada make plans to lend air assistance to the American forces in Alaska. This proposal did not come as a surprise because it had already been agreed that the defence of the northern United States, British Columbia and Alaska was a task in which both countries must share. To supply the required help fell within the scope of responsibility of Western Air Command. The Air Officer Commanding, A/V/M L. F. Stevenson, was juggling his meagre forces to see how this could be done without unduly weakening the air defences on Canada's west coast when, on 27 May, Maj. Gen. S. B. Buckner, commanding the Alaska Defence Command, sent him an urgent message requesting that one bomber squadron and one fighter squadron proceed immediately to Yakutat at the north end of the Alaskan panhandle.

As it happened, A/V/M Stevenson had already selected No. 8 (BR) Sqn., working out of RCAF Station Sea Island and No. 111 (F) Sqn., stationed at Patricia Bay, for possible service in Alaska and on 28 May they were warned for movement. At this time no one in No. 8 Sqn. was acquainted with the route to Alaska nor had any of its members even so much as seen an air navigation map of the area north of Prince Rupert. However, maps were soon found; on 2 June, 12 of the squadron's *Bolingbrokes*, led by S/L C. A. Willis, took off from Sea Island on the 1,000-mile flight north to Yakutat, staging through Annette Island and Juneau. They arrived at their destination the next day and on 4 June were joined by No. 111 Sqn., whose pilots had flown their *Kittyhawks* up the interior route through Prince George and White-horse.\* Some of the ground crews arrived by *Stranraer* the same day, while the main party followed by boat and rail.

\* At the time No. 111 was under command of S/L A. D. Nesbitt. On 13 June Nesbitt was appointed to command a two-squadron RCAF wing temporarily established at Annette Island, Alaska, to guard the approaches to Prince Rupert, B.C. Nesbitt was succeeded by S/L J. A. Kerwin, who like Nesbitt had flown in the Battle of Britain.

Number 111 Sqn. was accompanied to Yakutat by W/C G. R. McGregor,\* a veteran of the Battle of Britain who had been brought back to Canada to assist in the development of fighter operations in Western Air Command. In view of his record and experience it is not surprising that he was appointed to head the force sent to Alaska. His small headquarters, which for lack of a better name was called "X Wing", served as the point of contact between the Alaska Defence Command and the RCAF. The Canadian government consented to the two squadrons being placed at the strategic disposal of the 11th American Air Force and taking their operational orders directly from its commander, Maj. Gen. W. O. Butler, on the understanding that questions of major importance would be cleared beforehand with McGregor. Somewhat ironically, one of the general's first orders was for the red centres on the top wing roundels of all RCAF aircraft to be painted out as he considered that there was a confusing similarity to the red identification disk carried on Japanese planes. Further changes in RCAF marking were made by painting a blue band 14 inches wide around the tail end of the fuselage.

\* Now Trans-Canada Airlines President

On 5 June No. 8 and No. 111 Sqns. were ordered to deploy in defence of Elmendorf Field, near the thriving town of Anchorage. At the outset the two units made up about one fifth of the air strength of Alaska Defence Command\* and their presence at Anchorage enabled the Americans to move two of their own bomber squadrons and one of their fighter squadrons to Cold Bay and Omnak at the beginning of the Aleutian chain. The first DROs issued by S/L Willis at Elmendorf Field appeared on a single sheet size 8 x 10 on 9 June. They outlined the routine to be followed at the American base, confined all ranks to camp, ordered the carrying of personal weapons and emphasized the need to observe security regulations. The notice concerning mail, always an important item for those serving far from home, was probably the most studied item on the historic DRO. During its sojourn in Alaska the mail from home was to reach its members via A.P.O. 942, Seattle, Washington, and for quick delivery the use of U.S. airmail stamps was advised.

\* The air formation under Butler's command consisted of about 11 heavy bombers, 44 medium bombers and 98 fighters. Included in these figures are 14 *Bolingbrokes* and 19 *Kittyhawks* of X - Wing (RCAF).

Meanwhile, a task force under Admiral Kakuji Kakuda opened the Aleutians-Midway offensive with a diversionary attack on the American base at Dutch Harbour which did a limited amount of damage but fooled no one. The main attack went in against Midway 24 hours later and in the great battle which followed American air power carried the day, repulsing the enemy with staggering losses. On 6 June, in a face-saving gesture, a Japanese naval force invaded uninhabited Kiska at the western end of the Aleutian Islands. A neighbouring island, Attu, was also occupied the day after and landing parties dug in with the intention of establishing permanent garrisons on these bleak fringes of American territory. Since Admiral Yamomoto had failed to take Midway, Kiska and Attu had a very limited strategic value for Japan although their seizure did allow the Japanese government "to conceal from the people the terrible losses at Midway".

It is doubtful if the Japanese ever considered using the Aleutians as a passageway to the mainland of North America. As Maj. Gen. Buckner said, "They might make it, but it would be their grandchildren who finally got there, and by that time they would all be American citizens anyway". Nevertheless the presence of the Japanese on far-away Attu and Kiska served to create in the minds of the Pacific coast inhabitants of Canada and the U.S. the impression that such an invasion was feasible. To dispel such fears the governments of the two countries had to maintain sizeable forces at home when they were badly needed elsewhere. Thus the main motive for clearing the Aleutians was to remove the apparent threat of invasion and thereby relieve more of the home forces for duty overseas.

## **No. 8 SQUADRON**

After the Battle of Midway, Alaska Defence Command turned rapidly to the offensive. Men and materiel were pouring in through the Gulf of Alaska to construct a chain of island bases that would bring the Americans (and Canadians) within striking distance of Kiska and Attu. For the time being, the command's most vulnerable spot was its supply lines, there being still many elements of the Japanese Navy lurking about. To help in making the sea lanes safe for the convoys, No. 8 Sqn. was assigned to patrol a given area in the Gulf of Alaska.\* Instructions from the 11th Air Force called for the squadron to have six of its 14 *Bolingbroke*s at readiness state at all times. Normally two aircraft, armed with 300-lb. depth charges, took off on routine patrol every day that weather permitted. In addition, when submarines were reported in the area a special detachment of two or three *Bolingbroke*s were temporarily based at Kodiak Island to supplement the American strike force located there.

\* The Canadian cruisers "Prince David", "Prince Henry" and "Prince Robert" and two Canadian corvettes were operating in Aleutian waters at this time.

The possibility of encountering Japanese aircraft in No. 8 Sqn's patrol area was rather remote but Alaska weather and terrain, characterized by constant dense fog and uncharted mountain ranges, more than made up for the absence of enemy fighters. Between Anchorage and the Gulf of Alaska there was a table of unsurveyed peaks rising in some places to 10,000 feet, leaving but one possible answer to an error in judgment. In his book "First Steps to Tokyo", F/O D. F. Griffin gives a graphic account of the hazards of flying in Alaska. He describes the Alaskan fog

as ". . . of the worst kind, rising from the ground up, building itself into thick layers . . . Where those layers of ground fog stop, the clouds commence." An additional peril was provided by the sudden squalls known locally as "williwaws" which swept down from the mountains with great force, sometimes reaching gale proportions within half an hour.

No. 8 Sqn. had its first encounter with Alaskan fog on its move from Yakutat to Anchorage. Ten *Bolingbrokes* took off with two U.S. Army transports following with the ground crews. Only three of the aircraft got through, one of which was flown by S/L Willis. The others returned to base or diverted to Seward.

When Japanese submarines penetrated the Bering Sea at the end of June, a detachment of three *Bolingbrokes* was ordered to Nome — a town on Alaska's Bering Sea coast which at the beginning of the century had been the scene of a gold rush but in World War II was important as a staging point on the route over which pilots of the USSR ferried planes obtained on lend-lease from the U.S. For the next six months No. 8 Sqn. aircraft and ground personnel remained at this isolated base keeping watch over Norton Sound. The one good feature about the field at Nome was that the low rolling tundra around it presented no serious flying hazard. Otherwise it was a most uninspiring place — gravel runways, no hangars and only canvas accommodation. Still, social life, if not abundant, was at least not absent. In their off-hours the Canadians amused themselves by visiting with the local inhabitants, conversing in wild gesticulations with the Russian flyers or panning the nearby streams for gold. (No strikes were reported.)

Although No. 8 Sqn's 14 *Bolingbrokes* were a valuable addition to the forces of Alaska Command, they stuck out like a sore thumb when it came to obtaining spare parts. For example, when the squadron received its first operational instructions from the 11th Air Force, "All aircraft to be bombed up and stand by. Enemy contacted in position 57°N 170°W", it was discovered that the adapter rings on the *Bolingbrokes* didn't fit any of the bombs in use in Alaska. The maintenance crews, with American assistance, immediately took up the task of modifying the adapter rings until others could be flown in from Western Air Command. This was the story over and over again. Parts, for the Canadian-built aircraft, which of course couldn't be obtained from American stores, invariably arrived late, in insufficient quantity or of the wrong kind. Ground crews were forced to use their skill, training and ingenuity to the limit to keep the aircraft serviceable. Much of the work had to be done in the open or under canvas. Major overhauls and engine changes bordered on the impossible but somehow they were accomplished, though it meant working 18 hours a day, and the *Bolingbrokes* were kept flying.

Well before the end of the year the tactical situation in the Aleutians had passed the point where they were of very much use because Japanese submarines were now operating far beyond *Bolingbroke* range. Moreover, long range *Liberators* (B-24s) were being put at Butler's command while some of his fighter squadrons had been withdrawn for operations in the South Pacific. Taking into consideration the maintenance problems of the *Bolingbrokes* and the changed fighting conditions in Alaska, the American general asked that Canada replace No. 8 Sqn. with a fighter unit. As far as the RCAF was concerned the main problem was to find a fighter squadron properly equipped and trained for action. Again the question was handed

to Western Air Command. After going into the matter thoroughly with Gen. John L. deWitt of U.S. Western Defence Command, A/V/M Stevenson agreed to pull back the *Bolingbrokes* and send No. 14 (F) Sqn. to Alaska.

Rumours, running far ahead of official channels, foretold that No. 8 would be back in Canada for Christmas. But the squadron remained in Alaska long enough to celebrate an announcement in the New Year's Honours List that two of its members, P/O W. O. Woods and WO2 T. Lindsay, had been awarded the Air Force Cross for their zeal and determination in carrying out their patrols, totalling 300 hours, under the very bad weather conditions prevalent in Alaska. Preparations for the move back to Vancouver began in late January; by early March the entire squadron was once again at Sea Island. It left behind a record unequalled by any other squadron in Alaska inasmuch as none of its aircraft had been lost on patrol — a remarkable achievement when one considers the inadequacy of the existing (or non-existing) meteorological stations and radio communication facilities.

### **No. 111 SQUADRON**

DURING its first month in Alaska (June 1942) No. 111 Sqn. had been detailed to "fly flag pole" — in other words, to provide routine defence patrols for the Elmendorf area. This unenviable assignment came as a result of the Canadians having made the trip north without their Kittyhawks being equipped with long-range belly tanks, essential for flying between the widely separated bases along the Aleutian chain. The belly tanks were put on at Anchorage and shortly thereafter came the welcome announcement that a detachment of 12 RCAF Kittyhawks, 21 pilots and 60 ground crew was to be sent to Umnak, the most forward base in the Aleutians, to relieve an equivalent number of personnel in No. 11 Pursuit Sqn.. USAAF.

Preparations for the 1,000-mile flight to Umnak, routed through Naknek and Cold Bay, were completed on 10 July but the anxious Canadians remained weatherbound until the 13th when the first section got away. It consisted of seven Kittyhawks and three U.S. transports carrying nine more pilots, the ground crew and a medical officer. On the last leg of this flight, from Cold Bay to Umnak, the RCAF experienced its most tragic mishap in the Aleutians.

What happened might be told in half a dozen words — a thick fog, a hidden cliff. The squadron commander, S/L J. W. Kerwin (a former member of No. 1 (F) Squadron in its Battle of Britain days) and four other pilots were killed. Only one *Kittyhawk*, that flown by P/O O. J. Eskil, and two transports carrying the nine pilots, 17 ground crew and the medical officer, got through. W/C G. R. McGregor, who had been flying ahead of the formation of six *Kittyhawks*, narrowly missed hitting a rocky ledge himself as he circled low on the edge of the fog bank, calling "all *Kittyhawk* aircraft". Eskil was the only one of the six who answered. After trying vainly for half an hour to find the others, McGregor returned to Cold Bay to organize a search.

The loss of five experienced pilots was a hard blow, not only to the squadron but to the RCAF as a whole. To find replacements AFHQ had to take men from key positions in Canada. The overall effect of the accident may be measured by the fact that RCAF Overseas HQ was

asked to "send six experienced pilots to Canada to assist organization and training our fighter squadrons."

At Umnak the 10 RCAF pilots, using aircraft loaned by the USAAF, were formed in "F" Flight and worked in close co-operation with the 11th Pursuit Sqn., commanded by Maj. John S. Chennault, son of Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault of Flying Tiger fame. But Umnak was still 500 miles from Kiska. The return trip was barely within the operational limits of the *Kittyhawks* and the pilots once again were committed to a routine of defensive patrols with an occasional stint of flying control duty thrown in. Fact blended with fiction when Col. D. F. Zanuck, the celebrated motion picture executive, arrived at Umnak to shoot scenes for a production film. The 111 Sqn. detachment gladly took time out to do an unrehearsed performance.

On 22 August No. 111 Detachment personnel met their new commanding officer, S/L Kenneth A. Boomer, who arrived from Anchorage in company with W/C McGregor. Boomer had already served two years overseas with No. 411 Sqn. (one of Canada's top fighter units in the United Kingdom) and had two enemy aircraft to his credit. Like everyone else at Umnak, Boomer was hoping for an opportunity to tangle with the Japanese *Zeroes*. About a month after his arrival he had the satisfaction of telling his detachment that an air attack was planned for Kiska; he had volunteered RCAF assistance and he and three other Canadians, F/O R. Lynch, F/O J. G. Gohl and P/O H. O. Gooding, were to fly with the American formation.

The fighters were to take off from Fireplace, a temporary base some 250 miles from Kiska. After at least two postponements because of the weather the attack went in on 25 September — a red-letter day, for the RCAF scored its only victory against the Japanese Air Force. At 1000 hours the force of nine *Liberators*, 12 *Airacobras* and 20 *Kittyhawks* arrived over Kiska with fighters leading the bombers and other fighters providing top cover. The RCAF flyers had been assigned to take out the anti-aircraft defences and in their enthusiasm for the task flew almost at deck level.

They had crossed the island on their first run and were returning to strafe the gun positions again when a flight of three *Zero* floatplanes rose to meet the American fighters. After a brief display of aerobatics, an over-confident procedure sometimes indulged in by Japanese pilots, the leader came in with his cannon and machine guns trained on the tail of an American *Kittyhawk*. At that very moment, to quote Boomer's words, "I climbed to a stall practically, pulled up right under him. I just poured it into him from underneath. He flamed up and went down."

The other Canadians caught a glimpse of the Japanese pilot, who was not wearing a parachute, leap from his plunging aircraft just before it fell into the sea. In the meantime Maj. Chennault had downed another *Zero*. Other Americans were blasting away at a submarine surfaced in the harbour. The four Canadians joined in the attack but whether or not the submarine was sunk remained undetermined for the area was becoming too hot for anyone to take time out to assess the damage. Having expended their ammunition the fighters made rendezvous with the bombers and returned to base.

The Canadians were looking forward to more such encounters but spirits made jubilant by the success of the first Kiska mission were soon deflated by the news that the RCAF detachment was

to return to Elmendorf as soon as possible. The reason, not immediately revealed, was in due time made known. General Butler had been warned that he was to lose three of his fighter squadrons that were needed in the South Pacific theatre and he wanted No. 111 to replace one of them on defensive reconnaissance at Kodiak Island to protect the growing naval base there from a sneak attack. Before the Canadians left Umnak Major Chennault addressed the following letter to the CO of XI Fighter Command at Seattle:

"It is with great regret that we see the departure of 111 Fighter Squadron, Royal Canadian Air Force. Their entire tour of duty here has been noted for the sincere cordiality, total co-operation and the frank and easy manner in which they mingled with our personnel stationed here . . . We are proud to be brothers-in-arms with them."

Until August 1943, when it returned to Canada, No. 111 maintained its headquarters at Fort Greeley on Kodiak Island. On 29 December Canadian morale was raised to a peak by the news that Boomer,\* Lynch, Gohl, and Gooding were awarded the U.S. Air Medal. The New Year's list brought more honours; Boomer received the DFC for his "unflagging zeal and devotion to duty" while McGregor, who in the words of General Butler had worked "heart and soul" to make the Aleutian operation a success, won the OBE.

\* Boomer was killed on operations over Germany on 22 October 1944 while serving with No. 418 (Intruder) Squadron.

About the same time, W/C McGregor was promoted to group captain and was transferred to RCAF Station Patricia Bay as CO. His successor as commander of the Aleutian Wing was W/C R. E. E. Morrow, DFC, another outstanding flyer who had led No. 402 Sqn. on fighter operations overseas for almost two years. The new commander was injured in an accident on 6 May which might have been far more serious had it not been for a certain amount of luck intermingled with considerable courage and determination. It happened when Morrow was forced to jump from a disabled plane just off Umnak Island. The tail plane of the aircraft struck him as he bailed out, paralyzing his lower limbs and knocking him unconscious. Fortunately the impact caused the parachute to open and the pilot came to before landing in the water. He managed to throw off his parachute harness and struggle into the dinghy, only to find that the rubber life boat stubbornly resisted his attempts to propel it landward. In spite of his injuries he abandoned the dinghy and swam for shore, encouraged by some American soldiers who had watched his descent and waded out through the surf to the rescue. Using an improvised stretcher, made from the perverse dinghy which ironically had drifted in behind Morrow as he swam, they carried him to a nearby unit where American doctors attended him. The incident did not end Morrow's Aleutian tour. After spending several weeks in a Vancouver hospital, he returned in July to head the Canadian Wing during the remaining two months of the campaign. In the meantime, while Morrow was recuperating in hospital, his place was temporarily taken by W/C P. B. Pitcher, another Battle of Britain pilot whose name added yet more lustre to the gallant band of airmen that Canada had despatched to the distant Aleutian Islands.

## **No. 14 SQUADRON**

"When do we get into action?" These impatient words were recorded in the daily diary of No. 14 (F) Sqn. on 9 January 1943. There were plenty of rumours about an impending move but if the CO, S/L B. R. Walker (veteran of more than 50 fighter sorties with the RCAF Overseas), had

learned anything about his squadron's future during his visits to Western Air Command Headquarters, he was keeping it a closely guarded secret.

The suspense was finally broken on 5 Feb. when G/C McGregor briefed the squadron for their 2,500-mile flight to Umnak. On 11 Feb. 15 *Kittyhawks* took off from Sea Island and followed the coastal route to Alaska, encountering the usual bad flying weather that never fails to come to the Pacific coast in winter. Minor accidents added to their trials and tribulations. At long last on 18 March the 15 aircraft appeared over the aerodrome at Umnak, which was indeed a welcome sight for the ground personnel who had been waiting there since 2 March, having made the journey to Alaska by boat.

The squadron was disappointed to find that Umnak was still far from the scene of enemy activity, but to everyone's satisfaction it was soon learned that arrangements had been made for the two RCAF squadrons to maintain between them a flight of 12 pilots at a more forward base for operations against Kiska. No. 14 was to have the first go and was to be relieved by No. 111 in about a month's time.

On 31 March S/L Walker and 11 of his pilots left by American air transport for Adak Island, about 250 miles from Kiska, where they were briefed on operations for the next day. Unfortunately bad weather set in and continued for two weeks. By the time it had improved the American engineers had a base ready at Amchitka, just 75 miles from Japanese-held Kiska. The Canadian flyers moved forward to Amchitka on 17 April and here they practically merged with elements of Nos. 11 and 18 Sqns. of the USAAF, procuring their every need from American stores and flying American aircraft. Each of the American squadrons operated three flights from Amchitka and the RCAF detachment formed "B" Flight of No. 11 Sqn. Although as a rule the Canadians flew together as a flight, they volunteered to fill in whenever and wherever the American units were short of pilots. They attacked aircraft and ships in Kiska harbour, radar installations, runways, anti-aircraft guns and the general camp area in an effort to persuade the Japanese that there was little to be gained by remaining in the inhospitable Aleutians.

No. 14 Sqn. made its debut in the Kiska offensive on 18 April when four of its pilots escorted an American formation of bombers. After the latter had dropped their bombs and had turned homeward the *Kittyhawks*, each carrying a 500-pound bomb beneath the fuselage, returned to dive-bomb enemy gun installations. The squadron diary noted, "All pilots returned safely to base and enjoyed their mission, looking forward to good times to come."

This time the Canadians were not to be disappointed. For the next four months, with responsibility alternating between the two squadrons, the RCAF detachment flew on offensive operations whenever the weather permitted. No. 14 Sqn. completed two tours at Amchitka, representing almost 400 hours of operational flying. From 17 April to 15 May its detachment recorded 14 missions comprising a total of 88 individual sorties; from 4 July to 12 August 16 missions (102 sorties) were chalked up. In the interval, from 15 May to 4 July, No. 111 Sqn. flew 274 hours on Kiska operations.

On 6 May, as No. 14's first tour was coming to an end, the personnel on Amchitka were thoroughly briefed for the big attack by air, land and sea on the Japanese stronghold at Attu. Although Canadians were allotted no part in the Attu phase they eagerly awaited the arrival of the next day. The attack didn't go in until the 11th and although Attu was considered to be the weaker of the two garrisons, the assault turned into "a thoroughly nasty little campaign" to quote Col. C. P. Stacey in his "Six Years of War". After a final Banzai charge on 29 May the Japanese dead numbered 2,300 — almost five times the number of American casualties.

The fall of Attu marked the beginning of the end of Japanese occupation and the people on the west coast of Canada and the United States slept more easily than they had since June of 1942. Admiral Kogo's plans for a counter attack were discarded after serious second thoughts and the Japanese wisely decided to retreat from the Aleutians. By early August it was obvious to the pilots at Amchitka that the situation at Kiska had changed for the better. Anti-aircraft fire, which had always been conspicuous (though shockingly inaccurate), was noticeably absent on the third as the RCAF *Kittyhawks* plunged through a break in the overcast to bomb the camp. It was a week before the weather permitted No. 14 to operate over Kiska again and by this time there was little sign of life below.

It had not been expected that the Japanese would leave their fortification so quietly and for the past month an invasion force of 34,426 soldiers (5,300 of whom were Canadian) had been preparing to drive them out. The invasion was scheduled for 15 August. On the evening of the 14th the aircrew at Amchitka gathered in the mess to be briefed for their part in the attack; they were on alert the next morning at 0500 hours only to find that the weather had closed in. The invasion was carried out without their assistance, which as it turned out was not needed anyway. The attackers discovered that the foe had fled 18 days before under cover of a dense Aleutian fog.

For the Americans the fall of Kiska and Attu was but the signal for the beginning of bombing offensive against the Kuriles and the undertaking of other arduous tasks in the Pacific; for the Canadians it meant a return to the war in Europe. Both No. 111 and No. 14 Sqns. were due to move to the United Kingdom at the end of the year where they were to continue their careers under new numbers — 440 and 442 respectively. Actually No. 111 had been withdrawn without replacement on 10 August. After turning all but two of its aircraft over to No. 14 it ended its tour in the Pacific by embarking for Canada on a boat appropriately named the *S.S. Aleutian*. As soon as it was known that the Japanese had been driven out of the Aleutians the Canadian government indicated that No. 14 was to return to Western Command as soon as possible. At 1700 hours on 6 Sept. Gen. Butler issued his last order to the squadron when he instructed that it was to stand down from readiness and prepare to leave for Canada.

The curtain closed on a memorable last scene which is perhaps best described in the words of F/O Griffin:

"Maj. Gen. N. E. Ladd jumped into his command car and drove to the RCAF field at Umnak. He was carrying seven U.S. Air Force medals. There was a 'pukka' parade in the best RCAF tradition, with the United States Army band playing 'The Star Spangled Banner' and 'God Save the King'. He pinned the medals on RCAF officers. The citations mentioned 'Attacks pressed home in the face of enemy opposition, with a courage, skill and determination that reflects the highest credit on the force in which they serve'."

As the members of the Canadian air expedition to the Aleutians made their way back to British Columbia, either along the coast by boat or over the rugged mountains by air, they were probably too pre-occupied with thoughts of their home-coming to dwell philosophically on the unique and close relationship that had been established with the American Air Force in the Aleutians. It is true of course that elsewhere, for example on both the Pacific and Atlantic seaboard, components of the American and Canadian military forces had worked together in close collaboration. But in these instances the units involved remained under the immediate direction of their parent commands — in the case of the RCAF this was Eastern Air Command and Western Air Command. It is also true that the RCAF had a wing of two squadrons based at Annette Island in Alaska, but again these units were operationally controlled by Western Air Command as their main function was to provide protection for the growing city of Prince Rupert.

Only in the Aleutians did the two air forces serve together under one command and nowhere else did they work together so intimately as in this remote theatre. In spite of the considerable differences that exist in organization, procedure, custom and tradition between the American and Canadian services, X-Wing had enjoyed the most satisfactory relations with all branches of the USAAF. It augured well for the future co-operation of the two forces in the defence of freedom. Thus the RCAF had done more than lend its support to a military operation; it had added a new dimension to Canadian-American defence relations. Herein lies the significance of the RCAF contribution to the Aleutian campaign.

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## Wings, February 1943

### Scramble Over Kiska

“I just poured it into him from underneath—climbed to a stall, practically, while he sailed over chasing someone else. He flamed up and went down.”

That’s how the first Jap Zero fell to the guns of the R.C.A.F over embattled Kiska in the Aleutian Islands. It happened September 5, but the victorious Canadian pilot, S/L Ken Boomer of Ottawa, told the story in his own words for the first time...Boomer’s description to recreate the sky battle between the Zero and the Kittyhawk.

Boomer has been awarded the DFC and the US Army Air Medal for heroism.

“It was a combined US-Canada operation,” said Boomer. “We all went in abreast, our fighters and the Americans leading the bombers. Then we had a top cover of fighters, too.

“ Our job was to beat-up the anti-aircraft defenses. We went practically on the decks, although there was a 1200 feet ceiling. Well, we did our job, finished our run and were coming back at about 400 feet when we saw them coming.” (A flight of three Zeros, one of several flights which rose to meet the attackers).

“They were at about 100 foot altitude so I gave a ‘Tally-ho’ to the rest of our Squadron. One Jap was on the tail of one of the fighters giving us top cover protection. I climbed to a stall practically, pulled up right under him. I just poured it into him from underneath. He flamed up and went down.

“By this time the rest of them were all scattered. Then we went back all of us, Americans and Canadians, and beat-up a couple of subs that were there. We got one of the too, I think.

“That’s all there was to it.”

What did we do after that? Whey, we went home and slept.”