

Episode 3

THE ALASKA DECEPTION

THERE ARE probably World War II histories of the Pacific war theatre that describe this event in detail. I am only giving what little I gleaned from the peculiar twists of my own assignments.

When I received my commission in January 1944 as Ensign in the U.S. Naval Reserve and assigned to active duty, I first spent eight weeks at a quicky officers' "boot training" center at Princeton University, then twelve weeks at the Communications Training Center at Harvard University. In July I was assigned to the Communications Division of the Thirteenth Naval District in Seattle, Washington as a Communications Watch Officer (CWO).

I had expected sea duty. What I got was a "cush" job working as the only male CWO in a crew of WAVES (women naval officers). I could only assume it was to keep an eye on me once the Navy discovered I had a left political background. After one month I had had it. I asked for sea duty. This was a right that all officers had--to request some other duty if dissatisfied with the present assignment.

When I approached the Communications Officer--a Commander-- he looked at me astonished, and said, "You already have an enviable assignment that will probably continue until the war is over. If I get you assigned to sea duty, you will most certainly wind up in Alaska. Do you want that?"

I said I wanted sea duty no matter where I was assigned. He said O.K., he'd see what he could do.

Within a week I received orders to proceed to San Diego and report aboard the USS Cumberland Sound AV-17. My orders, however, did not come from the Bureau of Personnel (BUPERS) in Washington, but came by hand from Commander Fleet Air-Seattle (CFAIR-Seattle). Mine not to question why--but unusual nevertheless.

I reported aboard the USS Cumberland Sound on August 24, 1944 and was assigned duty as a CWO. I expected we would be heading for Alaska, but we proceeded instead to Hilo harbor, on the Island of Hawaii, for seaplane training exercises.

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When we left San Diego for Hilo, the war in the Pacific was stalled. Guadalcanal* had been captured after over four months of bloody fighting in the fall of 1942. Then Tarawa in the Gilbert

* In the Solomons, a threat to Australia. See map appended to Episode 1.

Islands, Kwajalein and Eniwetok in the Marshall Islands, and finally Saipan and Tinian in the Marianas, by-passing and isolating the heavily defended major Japanese base in the Truk Island complex (see map).

Our closest base to Japan then, was Saipan, some 1,500 miles from Tokyo. There were two possible strategies: establish bases on Kodiak and the Aleutians in Alaska and strike the Kurile Islands strung out North of Japan (see map), or strike Iwo Jima and Okinawa from the South, capturing them to use as staging bases for invasion of the Japanese mainland islands.

The Pacific command decided on an elaborate deception to provide Japan with "evidence" of a giant preparation to attack Japan by way of the Kuriles from bases in the Aleutians. Thousands of fake coded radio messages were sent out on the Fox schedule to make it appear from analysis of the call signs that supply ships and warships were assembling in the Aleutians. Ships leaving the U.S. were supplied with cold weather gear. Sealed orders were given ship captains so that the crews would assume they would be going to Alaska.

The Cumberland Sound was supplied with fleece-lined jackets and heavy parkas with hoods, gloves and heavy boots, and even a stock of blued-steel hunting knives. Hand-to-hand fighting in our parkas with knives yet! (The crew were issued all this cold weather gear and weaponry after Japan's surrender, so we could take it home with us. Karl got my knife.)

How well the deception succeeded in diverting Japanese forces away from the Central Pacific, I do not know. But it became clear that our assignment to Ulithi was important in providing accurate and timely weather reports and typhoon warnings to the carriers and invasion vessels as they attacked and invaded Iwo Jima (Feb. 19, 1945) and later, Okinawa (April 1, 1945). The Iwo Jima and Okinawa invasions were extremely difficult and very bloody. Hard to see how the "Alaska deception" helped any at all.*

James K. Phillips
For Karl Wigdal
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* As part of the Alaska deception, our ship was detached from and independent of any Fleet Air Wing command. We received our orders directly from Commander-in-Chief--Pacific (CINCPAC).