



Painted 11th Fighter Squadron patch from an A-2 flight jacket.

Alaska's Aleutian Islands were the scene of one of World War II's most difficult, unique, and isolated campaigns, which lasted a little over a year. The strategic importance of Alaska was obvious to many people (including Japan's military leaders) well prior to the war, but after

the US entered it on 8 December 1941 it became even more important — and to a lot more people. The American government had actually begun to improve the (then) territory's woefully inadequate defenses in the summer of 1940, but it was a race against time, limited resources, and the weather. Meanwhile, the Japanese were

making plans for its invasion.

The 100-plus, mostly uninhabited Aleutian Islands are strung out for over 900 miles from the Alaska Peninsula in the southern part of the state, starting with its largest island, Unimak, and ending with Attu. The latter island is actually closer to Japan (the Kurile Islands) and much closer to Russia (its Komandorski Islands) than to the Alaskan (North American) mainland. The Aleutians are bordered by the frigid North Pacific to the south and the even more frigid Bering Sea to their north, which greatly affects the weather there.



WAR OF THE ALEUTIAN LIGHTNINGS

AT THE HARSH "TOP OF THE WORLD," P-38 LIGHTNINGS OF THE 54TH FIGHTER SQUADRON, COMBINED WITH OTHER UNITS, FOUGHT A SUPERIOR JAPANESE FORCE AS THE ENEMY INVADED AMERICAN TERRITORY - PART ONE

BY STEVE BLAKE

Umnak Airfield in the summer of 1942: 11th FS P-40 pilots relax between missions by playing cards next to their colorful Warhawks that would fight alongside the Lightnings. Of that unit's six aerial victories, five were scored over and near Dutch Harbor on 3 and 4 June 1942.