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# Aleutian Allusions

## Mackenzie King's Diary and the Invasion of Kiska in 1943

Galen Roger Perras

In 1976 C.P. Stacey issued *A Very Double Life: The Private World of Mackenzie King*. Based on King's recently-opened diaries, the book startled many Canadians. Seen by many as a dull man prone to bouts of meandering verbosity, instead Canadians discovered the outwardly drab King in fact had been "an inhabitant of two worlds": a careful statesman immersed in the "very practical world of politics and public affairs"; and a quixotic figure fascinated by the occult, an embarrassing devotee to his mother, and a possible procurer of prostitutes. The diary, which begins in 1893 and ends in July 1950, as Stacey avers, is "the most important single political document on twentieth-century Canadian history."<sup>1</sup> But while many focus on the diary's more salacious details, this article will use the diary to study King's part in sending 5,000 Canadian soldiers to participate in an American-led assault upon the Japanese-held island of Kiska in the Aleutian archipelago in August 1943. King's role is important for several reasons. First, as J.L. Granatstein notes, King utterly dominated his government, especially in the Second World War when his Cabinet had no more than four or five truly effective ministers amidst a "cabinet table...surrounded by more than a few genuine mediocrities, political hacks, and patronage seekers." Further, as a Liberal steeped in the 19th-century British tradition, King's political watchwords were caution, balance, pessimism, and distrust of the military profession. As he told a visiting British diplomat in May 1938, "his experience of political life had taught him that any success he had attained had been due far more to avoiding action rather than taking action."<sup>2</sup>

Unlike the European theatre of operations, where hundreds of thousands of Canadian personnel had been handed over to Allied control with little real debate, King and his Cabinet War Committee (CWC) enjoyed absolute discretion employing Greenlight Force, the Canadian brigade group sent to the Aleutians. Through King's diary we can follow, from inception to conclusion, the political imperatives behind an optional military operation. Ever keen to limit Canada's military liabilities, King only reluctantly accepted a Kiska role for fear relations with the United States would suffer if he had declined. Understandably concerned about the quality of military advice after catastrophic defeats at Hong Kong in December 1941 and at Dieppe in August 1942, the CWC severely restricted the military's freedom of action in establishing Greenlight Force. Nevertheless, things did not go as expected. After risking considerable political capital, King gained little when 35,000 Allied troops landed on Kiska only to find its Japanese occupiers had covertly evacuated three weeks before. Thus when Winston Churchill told King in September 1944 Canada could secure a place in future operations "along the Aleutian islands and the Kuriles," the Canadian leader acidly rejoined he "did not wish our men assigned to any second Kiska role." If Canadian troops had to fight in the Pacific, King wanted them to do so in highly visible and important regions like Formosa, Japan, and the Philippines.<sup>3</sup>

The roots of the Kiska operation lie in King's concern about home defence, a concern that predated the Second World War. Though Stacey has argued King's martial disinterest was so



marked he “would have understood those Chinese intellectuals, who, we are told, regard soldiers as an inferior race whose proceedings deserve only the contempt of civilized men,” recent scholarship asserts King supported rearmament after 1935 to protect Canada against American encroachment in the event of a war between Japan and the United States.<sup>4</sup> Such concerns had emerged early. When Wilfrid Laurier created a Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) in 1910 to deflect demands for a Canadian contribution to the Royal Navy, Minister of Labour King noted while ships on the west coast “would be best from the point of real efficiency to the Empire,” they would “be unpopular in Quebec & the East.” Ten years later when Admiral Viscount Jellicoe suggested fielding 15 Canadian warships in the Pacific, as opposition leader King thought Canada should

Prime Minister W.L. Mackenzie King only reluctantly accepted a role for Canada in the Kiska operation for fear that relations with the United States would suffer if he declined.

“recognize an obligation to coast defence, & to the British Navy.” But after coming to power, in the wake of the Anglo-Japanese alliance’s replacement by multinational agreements limiting Pacific naval armaments in 1922, Prime Minister King cut the navy to just two destroyers.<sup>5</sup>

When King nervously attended his first imperial conference in 1923, determined British attempts to centralize the empire’s foreign and defence policies made little headway. King greatly distrusted imperialists, while his minority government rested upon a shaky concord between isolationist French Canadians and anti-militarist Progressives. Arguing Canada had never brought the empire into a conflict and likely would never do so given its geographical isolation and good relations with America, King won the hard-fought concession that each Dominion’s primary military responsibility was home defence despite vehement Australian opposition.<sup>6</sup> Even after gaining a firm majority in 1935, King told Parliament in 1936 with “respect to all the great issues that come up,” Canada’s first duty to the empire and the League of Nations was “to keep this country united.” After 1937, though King knew Canada would support Britain against Germany, he would not commit lest an emboldened British government would adopt a hard anti-German line that instead might bring on a conflict. When he approved rearmament in 1936–37, King was less interested in European security than he was in safeguarding British Columbia in the wake of Franklin Roosevelt’s comments that America might intervene if Canada could not rebuff Japanese aggression.<sup>7</sup>

In September 1939 King sought a war of limited liability that emphasized air power and economic production. But when Canada’s military pushed for an expeditionary force for Europe, Under Secretary of State for External Affairs O.D. Skelton emphasized home defence, arguing “we cannot in this war ignore the Pacific as we did in the last.” General H.D.G. Crerar, Chief of the General Staff (CGS), believed any diversion of resources to the Pacific might lose the European war. Intent on building a formidable Canadian army that would play a major role in defeating Germany, Crerar told Minister of National

Defence J.L. Ralston in July 1940 the risk of Japan attacking Canada was quite low. Further, as Canada could rely on American intervention in the event of Japanese aggression, it did not need substantial home defence forces. King's consent in mid-August 1940 to Roosevelt's suggestion of a Canadian-American Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) to coordinate continental defence only enhanced the drive to build a "big army" in Britain now that Canada itself seemed secure. As negotiations between America and Japan ominously stalled in late 1941, Canada had just six infantry battalions, 25 warplanes, and three minesweepers in British Columbia.<sup>8</sup>

This did not mean that King was sanguine about the strategic situation in the Pacific. In August 1940 he told Britain's High Commissioner that Canada might remain neutral in an Anglo-Japanese war so as not to injure Anglo-American relations, adding ominously that Canada's Pacific coast was "wholly undefended." Yet when he met Japan's Minister on 7 September, with no Britons present, King took a harder line. After Baron Tomei complained America's possession of the Philippines, Hawaii, and the Aleutian Islands menaced Japan, King insisted Canadians were

"prepared to fight in any quarter of the globe where the British Empire was threatened." Then in October, when invited to participate in a Singapore-based conference about defence cooperation in the south Pacific, against Skelton's desires King sent an observer though he agreed with Skelton that Canada should not send military forces to the region.<sup>9</sup> Japan's surprise December 1941 offensive changed much. Despite prompt military assurances that British Columbia faced only minor Japanese raids, cabinet minister T.A. Crerar told journalist Grant Dexter on 8 December 1941 that King wanted two divisions stationed in British Columbia. Crerar had not exaggerated. Called from a Cabinet meeting on 9 December to receive word of the United States Navy's (USN) stunning losses at Pearl Harbor, a shocked King worried that a Japanese assault upon Canada's west coast "seemed wholly probable." Desperate to prevent any diversion of limited resources to home defence, on 10 and 11 December Canada's chiefs of staff advised that whilst recent Allied defeats had adversely altered the Pacific's strategic balance in favour of Japan, Germany constituted the greatest long term military threat and it remained "vitally important to ensure that attention is not unduly diverted

Air Marshal Lloyd S. Breadner, Rear-Admiral Percy W. Nelles and Lieutenant-General Kenneth Stuart, the Canadian chiefs of staff, at the Quebec Conference. There was much friction between these senior officers and Prime Minister King and his War Cabinet, over the decision to send Canadian troops to the Aleutians.



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Prime Minister Mackenzie King's key advisors: Charles G. Power, minister of National Defence for Air; James L. Ralston, minister of National Defence; and Angus Macdonald, minister of National Defence for Naval Services.

Japan might take India, could knock China from the war, and would attack Alaska and possibly even British Columbia. Thus, while agreeing to hold to the "basic view of defeating enemy in Europe as immediate first step," the CWC paid more attention to Canadian defences. A week later the prime minister, informing a sympathetic Dexter and fellow journalist Bruce Hutchison on 27 February that Japan soon would attack Alaska and British Columbia, carped about army ambitions and advised them "to keep banging away at the generals" about home defence. The increasingly bitter row finally abated in mid-March when Stuart, claiming his job was in jeopardy, created three new home defence divisions.<sup>11</sup>

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In June 1942 the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) fell into an ambush at Midway Island and lost four aircraft carriers. Japan's sole success in an overly complex scheme was its occupation of the islands of Attu and Kiska in the Aleutian chain. Midway's results can be attributed in large part to USN crypto-analysts having deciphered IJN plans, but the mad scramble to meet the Japanese threat revealed just how poorly defended Alaska was. Uncertain whether the army air force could reinforce Alaska in time to meet the IJN onslaught, US Lieutenant General John DeWitt of Western Defense Command, which encompassed Alaska and the western continental United States, asked Canada's Pacific Command to send two RCAF squadrons to Yakutat near Anchorage within 24 hours. DeWitt had good reason to expect assistance would be forthcoming. The Canadian army had overturned a September 1940 PJBD agreement that pledged Canadian army, air force, and navy resources to Alaskan defence on the grounds that "the political need" for Canada to promise some measure of assistance to America in the dark days of 1940 no longer applied in 1941. However, the final joint plan ABC-22 of July 1941 committed the RCN and RCAF to aid Alaska.<sup>12</sup>

On 27 April 1942 the PJBD had agreed to let local commanders determine the distribution

from the Atlantic." The army offered only 11 anti-aircraft guns for British Columbia, the RCAF just 120 fighter planes; deploying anything more to the west coast, army chief General Kenneth Stuart argued, would play "into the hands of our enemies."<sup>10</sup>

Unconvinced by the military's case, on 11 December King noted Japan might "make some landing on our coast." Still, even that dismal possibility might work to his advantage as Canadians might "not wish to see large numbers of our men sent overseas in addition to those already there before US troops begin to be landed on either British or European soil." But after Singapore's stunning capture in mid-February, and with the Vancouver *Sun* demanding the flow of Canadian soldiers to Europe should cease while "the war moves towards Canada across the Pacific," King saw Canada's generals as his greatest immediate foe. He and Stuart argued bitterly on 20 February about home defence and the Pacific. Convinced that Canada's military saw nothing but the war in Europe, King fretted

of west coast air strength. Moreover, Air Vice-Marshal L.F. Stevenson, the RCAF's commander of Western Air Command, had begun planning to transfer planes to Alaska as early as 5 May. But the RCAF, which had objected to the PJBD's April decision because it seemed "to place upon Canada the onus of providing re-enforcement [sic] in the event on an attack upon Alaska," had convinced the CWC on 14 May to restrict warplane transfers only to the Alaskan Panhandle. Therefore when DeWitt's request came, Minister of National Defence for Air C.G. Power and his staff ruled RCAF squadrons would only go to Annette Island near the Panhandle's southern frontier pending a possible move to Yakutat.<sup>13</sup> DeWitt appealed Power's decision. In temporary command in British Columbia, Stuart advised standing firm. For his part, Power told King the RCAF squadrons should stay at Annette until the "situation developed further and [the] purpose of reported enemy concentrations more clearly indicated." Switching tactics, DeWitt called upon American PJBD member General S.D. Embick to intervene. Embick revealed the scope of Japan's offensive to General Maurice Pope, head of Canada's Joint Staff Mission in Washington DC. Though Pope doubted the situation was so dire, he counselled

Embick to speak to Air Commodore H.V. Heakes. Making pointed references to ABC-22, Embick told Heakes the planes likely would be held at Yakutat only until 8 June. Four hours later Heakes cabled that the squadrons would be on their way to Alaska shortly.<sup>14</sup>

The RCAF's official history argues these "complicated and occasionally irascible negotiations" might have been avoided had Canada been kept "fully in the intelligence picture." This greatly overstates the case. Certainly America's military had not revealed all it knew about Japan's intentions, but between 18 and 30 May it had sent Canada four major messages outlining enemy plans. The problem was not a shortage of timely information, only that Canadian officers did not believe American threat assessments. On 28 May, questioning American steadiness and intelligence-gathering abilities, Pope concurred with a British assertion that the USN was overly anxious about the Pacific.<sup>15</sup> Canada's military confidently had expected its new home defence emphasis would defeat DeWitt's request. But King declined to support his military again. First, on 1 April Roosevelt had indicated the Aleutians could be a vital land

Prime Minister King (left) meets with US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill at the Quebec Conference in August 1943. Standing at the back are (l.-r.) General Henry Arnold, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, General Sir Alan Brooke, Admiral Ernest King, General Sir John Dill, General George Marshall, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, Admiral William Leahy.



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LCMSDS Photograph Collection

bridge if the Soviets allowed American bombers to use Siberian bases to attack Japan's home islands. But with American forces heavily engaged elsewhere, Roosevelt had noted he "might have to look to Canada for assistance in securing Alaska and the Aleutians." Then on 15 April, when Roosevelt had accentuated Alaska's vulnerability to attack, King had replied he might be able to send forces to Alaska "later on." Moreover, under-secretary at the Department of External Affairs (DEA) since Skelton's death in January 1941, had told King in March that not every allied nation had to make its major military effort against Germany. For Robertson, an active Canadian role in Alaska might balance a politically worrying American presence in Canada's northwest on projects like the Alaska Highway.<sup>16</sup> Writing to a friend, King argued that as Canada might require assistance to defend British Columbia:

Not to be able to send planes and ships into American territory, as for example Alaska, and islands that lie beyond, is to risk much in the way of additional co-operation by the United States in the defence of our country, as well as their own, and to convey to American citizens generally a wholly erroneous impression, especially, where, as of present, they are sending troops and ships and men to the United Kingdom, to Australia, New Zealand and India. This is a very serious ground of misunderstanding to permit to continue for any length of time.<sup>17</sup>

So, while Canadian officers sought to deflect requests for air force assistance, King told his

Norman Robertson (left), the under-secretary of state for external affairs, believed that a Canadian role in Alaska might balance a politically worrying American presence in Canada's northwest on projects like the Alaska Highway. J.L. Ralston, the minister of national defence, also supported the Aleutians operation, but feared the military would make commitments to the US without his full knowledge.

caucus on 27 May Canadian soldiers might be needed in Alaska, adding three days later the Japanese might "get a very considerable foothold on parts of Alaska and even BC."<sup>18</sup> Upon hearing of Japanese air raids upon the eastern Aleutian base of Dutch Harbor on 3 June, though he feared the Canadian public would "be in a state of consternation over the Japanese being able to establish bases in Alaska which would enable them to attack our country and to prepare for its invasion," King felt great relief "to find how completely the thing I have fought for all along has been justified." However, he also lambasted Canadian military commanders:

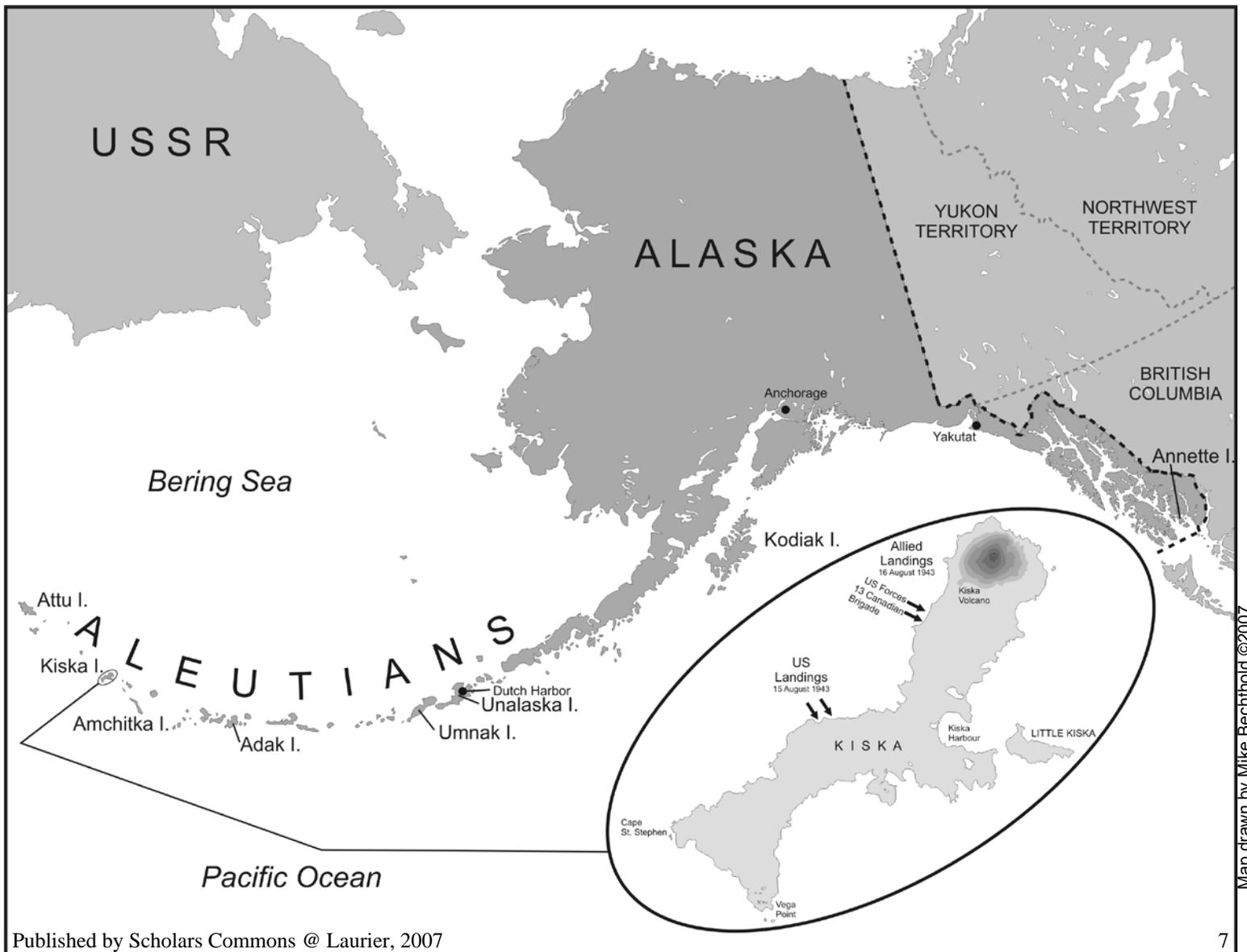
As a matter of fact, our people have left Canada's position very much that of the position at Singapore, basing their view on Hitler being the only one to defeat and the security of outlying parts. BC is pretty much today as Singapore. We have been directing all our attention toward fighting the battle on another front, and left the back door completely opened for the enemy to come in from that side.<sup>19</sup>

King's gloom dissipated once Roosevelt told him on 25 June that Japan's occupation of the western Aleutians was not as a preliminary step towards a major assault upon North America, an opinion also offered by British Field Marshal Sir John Dill when he met with King in Ottawa on 12 July. So, as Japan consolidated its Aleutian

foothold, by September 1942 Canadian planes were raiding Kiska and Attu. In August 1942 the RCN allocated five ships to the Aleutians, telling naval minister Angus Macdonald only as the vessels were about to sail. Though he released the vessels, an indignant Macdonald limited their tactical independence and informed a disappointed USN no additional ships would be forthcoming. Irate, King complained Canadian officers had no right to make such commitments without prior CWC permission. He did not object to modest assistance for Alaska; indeed, on 4 September his government sent three small anti-aircraft units to Alaska. What King wanted the military to understand was that the CWC required the full details of all operations "in which Canadian assistance had been requested."<sup>20</sup>

King's demand for full and timely disclosures figured prominently when Aleutian operations

came up again in May 1943. American forces had crept westward in the Aleutians, seizing islands and building support bases for the eventual recapture of Attu and Kiska. The American services had engaged in often heated arguments amongst themselves and with the British about Pacific operational prospects. The argument reached the boiling point when the Combined Chiefs met at Casablanca in January 1943. Convinced that his officers had overestimated Japan's military capabilities and that plans to use the Aleutians to assault the Kurile Islands might seriously delay the invasion of western Europe, General George C. Marshall watered down a proposal to retake the western Aleutians as soon as possible in favour of "operations to make the Aleutians as secure as possible."<sup>21</sup> Marshall's restrictions and USN concerns about the size of Alaska's garrison was a major problem for DeWitt. Though Alaska's authorized garrison





Canadian Forces Joint Imagery Centre PMR 78-233

Canadian soldiers from Le Régiment de Hull, a French-speaking unit, board US Navy transports bound for Kiska.

was 110,000 soldiers, many of the men were air corps personnel and support troops tasked with maintaining the overstretched communications lines. Though the Joint Chiefs had said this ceiling could be exceeded for approved offensive operations, on 19 April 1943 they offered DeWitt only two additional infantry regiments for action in the Aleutians. Seeking more combat troops, DeWitt told Major-General George Pearkes in Vancouver on 19 April that Attu's invasion was imminent and that an operation against Kiska was likely by summer's end. Removed against his will from a divisional command in Britain in 1942, Pearkes enthusiastically desired a role at Kiska and offered an observer team for Attu.<sup>22</sup>

Stuart did not act until after Pope reported that State Department official John Hickerson had lobbied him on 8 May for a token Canadian army role in the Aleutians. Hickerson's judgment "that such an invitation would be gratefully accepted" was dead on. As the Canadian army's sole combat role since the December 1941 defeat at Hong Kong had been the calamitous Dieppe raid in August 1942, Stuart was now keen to

act in the Pacific. So when Pearkes reported back on 25 May that DeWitt wanted either a battalion-sized garrison force for the western Aleutians or a brigade group ready by 1 August for an amphibious landing, on the morning of 26 May Stuart presented Ralston with five reasons for accepting both suggestions: troops would gain combat experience; army prestige and morale would be enhanced; using home defence conscripts in an active theatre would lessen hostile public opinion towards the so-called "Zombies"; removing enemy forces from American soil would improve relations with Washington; and participation coincided with PJBD continental defence plans.<sup>23</sup>

With no time for Ralston to digest the subtleties of Stuart's case, the minister and the general rushed off to a CWC meeting where Ralston, after a brief introduction, gave way so the CGS could make his pitch. King said very little about Stuart's proposal during the CWC meeting, but in his diary that night he was not so reticent. King was quite displeased Ralston had not brought the matter to the Cabinet table, especially

as the CWC had once more warned the chiefs of staff on 18 May about keeping the government informed of all relevant military information in a timely manner. Perhaps even more galling, King and Stuart had met on 25 May to discuss Canadian participation in the impending invasion of Sicily, and the general had said nothing about the Aleutians. Ever suspicious, King rightly determined that Ralston had not known about the Aleutian initiative, and feared Stuart had initiated contact with DeWitt without Ralston's authorization or prior knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

Yet when the CWC reconvened the next day, King's anger had largely dissipated thanks to the efforts of Norman Robertson. Still concerned by the growing American presence in northwest Canada and the political implications of that presence, Robertson thought sending forces to the Aleutians would deflect Australian demands for a Canadian military role in the south Pacific, enhance Canada's standing in the United States, and counter American activities on Canadian soil. Frequently quoting from

Robertson's carefully phrased memorandum, King conditionally supported an Aleutian role as long as it would not hinder attempts to reinforce Canadian units in Britain. Anxious that another military failure could damage his government disproportionately while success might bring far too little credit, and claiming no knowledge of Anglo-American planning for the Pacific theatre, the prime minister insisted that final approval from the CWC would come only after Roosevelt formally asked for Canadian participation. When Power, whose son had been captured at Hong Kong, thought the garrison option sounded too dangerously like the British request that had led to that embarrassing defeat, Stuart quickly repeated that he had made no prior commitments to the Americans. Appeased, the CWC promised to grant consent only if Roosevelt or Secretary of War Henry Stimson personally invited Canada to send troops to the Aleutians. The matter was anything but settled. Directed to extract the American invitation, Pope complied but complained bitterly it would be "more consonant with our self-interest to let the

Two Canadian soldiers, likely from the Winnipeg Grenadiers, prepare for the Kiska operation. It is interesting to note the mix of Canadian and American gear used by the soldiers. Weapons (Lee-Enfield rifles, Bren Guns), battledress, and ammunition pouches are of standard British-Canadian issue, while helmets, packs, rifle belts and canteens have been drawn from US stores.

LCMSDS Photograph Collection





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This official Canadian Army Photo was released to the press with the following caption:

"Sleeping quarters are a bit cramped, but these Canadian troops, bound for high adventure in the Aleutians, take it as all a part of the show as they await the sailing of their transport vessel northwards towards Kiska where they are now in action against the Japanese."

King had welcomed "every measure to evict the Japanese from the Aleutian Area." Perhaps King had forgotten that meeting; more likely he had chosen to forget so as not to buttress Stuart's position, a position King liked less and less after 27 May. On 28 May a livid Ralston burst into King's office to reveal that some journalists had just informed him Canadian troops were already on Attu. Viewing this as "an alarming development in that it indicated that the army are going ahead with operations without the Cabinet having even sanctioned them," King heartily approved Ralston's decision to call Stuart upon the carpet for this distressing revelation. That evening a browbeaten Stuart explained there was only a small team of observers on Attu, calming King's fears that the

Americans know that we wanted to play our part in the expedition rather than to seek lamely the 'cover' of an invitation from them." Stimson sent the desired invitation on 29 May but insisted that planning had to be handled through military, not governmental, channels. The American army also overcame USN objections that Canadian participation was an obvious attempt to subvert Alaska's garrison ceiling lacking any apparent "great political benefits."<sup>25</sup>

King may have misled his advisers about his knowledge of Allied planning for the war with Japan. He had been present in Washington on 20 May when Roosevelt had discussed Attu (attacked by American forces on 11 May) and had alluded to a possible operation against Kiska. Indeed, when queried by Roosevelt as to what he thought,

army had covertly initiated a full-scale operation without his knowledge. Stuart promised never again to discuss military operations without obtaining political approval, blamed Pearkes for exceeding his instructions, and accepted King's demand that no further Aleutian troop transfers would occur without prior Cabinet approval.<sup>26</sup>

By the next morning, as he pored through communications about the bloody combat ongoing at Attu, King entertained serious second thoughts about sending Canadian soldiers to the Aleutians. "Incensed that our forces should have been drawn into this business without the Minister of Defence or myself," King mused that he would have cancelled "the whole thing" had the matter not already come to the attention of the American army chief of staff, General George

C. Marshall. To abort the initiative now could engender serious problems with Canadian-American military cooperation in the Pacific and might force Stuart's resignation, no small concern as the Quebec-born Stuart was the rarest of Canadian generals, an officer opposed to conscription for overseas service. Hopeful "the whole business has been caught just in time," and believing that doing anything else "would have made the situation worse," King consoled himself that Canadian participation in Aleutian operations would be of "national value" as it would prevent the United States from seeking to take all the credit for safeguarding the North American west coast.<sup>27</sup>

King's acquiescence came at a steep price. Stuart had dropped DeWitt's garrison proposal as administratively unworkable, but when Ralston accepted Stimson's Kiska invitation, he insisted final approval of the actual despatch of the Canadian brigade group, Greenlight Force, would be "subject to the satisfactory completion" of the military plans. Thus, the CWC instructed a horrified Pope to obtain a copy of the formal American directive authorizing Kiska's invasion so it could determine if the operation was likely to succeed. Although the American Joint Chiefs let

Pope examine the document, they firmly declined to release it to Ottawa unless the CWC promised to severely restrict its circulation. This difficult matter was resolved only when the CWC dropped its demand to see the actual document after Pope found the plan militarily acceptable.<sup>28</sup>

Pope was appalled by this tiresome "constant hunting for cover" which he felt cast serious and embarrassing doubts upon American military abilities. Pope was mistaken. After Hong Kong and Dieppe, the CWC was far more concerned about Canadian military competence than any perceived American martial inefficiency. As the 1942 Royal Commission that had studied the Hong Kong debacle had noted 120 soldiers had been despatched to that doomed colony without adequate training, King's government insisted that all Kiska-bound soldiers had to have six months training by 1 August 1943, later revised to four months when Pearkes insisted a six-month rule would greatly impair the brigade's formation.<sup>29</sup> Greenlight Force's administrative history admits one third of every brigade unit had to be replaced thanks to an inadequate army medical boarding system, an abundance of over-age and inefficient officers, and the army's policy of treating home defence formations as

Canadian and US Forces land unopposed on Kiska, 16 August 1943. Hundreds of men and vehicles are visible at the water's edge, while lines of troops can be seen marching in single files up the draws leading from the beach.





LAC C 8021

This grainy photo of the Canadian camp on Kiska captures the bleakness and desolation of the northern terrain.

reinforcement pools rather than as proper units destined one day to see real combat. Le Régiment de Hull, seven officers short when the process began, lost 21 more including its commander in the reorganization. Prior to 9 July the army ordered Pearkes to confirm on three separate occasions that the remaining men were fit for combat. Despite all these efforts, when the troops shipped out on 12 July, 26 insufficiently trained men had to be left behind on the dock. One disgruntled company from the Winnipeg Grenadiers nearly mutinied, numerous men were absent without leave, and some apprehended deserters had to be put aboard their transports at gunpoint.<sup>30</sup>

But the CWC would not authorize Greenlight's final move to Kiska until Major-General J.C. Murchie had personally judged the brigade's readiness and deemed the tactical plan acceptable. Murchie arrived on Adak Island on 6 August, but informed Ottawa all was well only on the evening of 11 August, just hours before the expedition's departure for Kiska. Owing to time zone differences and the need to decode Murchie's detailed message before Ottawa could reply, Pearkes found himself in a most awkward position on 12 August; some ships had already left for Kiska and he still had no authorization to let Greenlight go. Fortunately Ottawa's affirmative answer reached Pearkes before the first Canadians were slated to depart.<sup>31</sup> This final problem left a bitter taste. Pope opined that Murchie's inspection had been a travesty. Either Canada wanted to drive Japan from the Aleutians or it did not; if it did then it should

have accepted American direction. Pearkes complained the embarrassing delay had put him in a "most unfair" position, though he admitted later that he would have sent the troops without authorization rather than risk the expedition to Kiska.<sup>32</sup> Certainly both generals had a point for the CWC had put them in difficult positions, but it is hard to sympathize with Pearkes as he had secretly negotiated with DeWitt to force King to accept a *fait accompli*. One doubts Ralston and King thought they could derail a major military endeavour at the very last moment, but that possibility cannot be ruled out either. It certainly was not one of Canada's finer moments, and clearly illustrated that Canadian civil-military relations in 1943 were at a dangerously low ebb.

The actual mechanisms involved in the difficult and complex task of forming Greenlight Force, which included despatching Marine Corps instructors to Pacific Command to acquaint the Canadians with amphibious warfare techniques, does not seem to have concerned King. His diary contains just one reference to Greenlight's training, when he mistakenly noted on 3 July 1943 that 5,000 Canadian draftees had already left British Columbia for further instruction with American forces already present in the Aleutians. Rather, apprehensive that using draftees in combat for the first time might "change considerably the emotional feeling in the country and the situation in Parliament," King hoped he would be up to the job, emotionally and physically, "to hold the country steady."<sup>33</sup> On 15 August, as the first Canadian and American soldiers began splashing through the bone-

chilling surf at Kiska, King was in Quebec City, playing host to Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff. Excluded from the meetings of real substance, King greeted news of the landings “with intense interest” and desired to broadcast the operation’s significance to the Canadian people. While King, according to Pope, “wished to go to bat” on 15 August, the American military permitted no announcement until all landing operations at Kiska had been completed, a restriction not lifted until 20 August.<sup>34</sup> The lack of Japanese opposition was puzzling though. When King met with Churchill on 16 August, the British leader wondered (correctly) if the Japanese garrison “had left the place.” Unable to imagine that possibility, King believed the Japanese troops, hiding in Kiska’s rocks and caves, “would turn up later.” When Murchie briefed King on 17 August, the general reassured the Prime Minister the splendidly conditioned Canadian soldiers on Kiska “were the best equipped lot of men that had taken part in this war anywhere,” and that Americans officers had praised them for their “skill, daring, courage and efficiency” during the landing and subsequent march inland.<sup>35</sup>

Having risked considerable political capital by sending home defence conscripts to their first

combat zone, King remained keen to make his public announcement even though the USN made clear on 20 August that, given the unopposed landing and the heavy casualties from friendly fire and Japanese booby-traps (four dead Canadians and dozens of American fatalities), it had no wish to publicize the operation. J.W. Pickersgill, one of King’s advisers, also opposed issuing a public statement, maintaining Canadians, expecting to hear “the operation had been something of a major character,” would “experience a sense of keen disappointment” once they knew the more prosaic truth. Pickersgill dropped his objection when King countered they might never again have an opportunity to show the extent to which Canadian forces had cooperated with the United States to protect Alaska. No doubt Pickersgill had seen the power of King’s wisdom or at least the wisdom of acknowledging King’s power! King’s radio statement, made on of 21 August, outlined the operation, mentioned the Canadian units involved and their commanders, emphasized the extensive training the brigade had undergone, and stoutly defended his government’s record on home defence and the conflict in the Pacific.<sup>36</sup>

While Stacey labels Kiska’s invasion a “fiasco” and “a ridiculous anti-climax,” Pearkes and Stuart hoped the operation would act

A Canadian soldier catches a quick catnap before boarding the transport which will take him to Kiska.



LCMSDS Photograph Collection

as a springboard for even more ambitious plans. On 31 May Stuart had initiated "Poppy," a study about employing Canadian troops in the Aleutians, on mainland Asia, and in the southwest Pacific. Furthermore, he had demanded that the staff officers involved in the planning should shun official communications channels and the military's official filing system,<sup>37</sup> truly extraordinary measures that might indicate Stuart was playing a dangerous game just days after his dressing down by Ralston and King. Pearkes was even more reckless. On 5 July, after DeWitt had mentioned moving against the Kuriles Islands in 1944, he and Pearkes had promised to keep talking about Canada's future role in the Pacific. Murchie had cautioned Pearkes that such plans were for the CWC to consider. That warning had no effect. Days later Pearkes stated Kiska was the "first step to Tokyo and that Canada should be prepared to follow it up and stay with it to the end," and Greenlight would "be the forerunner of larger expeditions from Pacific Command."<sup>38</sup> By early August, envisaging three Canadian brigades for the Kuriles, Pearkes naively claimed that he had not the slightest idea what King wanted, and planning had to begin immediately. To speed up the process, Pearkes had suggested wintering Greenlight in the Aleutians, parcelling its units out later to train the Kurile force.<sup>39</sup> Intent on meeting those desires, on 30 August Stuart asked the CWC to retain three brigades in Pacific Command in case the Pacific conflict unexpectedly deteriorated and to serve as reinforcements pools for Europe. As Greenlight's fine performance at Kiska might prompt Washington to ask Canada for further assistance in the Pacific, unless the formation was maintained the CGS pointed out it might take eight months to reform disbanded units, a delay that might prove most embarrassing.<sup>40</sup>

Stuart's ideas had support. Just days before Roosevelt had noted Germany's ultimate defeat would allow the Allies, including Canada, to transfer more military resources to the fight against Japan. Even the RCN, focussed on its brutal battle with Germany, was contemplating extensive Pacific operations so that it might acquire cruisers, aircraft carriers, and a prestigious blue water fleet status.<sup>41</sup> H.L. Keenleyside of the DEA also advocated a wider Canadian role in the Pacific. A "northern nationalist" who believed Canada's future "lay in the responsible development of the northern

frontier," Keenleyside had been struck by the sheer scale, intensity, and permanence of the American effort in Canada's northwest. Worried 46,000 static Canadian troops in the region could not balance the more dynamic American presence, Keenleyside wanted a visible part in north Pacific operations to demonstrate Canada deserved a real voice in determining a prostrate Japan's postwar future.<sup>42</sup> King, however, was in no mood to accept any more military advice. When the CWC discussed potential participation in Kurile operations on 8 September, King dispensed with the army's plans. Although accepting the need to retain adequate reserves in Pacific Command for unexpected eventualities, King rebuked the military for seeking substantial commitments when Canada was heavily engaged in Europe. But after Ralston defended Stuart, the ministers declined to make any decision. When the matter came up again on 12 October, King said little as Ralston and Stuart quarrelled about Greenlight Force. Ralston suggested leaving a small force behind in the Aleutians over the winter to represent Canada's continued interest in the north Pacific, but Stuart pushed for the entire brigade to be returned to Canada for retraining for possible future operations. The ministers agreed. As Power put it, the period of active north Pacific operations was over and all the soldiers should come home by January 1944.<sup>43</sup>

Canada's mixed record of involvement in Aleutian operations strongly influenced King's attitude towards the Pacific conflict until Japan's surrender in 1945. On 1 December the Canadian leader noted in his diary that Roosevelt and Churchill had gone too far by publicly announcing Japan would be stripped of its colonies at the war's end. This declaration would leave Japan little choice but to keep fighting, which might mean Canada coming "into the war against Japan on a larger scale than has been intended." Just over a month later, King and Power discussed a possible Canadian contribution to the final invasion of Japan. Power wanted to send 60 RCAF squadrons, but recalling Hong Kong and the Aleutians, King worried most Canadians would be unenthusiastic. Certain "there was really no place for sending any army over the Pacific" and that Canada would "get little credit for anything" it might do from its allies, the war-weary leader reluctantly accepted Canada's "obligation to share" in Japan's defeat.<sup>44</sup>

Determining the extent of Canada's share was not easy. Britain, which wanted Dominion help to recover its lost Asian possessions, sought indications such assistance might be forthcoming. But taking exception to Lord Halifax's public advocacy of a united imperial foreign policy in Toronto in late January 1944, an irate King ordered Power, Robertson, and Privy Council clerk A.D.P. Heeney to draft a response. That document, ready by 10 February and carefully vetted by King, insisted Canada's commitment to the war with Japan would be determined by its status as a Pacific nation, its Commonwealth membership, a desire to defeat Japan, and its "close friendship and common interest with the United States." As a northwestern route across Canada to Japan might become important, it might be "advisable for Canada to play her part in the Japanese war in very close cooperation with the United States, at any rate in certain operational areas."<sup>45</sup> Concerted British and Australian efforts to alter King's mind at a meeting of Commonwealth prime ministers in London in May 1944 failed utterly. King was surprised to discover the British had not been able "to figure out just what was needed" to fight Japan, the result of a bitter battle within Britain's Cabinet between advocates of a strong military effort against Japan and those wanting to speedily rebuild Britain's battered civilian economy. Declining to support Australian Prime Minister John Curtin's demands for improved imperial consultative machinery for the Pacific war and the postwar period, noting neither British nor Canadian plans had been finalized, King refused to sign a statement that the Commonwealth had devised a common strategy to fight Germany and Japan. Adding insult to injury, King declared that as Canadian forces had been cooperating with their American counterparts to secure the north Pacific and the Aleutians, it "might be thought wise in the strategy of war for us to continue in that way and when attacking Japan."<sup>46</sup>

In the end, King's assertion held; despite the strenuous efforts of the British, the RCAF, the RCN, and some Cabinet ministers, most notably navy minister Angus Macdonald, Canada opted to fight in the northern Pacific and to attach an army division to American forces slated to invade Japan in 1945-46. Nor did King relax his control over the process. When Roosevelt suggested deploying Canadian troops to China in March 1945, King indignantly complained

about the President proposing "anything of the kind." Then when the British asked Ottawa in August 1945 to let the Canadian division serve in an imperial corps with British and Australian forces, the army, which had begun equipping its troops with American weapons and adapting them to American command systems, declined. When Japan surrendered in mid-August, Canada summarily rejected two British requests to include Canadian units in the recapture of Hong Kong and a Commonwealth occupation force for Japan.<sup>47</sup> Canada's Pacific war was over.

King had never forgotten the Kiska episode, though his recall of events altered with the passage of time. In May 1943 his ire had been directed, and properly so, at Stuart and Parkes for their unauthorized discussions with DeWitt. Yet in a bitterly reflective moment on 16 January 1945, a tired prime minister asserted Canada had often got into trouble over the course of the war because of the overzealous conduct of some officials in the Department of External Affairs and the Department of National Defence. Certain "we are getting a certain kind of bureaucracy working out these things [policies] amongst themselves," King was amazed Robertson "does not see the terrible import of anything of the kind." In particular, King blamed Keenleyside for having got Canada "into the Kiska expedition business," though the diary offers no further explanation for this harsh and mistaken judgement.<sup>48</sup> In fact, Keenleyside had not initiated the despatch of Canadian troops to Kiska in the summer of 1943, though he had lobbied King in July 1943 to follow up the Kiska attack by participating in more American-led operations in the north Pacific. Certainly King knew he possessed the capacity for making mistakes, as he made clear on 1 January 1902:

This journal is strictly private, and none should look upon its pages save with reverent eyes, and a heart that can abide with silence, for its is the story of a human life, its ambitions, its beliefs, its failures & its broken achievements, all of which may be right or wrong, none of which are without their influence, and purpose for all time.<sup>49</sup>

King's admission of the possibility of failure and error links him to the rest of humanity, for as J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan's creator, has commented, the "life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story, and writes another; and his humblest hour is when he compares the volume

as it is with what he vowed to make it.”<sup>50</sup> After getting their chance to read King’s fascinating diaries, Canadians might agree with Barrie.

### Notes

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4. C.P. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict: A History of Canadian External Relations. Volume 2: 1921–1948* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 275. See also Roger Sarty, *The Maritime Defence of Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 1996); and Galen Roger Perras, *Franklin Roosevelt and the Origins of the Canadian-American Security Alliance, 1933–1945: Necessary But Not Necessary Enough* (Westport: Praeger, 1998).
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20. Diary, 25 June and 12 July 1942, King Papers, LAC; CWC minutes, 26 August 1942, RG2 7C, LAC; and Privy Council Order PC 7995, 4 September 1942, Minutes and Orders in Council, 1867–1959, RG2 1, vol. 1520, file 2639G, LAC. Force D's ships guarded Alaskan convoys until 30 October 1943; W.A.B. Douglas, Roger Sarty, and Michael Whitby, *No Higher Purpose: The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, 1939-1945 Volume II, Part 1* (St. Catharines: Vanwell, 2002), 331–371.
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