

# Alaska Territorial Guard

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The **Alaska Territorial Guard (ATG)** or **Eskimo Scouts** was a military reserve force component of the US Army, organized in 1942 in response to attacks on American soil in Hawaii and Alaska by Japan during World War II. The ATG operated until 1947. 6,368 volunteers who served without pay were enrolled from 107 communities throughout Alaska in addition to a paid staff of 21, according to an official roster<sup>[1]</sup>. The ATG brought together for the first time into a joint effort members of these ethnic groups: Aleut, Athabaskan, European American, Inupiaq, Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Yupik, and most likely others. In later years, all members of some native units scored expert sharpshooter rankings<sup>[2]</sup>. Among the 27 or more women members were at least one whose riflery skills exceeded the men<sup>[3]</sup>. The ages of members at enrollment ranged from 80 years old<sup>[4]</sup> to as young as twelve<sup>[5]</sup> (both extremes occurring mostly in sparsely populated areas).



Map showing the locations of Alaska Territorial Guard units (with membership counts), major military bases, and evacuated Aleutian villages

One first-hand estimate states that around 20,000 Alaskans participated, officially or otherwise, in ATG reconnaissance or support activities<sup>[6]</sup>.

The ATG served at least two vital strategic purposes to the entire Allied effort during World War II:

- They safeguarded the only source of the strategic metal platinum in the Western Hemisphere against Japanese attack<sup>[7]</sup>.
- They secured the terrain around the vital Lend-Lease air route between the United States and Russia.

In addition to official duties, ATG members are noted for actively and successfully promoting racial integration within US military forces<sup>[8][9]</sup>, and racial equality within the communities they protected<sup>[10]</sup>.

Several former members of the ATG were instrumental in achieving Alaska Statehood in 1959, as members of the Alaska Statehood Committee and/or delegates to the Alaska Constitutional Convention.

In 2000 all ATG members were granted US veteran status by law, finally acknowledging the contribution of these American heroes, a surprising number of whom are still living<sup>[11]</sup>. But efforts to find the surviving ATG members and assist them through the application process have been stymied by years of bureaucratic evasiveness and a generally neglectful attitude among those that have benefited most from their sacrifice<sup>[11]</sup>.

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## Conditions leading up to the ATG

Before World War II, Alaska was regarded by US military decision makers as too distant from the contiguous United States to effectively protect, and of little strategic importance<sup>[12]</sup>.

"...the mainland of Alaska is so remote from the strategic areas of the Pacific that it is difficult to conceive of circumstances in which air operations therefrom would contribute materially to the national defense." - General Malin Craig, US Army Chief of Staff, November 1937<sup>[13]</sup>

This stands in marked contrast to the attitudes of US military leaders during the Cold War immediately after World War II:

"...as I continue to correspond and to talk with people throughout the United States and the Department of Defense, they too can see clearly the importance of these two battalions which you make up. The real honest-to-God and real-world first line of defense in Alaska ... nearer our opponent, Communist Russia, than any other armed troops in the United States." - General James F Hollingsworth, Commanding General, US Army Alaska (USARAL), February 1971 <sup>[14]</sup>

True to the earlier viewpoint, the US Army reassigned all Alaska National Guard units out of Alaska to Washington State in August 1941<sup>[15]</sup>. Alaska was now without military reserves or any form of Home Guard. In the face of an encroaching enemy, the defense of nearly 34,000 miles (55,000 km) of US coastline was left to the best efforts of unorganized local citizens and already overworked seasonal laborers.

That enemy was demonstrating a definite interest in taking Alaska. In the early months of 1942, a Japanese Navy reconnaissance unit was caught on film making detailed surveys of Alaska coastline.

Enemy combatants strode unopposed onto American soil and made inquiries among the populace about the local economy. <sup>[16]</sup> Enemy aircraft and submarine sightings were common, inspiring great fear among the locals<sup>[17]</sup>, and culminating in the raid on Dutch Harbor and the occupation of the Aleutian Islands of Attu, Kiska and Adak that June.

## Creation of the ATG

By the time of the Dutch Harbor bombing, a Major Marvin R Marston had submitted a new plan to defend the entire Alaska coast by enlisting the local citizens<sup>[18]</sup>. He had conceived this plan while visiting Saint Lawrence Island and contemplating the fate of the locals he'd met<sup>[19]</sup>. Marston's proposal finally met with favor when word of it got to Alaska territorial governor Ernest Gruening<sup>[20]</sup>. Gruening had sought to organize a new guard for Alaska, including every able man and boy, since he got word that the US Army would reassign the Alaska National Guard<sup>[15]</sup>.

Motivated by the recent Dutch Harbor attack, the Alaska Command assigned Major Marston and Captain Carl Schreibner within days to serve as military aides to Governor Gruening. Shortly after, Gruening and Marston flew a

chartered plane to begin setting up units of the new **Alaska Territorial Guard (ATG)**. This included one of the most strategically important sites in all Alaska, a tiny mining town called Platinum -- the only source of that strategic metal in all the Western Hemisphere. <sup>[21]</sup>

The enrollment drive continued into early 1943, the organizers travelling in all kinds of weather and by every available mode of transport, including plane, boat, snowmobile, foot, and the most reliable means in the region, dogsled. When a promised plane failed to arrive after a week, Major Marston set out by dogsled on an epic 680-mile (1,090 km) trip around the Seward Peninsula, during the coldest winter in 25 years<sup>[22]</sup>. He survived by foregoing standard military survival training in favor of the native methods of his Eskimo guide, Sammy Mogg<sup>[23]</sup>.

Thanks to Marston and Mogg's heroic effort, the **ATG** stood as a first line of defense for the terrain around the Lend-Lease route from America to Russia, against attack by Japan and the Axis Powers. This vital lifeline allowed the US to supply its Russian ally with essential military aircraft<sup>[24]</sup>. This lifeline had proven to be crucial to Russia's survival during Hitler's Operation Barbarossa<sup>[1]</sup>.

## Organization of the ATG

### Authority

The **Alaska Territorial Guard (ATG)** was organized in June 1942 under the authority of the office of the territorial governor, Ernest Gruening, who served as Commander-In-Chief. All members took an oath to obey the Governor's orders. The governor was directly supported by the **ATG** Adjutant General, J P Williams. Headquarters was in the territorial capital, Juneau.

### Mission

The mission of the **ATG** was to play a defensive role for the entire coast of Alaska<sup>[25]</sup>. Offensive action was the responsibility of the Pacific Theatre commanders, operating from large bases at Dutch Harbor, Cold Bay and Anchorage.

Explicit within the **ATG** mission was that of protecting the terrain around the American terminus of the Lend-Lease air route to Russia on which warplanes were flown from Great Falls, Montana to Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, Canada, then to Ladd Field, Alaska (now Eielson AFB) and on to Nome. Here, Russian pilots flew the planes on to their intended use, combat against Hitler's Third Reich. <sup>[24]</sup>

### By Date

The Alaska Territorial Guard operated from its inception in June 1942<sup>[26]</sup> until it was officially disbanded on 31 March 1947<sup>[27]</sup>.

### By Geographic Area

The Territory of Alaska was divided vertically by the 156th Parallel<sup>[28]</sup> into Eastern and Western Areas. To the Eastern Area was added Southwest Alaska, including the Aleutian Islands, which had been evacuated of non-combatants<sup>[29]</sup>.

The Western Area had a Field Headquarters in Nome, with the offices of the Commander, Quartermaster, Instructors, Public Relations Officer and Chaplains. Other field staff were located in Anchorage, Koyuk, Selawik and Gambell (on Saint Lawrence Island, where Major Marston first conceived his plan).

The Eastern Area was headquartered in Juneau and held the offices of Property Officer (a role filled by the Adjutant

General) and Instructors. Field staff were assigned to Glacier Highway, |, |, Palmer, | and Sitka.

## By Ethnic Group

The **Alaska Territorial Guard** was drawn from 107 communities and from these ethnic groups: Aleut, Athabaskan, European American, Inupiaq, Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Yupik, and probably more.

## By Rank

The **ATG**, being organized by US Army officers<sup>[30]</sup>, made use of the same US Army rank structure, with these exceptions:

- Throughout the duration of the **ATG**, no member rose above the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, including the Adjutant *General*.
- The designation "Private" appears to have been little used, though most members were in fact of Private rank.<sup>[1]</sup>

## By Workload and Pay

The 21 staff officers were all full-time, paid positions (except for the governor, whose **ATG** duties were in addition to his regular office and without added salary). All other positions were strictly part-time volunteer, without pay.

## By Sex

That total includes at least 27 **ATG** members who were women. Most women served as nurses at the field hospital in Kotzebue, although at least one woman served the **ATG**'s primary mission alongside the men. Laura Beltz Wright of Haycock is also noted for being the best sharpshooter in her company, scoring 98% bulls-eyes. She was chosen Queen of Fairbanks in a beauty contest, an honor her daughter later shared. One of her sons rose to become an airline vice president. <sup>[3]</sup>

## By Age

The age of **ATG** members at enrollment ranged from 80 years old<sup>[31]</sup> to as young as twelve<sup>[20][5]</sup>, even though official regulations put the minimum age at sixteen.

## By Number

All told, there were 6,389 members of the **Alaska Territorial Guard (ATG)**, according to an official roster<sup>[1]</sup>.

## Unofficial tally

Alongside those who served in the **ATG**, many others worked to support them, including food service, providing equipment and supplies to the Quartermaster, repair work, etc. Major Marston put the estimate at 20,000 Alaskans who materially participated in **ATG** activities, in his Western Area alone<sup>[6]</sup>.

## ATG Activities

All **ATG** members except the 21 staff officers served without pay, and had to perform their new **ATG** duties in addition to the often difficult challenges of subsisting in Arctic and extreme marine environments.

The **ATG** trained for and/or actively carried out the following:



elsewhere during World War II.

ATG members were also active in promoting racial equality in their communities, insisting on equal treatment for natives and whites alike at movie theaters, restaurants and other public facilities<sup>[10]</sup>.

## Recent developments

In 2000 Alaska's senior US Senator, Ted Stevens, sponsored a bill ordering the Secretary of Defense to issue Honorable Discharges to all Americans who served in the Alaska Territorial Guard (ATG)<sup>[11]</sup>. Stevens is himself a World War II veteran, flying with the Army Air Corps in China.

This bill, meant to repay a debt of honor long outstanding, was signed into law by President Bush that August. This recognition of the ATG's wartime military service includes retirement and/or survivors' pay and other benefits for many former ATG members, a very timely income boost for many seniors living well below the poverty line.

Unfortunately, no effort was made to find and inform these American heroes of their newly granted rights. Initially there was much disagreement as to whose responsibility it was to seek them out. <sup>[11]</sup>

Compounding the task, many people from this generation grew up without, and still do not own, a telephone. Their primary sources of news have been by radio broadcasts and word-of-mouth, yet not even these methods have been employed to any degree. The advanced age of former members creates an obvious urgency. Add to this the difficulty many will have finding old documents and filling out forms to bureaucratic standards, and the immediate need for a task force of personal assistants is clear. <sup>[11]</sup>

In 2003 Robert A "Bob" Goodman, a retired colonel, took a temporary position with the Alaska Department of Military & Veterans' Affairs (DMVA) to find and assist as many former ATG members as possible. After the position ended that October, Bob continued the work, on his own and funded out of his own pocket. In support of this effort, he founded the Alaska Territorial Guard Organization (ATGO), a 501(c)(3) non-profit, in April 2006. He continues the work with the help of the small, dedicated underpaid and volunteer ATGO staff. To date, they have found and helped obtain an honorable discharge for about 150 ATG members. They estimate there are several hundred of these hardy souls yet to be found. <sup>[11]</sup>

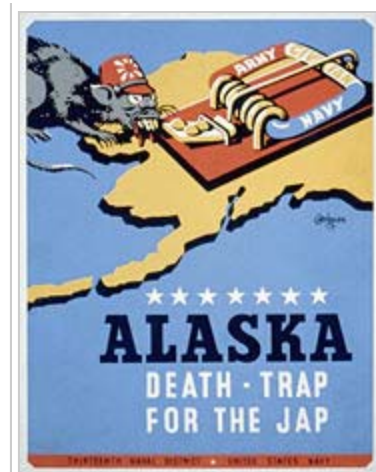
Bob and the ATGO have tirelessly pled the case of the ATG members and spouses with US senators two Alaskan governors, most of the state legislature, the Anchorage Assembly, as well as numerous Alaska Native Regional Corporations and other corporations and foundations.

The response is nearly uniform: "Yes, these people need and deserve help right away, and we'll gladly give you a letter of support, but that's not the kind of need we fund here." <sup>[11]</sup>

## Timeline of ATG-related events

- 1931 - The Imperial Japanese Army invades Manchou (Manchuria), confirming its intent to dominate East Asia and the Pacific.
- 1935 - Billy Mitchell declares Alaska's strategically important, goes unheeded by US military leadership<sup>[52]</sup>. Earlier, Billy Mitchell was court-martialled for advocating the value of military air power.
- 1937 - The US Army officially declines a request for an air base in Alaska<sup>[53]</sup>.
- 1939 - Ernest Gruening is appointed Alaska territorial governor by his friend, US President Franklin D Roosevelt (FDR). Gruening gets four National Guard units organized in the Alaska Territory.
- 1940, Mar - A bill for an air base in Alaska failes to pass in the US House<sup>[13]</sup>.
- 1940, April - Hitler invades Norway and Denmark (whose territory includes Greenland).
- 1940, May - US Congress approves an air base in Alaska<sup>[13]</sup>. Air raids from northern Alaska would help counter any Nazi bases built in Greenland, as a polar projection map will attest).

- 1941, Mar - Marvin Marston is commissioned at the Pentagon as a major with orders to Alaska<sup>[54]</sup>.
- Mid-1941 - Ernest Gruening seeks a new guard organization for Alaska, anticipating the reassignment of the Alaska National Guard<sup>[15]</sup>.
- 1941, August - The US Army reassigns Alaska National Guard soldiers away from Alaska, leaving the state with no military reserves or Home Guard<sup>[15]</sup>.
- 1941, December 7 - The Imperial Japanese Navy bombs the USA at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, sinking most of the US Pacific Fleet. Soldiers' families are ordered evacuated from Alaska<sup>[55]</sup>.
- 1942, Feb-Mar - A Japanese Navy reconnaissance unit is filmed making detailed surveys of the Alaska coastline. Japanese crewmen (enemy combatants) came ashore and questioned the locals about the area. <sup>[16]</sup>
- 1942, Mar - Major Marston realizes the practicality of a 'tundra army' to defend the entire Alaskan coast.
- 1942, Mar - Japanese aircraft are sighted over Saint Lawrence Island<sup>[56]</sup>.
- 1942, Mar/April - Major Marston presents a formal plan for the defense of Alaska shoreline<sup>[57]</sup>.
- 1942, Jun - Japanese forces raid Dutch Harbor and take control of Attu, Kiska and Adak.
- 1942, Jun - The Alaska Command assigns Major Marvin Marston and Captain Carl Schreiber as military aides to Governor Gruening. Gruening and Marston soon embark on a trip to form the first units of the new **Alaska Territorial Guard**<sup>[58]</sup>.
- 1942 - Major Marston (by now known as "Muktuk" after an eating contest with a village headman) opts to make an **ATG** recruiting run by dogsled when a promised plane fails to show up<sup>[59]</sup>.
- 1943, Jan - Major Marston completes his circuit around the Seward Peninsula by dogsled during the coldest winter in 25 years<sup>[22]</sup>. Living by native methods, he continues to travel the Arctic through 1945.
- 1945, August - VJ Day, The Empire of Japan surrenders.
- 1947 - The **Alaska Territorial Guard** is disbanded<sup>[27]</sup>.
- 1966 - The State of Alaska awards a medal to all **ATG** members<sup>[27]</sup>.
- 2000 - US Senator Ted Stevens' (R-AK) bill granting **ATG** members full veteran status is passed into law. Little is done to find and inform surviving **ATG** members and spouses, many of whom relocated numerous times in the intervening 53 years. <sup>[11]</sup>
- 2003 - Robert A "Bob" Goodman, Colonel (Retired), Alaska Air National Guard, takes up the task of finding as many former **ATG** members as possible, to help them apply for recognition as US veterans<sup>[11]</sup>.
- 2006 - Bob Goodman founds the Alaska Territorial Guard Organization, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, to support his efforts on behalf of all former **ATG** members. To date, they have found and helped gain approval for about 150 **ATG** veterans<sup>[11]</sup>.



U.S government poster from WWII

## Noted ATG members

- Atwood, Robert - Editor and publisher of the Anchorage Times, **ATG** lieutenant, Statehood Committee chair
- Egan, William A - territorial & state representative, **ATG** corporal, Constitutional Convention president, state governor
- Geist, Otto William - Pioneer Alaskan archaeologist, promoter of Alaskan artist Florence Nupok Malewoktuk, **ATG** major and quartermaster<sup>[60]</sup>. The University of Alaska Museum's main building is named for him.
- Gruening, Ernest - Friend of FDR, territorial governor, **ATG** founder<sup>[61]</sup>, Statehood Committee member, US Senator
- Heurlin, Magnus Colcord "Rusty" - WPA artist, **ATG** lieutenant, famed Alaskan artist, first art teacher at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, influenced fellow artist Fred Machetanz
- Ipalook, Fred - Inupiaq native, **ATG** lieutenant, teacher for 39 years<sup>[62]</sup>.
- Ipalook, Percy - Inupiaq native, **ATG** chaplain, territorial & state legislator<sup>[63]</sup>, Statehood Committee member
- Johnson, Maurice Theodore - **ATG** member, Constitutional Convention delegate
- Jorgensen, Holger - **ATG** sergeant, commercial airline pilot<sup>[64]</sup>
- Knight, William Wellington - **ATG** member, Constitutional Convention delegate

- Lisbourne, Daniel - **ATG** member, mayor
- Marston, Marvin R "Muktuk", Major, US Army - **ATG** organizer of Western Alaska, Constitutional Convention delegate, author of the book **Men of the Tundra: Alaska Eskimos at War**
- McNealy, Robert J - **ATG corporal**, Constitutional Convention delegate
- Mogg, Samuel Snell "Sammy" - **ATG** lieutenant, guide who led Major Marston by dogsled on an epic 680-mile (1,090 km) mid-winter organizing circuit around the Seward Peninsula.
- Nolan, James - **ATG** member, Constitutional Convention delegate
- Peratrovich, Frank J - Tlingit native; **ATG** captain; mayor; territorial & state representative; senator & senate president; Statehood Committee member; Constitutional Convention first vice president
- Reader, Peter L - **ATG** member, Constitutional Convention delegate
- Schreibner, Carl, Captain, US Army - **ATG** organizer of Eastern Alaska
- Wright, Laura Beltz - **ATG** member, best sharpshooter in her company, shooting 98% bulls-eyes, former Queen of Fairbanks

## See also

Former United States special operations units Gutierrez, Fermin "Rocky"

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