

SB

90

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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Charlie Huggins
Senator

24-LSO459\Y

SPONSOR STATEMENT

SENATE BILL 90

Alaska Territorial Guard Day

Senate Bill 90 would declare October 18 as Alaska Territorial Guard Day.

December 7, 1941, Japanese forces bombed Pearl Harbor in a surprise attack on the United States Navy. Around six months later, the Japanese seized the islands of Attu and Kiska and bombed Dutch Harbor killing forty-three Americans. Soon after, Governor Ernest Gruening was assigned two military aides to assist him in forming the Alaska Territorial Guard in order to protect and defend the US Territory that was Alaska. The first, Captain Carl Schneibner, was responsible for organizing the Guard in the Interior. The second, Major Marvin "Muktuk" Marston, was responsible for organizing the Guard on the Bering and Arctic Coasts. These two men went to their recruiting areas with a message from the President of the United States and the Governor of Alaska, asking for help in defending the Alaska Territory. Their combined efforts resulted in a total number of about 6,500 predominately Alaskan Native men signing up to defend their Territory, Country and the general good of all mankind. Dressed in WWI uniforms and shouldering Enfield rifles, the Alaska Territorial Guard succeeded in defending Alaska until its disbandment in the month of March 1947. After the disbandment, Gov. Gruening included members into the regular Alaska National Guard as scout battalions.

Until the year of 2004, these valiant volunteers had not been recognized as veterans. On October 18, the first members of the Alaska Territorial Guard were recognized by the United States Army as Veterans. This bill is dedicated to the memory of those who served so bravely for our great state.

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Letter of Intent

CS SENATE BILL 90 (STA)

February 18, 2005

It is the intent of the Alaska State Legislature in passing this bill to establish October 18 of each year to acknowledge and commemorate the service of members of the Alaska Territorial Guard in defense of Alaska and the United States during World War II.

On December 7, 1941, Japanese forces bombed Pearl Harbor in a surprise attack on the United States Navy. Six months later the Alaska islands of Attu and Kiska were seized and Dutch Harbor was bombed by the Japanese. The attack on Alaska resulted in the deaths of 43 Americans.

With the arrival of war, Alaska's National Guard was pressed into federal service leaving most of the Interior and Western coastal regions of the territory with inadequate protection. Alaska Governor Ernest Gruening sought and received permission from Congress to organize a volunteer civilian militia, thus the Alaska Territorial Guard was formed.

Captain Carl Schneibner and Major Marvin "Muktuk" Marston were responsible for organizing the guard in the Interior Region and the Bering and Arctic Regions, respectively. The two men went to their regions with a recruitment message from the President of the United States and the Governor of Alaska. The people of Alaska responded.

The guard was made up of some 6,500 Alaskans who were predominantly Alaska Natives and served in defense of Alaska from 1942, through World War II, until 1947. On October 18, 2004, the first members of the Alaska Territorial Guard were recognized as veterans by the United States Army. It is appropriate that the State of Alaska commemorate the service of the Alaska Territorial Guard.

This bill is dedicated to the memory of those who served so bravely for our great state.

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With the arrival of war, Alaska's National Guard, the 297th Infantry, was pressed into federal service, leaving most of interior and western coastal regions of the territory with inadequate protection. Alaska Gov. Ernest Gruening received permission from Congress to organize a volunteer civilian militia to protect the vast terrain of Alaska.

Thus the Alaska Territorial Guard, or ATG, was formed. In doing so, Gruening created a shining example of true home security, wherein every able-bodied civilian not central to the war effort would be provided firearms and help aid in th protection of the United States.

Formation of the Alaskan Guard

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As regular U.S. forces flooded into the Aleutian Islands to repel the Japanese attack, the role of the Alaska Territorial Guard in protecting the rest of Alaska and maintaining the polar supply route to the Soviet Union—through which supplies and aircraft were moved to battle Japan's ally Germany—became even more urgent.

The Alaska Territorial Guard was supplied with WW1 uniforms and Enfield rifles. And though ammunition was sometimes in short supply, the native Alaskans who made up the majority of the ATG—Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts—never wavered in their service.

This "Tundra Army" became the eyes and ears of the U.S. military across the desolate regions of the northwestern frontier. At each village, the local territorial guard was asked to keep watch for unusual people, objects, ships or aircraft and report such instances to the nearest military authority. They were also to maintain community-wide blackouts to offset any Japanese reconnaissance that may be operating in the area and, through the guns supplied them, defend their villages from attack.

In his account of the formation of the ATG, *Men of the Tundra*, Major "Muktuk" Marston ("Muktuk" being an Eskimo word for whale skin and blubber) describes his trip by dog sled through the frozen Seward Peninsula to bring word of the Alaska Territorial Guard to the native people and ask for assistance in helping defend their villages, and nation, from the Japanese.

"The President of the United States and the Governor of Alaska have told me to come and ask your help," Marston would declare to those gathered at the schoolhouse of every village he called upon. "The Japanese have bombed our ships and people at Pearl Harbor. They have dropped their bombs on Alaska at Dutch Harbor. They will come with more bombs. We do not know where they will strike next. ... Will you keep the Japanese out? Will you keep a lookout along your shores? You men who will help your country against the Jap, come forward now and sign your names."

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And in every village Marston visited, the native population was obliged to help in the cause of defense, resulting in 10 percent participation among those eligible for enrollment. Even those of an age and sex not sanctioned at the outset of formation became members. In a time of national defense, it was wisely conceded that such arbitrary parameters would only hinder the formation of an effective homeland guard—considering there were those both elderly and young, male and female, who were quite able to assist in the defense.

In his chronicle *Cruise of the Ada*, Henry Varnum Poor describes the recruitment of two 14-year-old young men into the Alaska Territorial Guard. Poor, an artist with the War Art Program, accompanied Marston on a boat trip along the Bering and Arctic coasts, stopping at villages to recruit members into the ATG. The cruise took the crew of the *Ada* as far as Barrow, the northernmost point of Alaska and location of the final flight of Will Rogers and Wiley Post.

"Two 14-year-old boys came back with the Major to be sworn into the guard and get rifles," Poor writes of their stop at Point Lay, situated along the edge of the Arctic Coastal Plain. "The teacher and all the men had testified that one had seven, the other 10, caribou during the winter, and on that the Major had agreed to make an exception and admit them into the guard. 'If he's big enough to hunt caribou, he can hunt Japs,' was the Major's verdict, and they were proud and happy kids." Gov. Gruening, in his introduction to *Men of the Tundra*, recalls witnessing a youth near the village of Koc carrying a rifle from which hung four ptarmigans. Having winged the arctic grouse with the rifle, and not a shotgun, the young man was enrolled in the guard. He was 12.

Many over the initial age limit were allowed to join as well. Marston mentions his meeting with an 80-year-old half-Eskimo half-Russian man who wanted to be in the ATG. He had lived in Alaska during the time of Russian rule and, when the territory had been ceded to the United States, his family had decided to stay. He too wanted to protect his homeland.

"I want to kill Japs. Many time when we hungry for fish Japs take our fish, and we have not fish," the old man told Marston. "I said, 'Thanks, Paul, that's fine. I am glad you feel that way, but you are a sick man,'" Marston responded. "'I am not sick,' he said, and stood right up saying, 'I'm just resting.' I still didn't want him and I said, 'Paul, you have eyes to shoot with.'"

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"I got the gun, and they had the practice out in the field, on the snow," Wright recalls. "I hit every target but one right the bull's-eye, and I shot the other bull's-eye twice and left the other one vacant ... that is the reason I got 49 out of 50. So I won the target-shooting practice."

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A Sea Change in the Pacific

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With the U.S. Navy maintaining a blockade, the Japanese forces on Attu were cut off from resupply; the mountainous terrain kept them contained on the eastern portion of the island. U.S. troops, among them members of the ATG, pushed the Japanese inward from Holtz Bay, as another contingent fought their way north from Massacre Bay.

On May 29, 1943, surrounded by 15,000 American troops, the 750 remaining Japanese on Attu attempted a counteroffensive. By American bullets and by their own hands, the Japanese forces were whittled to less than 300. American dead numbered 550.

U.S. forces then turned their sights on the island of Kiska, where over 5,000 Japanese soldiers were believed to be huddled. Yet on July 28, hidden by a shroud of fog, the Japanese were able to evacuate and slip through American patrols without detection.

Japanese forces had occupied American soil for more than a year.

Through the remainder of the war, members of the Territorial Guard would maintain their watch over Alaska's frozen shores. They continued their meetings, practiced their drills and kept an eye open for anything suspicious.

But toward the end of the war, about the only thing suspicious in the skies over Alaska came in the form of bomb-laden balloons the Japanese released into the Gulf Stream, hoping to rain destruction and havoc upon the American mainland. This, however, proved to be the death knell of a mortally wounded empire, as most of the 9,000 balloons released by Japanese drifted off course, causing no damage. Many found their way to Alaska, and were retrieved by members of the ATG.

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Throughout those anxious years of the Cold War, these scout battalions maintained their post along the Bering Strait, watching for signs of an enemy intent on occupying American soil. This time, however, it was the Soviet Union for whom the guards watched, visible there across a small ribbon of water. Many assumed that, if the beginning of World War II were to come, it would be an Alaskan scout who would signal the call to arms.

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Yet there's another important aspect to the story of the ATG: the idea that a person armed is a person not so easily subjugated. Through their service in the ATG, native Alaskans became organized and began insisting on the respect and freedom promised by the government they were working to protect.

Through the simple act of becoming armed and organized, the strength these people gained through the ATG began to filter into every other aspect of society. Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts—people who before the formation of the atg had denied the right to even sit where they wanted in a movie theatre—in growing numbers became business owners, legislators and community leaders.

Through the actions of the over 3,000 members of the Alaska Territorial Guard, we are shown a people who bravely answered the call to protect their land, and in doing so gained a greater share of freedom.

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