

Alaska at War

For most of the 1930s Alaska's non-voting delegate to Congress, Anthony Dimond, argued without success that spending money to fortify Pearl Harbor in Hawaii without taking any precautions to defend Alaska was like locking one door of a house and leaving another wide open. He said the territory could be taken "almost overnight by a hostile force", and any effort to recapture Alaska would come at a cost of millions of dollars and thousands of lives.

A future five-star general and commander of the Army Air Forces in World War II Lt. Col. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, became one of the strongest supporters of the need to defend Alaska. It wasn't until the late 1930s that Congress finally acted, approving funds to defend Alaska.



First photos of our attack on Attu, May, 1943

Two years before the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the only military installation in the Alaska territory was the Chilkoot Barracks in Haines, an old Gold Rush facility where the troops had ancient Springfield rifles. Their only transportation was a 52-year-old tug boat with so little power that it couldn't move against a 30-knot headwind on Lynn Canal.

The fortification of Alaska became an urgent national priority after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. People were afraid that Alaska would be used as a stepping stone to attack the mainland. From then on, military issues were a priority for the federal government.



Alaska Territorial Guard Certificate of Service

The war brought the building of major military bases in Anchorage, Fairbanks and across the territory, along with many civilian airfields and other facilities. The building of the Alaska Highway along with other new roads and docks, wharves and facilities also contributed to the greatest period of sudden change in Alaska history. The government spent more than \$1 billion in Alaska during World War II, a time that was both an economic and political turning point.

Military and other government spending replaced fishing and mining as the major Alaska industries. From a high of 153,000 military personnel in 1943, the number dropped to less than 20,000 at the end of the war.

In the early 1950s, the government spent an average of \$350 million per year on defense. In the 1940s, the civilian population climbed from 74,000 to 112,000. Because of the military, Anchorage became the economic capital of Alaska. The new immigrants joined with civic leaders from various towns in a campaign for political equality.

<http://www.akhistorycourse.org/articles/article.php?artID=137>