

## **Alaska's Betrayed Veteran's**

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For a Nation to become great and remain great it becomes necessary for it to remember those who sacrificed, and those who are its heroes.

On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor destroyed almost 90 percent of the Pacific Fleet leaving the entire West Coast from Baja, Mexico to Washington State open to attack from Hirohito's Naval Air Forces and Japanese Marines.

All National Guard Units are activated and the United States Military deploys as many units as possible for the protection of the West Coast, including those National Guard Units in Alaska which were placed in Washington State. The prevailing attitude at the time was that Alaska was regarded by US military decision makers as too distant from the contiguous United States to effectively protect, and of little strategic importance.

However the Japanese were 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 the Alaska coastline. Enemy combatants strode unopposed onto American soil and made inquiries among the populace about the local economy. Enemy aircraft and submarine sightings were common, inspiring great fear among the locals, and culminating in the raid on Dutch Harbor and the occupation of the Aleutian Islands of Attu, Kiska and Adak that June.

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. He had conceived this plan while visiting Saint Lawrence Island and contemplating the fate of the locals he'd met. Marston's proposal finally met with favor when word of it got to Alaska territorial governor Ernest Gruening. 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.

Motivated by the recent Dutch Harbor attack, the Alaska Command assigned Major Marston to serve as military aide 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 at that time of that strategic metal in all the Western Hemisphere.

Marston's 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. He

survived by foregoing standard military survival training in favor of the native methods of his Eskimo guide, Sammy Mogg.

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. This lifeline had proven to be crucial to Russia's survival during Hitler's Operation Barbarossa.

What nobody realised at the time was that the establishment of the Alaska Territorial Guard would have an even greater impact to not only the defence of the Alaska Coast line and territory, but also on the United States Military as a whole.

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. They ranged in age between 12 years old and 80 years old because they were either too young or too old for the draft, and their official total numbers were approximately 6,600 with the unofficial numbers at 20,000. All volunteers, without pay, and with a very minimum of equipment and resources. And a few even saw combat against the Japanese with the retaking of the Japanese occupied Aleutian Islands.

The ATG actively and successfully promoted racial integration in the US Army by proving the worth of native Americans as soldiers within US military forces such as the Navajo, Commanche and Choctaw Code talkers did 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. They were the first to promote the idea of equal rights within the United States and were the pioneers of a civil rights movement that would take root in Black America in the 1960's. There were 27 women within the ATG, and while most served as nurses in the field hospital at Kotzebue, the ATG was also the very first military organization that had a woman assigned to an active field unit. Laura Beltz Wright of Haycock is reputed to have been one of the best shots in the ATG.

While the services of the ATG are too numerous to mention here, it must be noted that the service of the 6,000 plus members and their legacy to not only the State of Alaska, but the United States of America is one of brave sacrifice and heroic proportions unsurpassed by any organization as ethnically diverse as the ATG.

With the disbanding of the Alaska Territorial Guard two years after the end of the war in 1947, its members quietly returned to their lives in the 107 villages and towns of Alaska never expecting to be recognised for their efforts or for a job well done. But in 1966 the Alaska State Legislature in an effort to correct a grievous error ordered the striking and awarding of a Medal to all ATG members to honor their service to both their state and to their country.

And here is where it all falls apart.

Thirty-four years after the Alaska State Legislature ordered the creation of the ATG Service Medal and its awarding to ATG members in 1966, in the year 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). Stevens was himself a World War II veteran, flying with the Army Air Corps in China. The bill was signed into law by President Bush that August.

Despite this, there was a disagreement as to who would actively seek out the former members of the ATG and help them apply for the Military Discharge Certificates which would then put them and their surviving spouses in line for benefits from both the State of Alaska and the Federal Government due to World War II services veterans. Many of the members of the ATG went on to serve honorably in the National Guard for over twenty years, and while there seems to be a major disagreement with regard to the ATG service these individuals have received their retirement benefits, but there is contention on the issue of additional benefits due to them and benefits due from the State to those who served exclusively in the ATG. In 2003 in order to resolve the issue, the Alaska State Legislature assigned the task of tracking down the surviving ATG members and their spouses to the Alaska Adjutant General Craig Campbell and the Department of Military and Veteran's Affairs, who then passed the task onto his Assistant Adjutant General, Army Brigadier General Thomas Katkus, and temporarily hired retired USAF Col. Robert Goodman to establish a pilot program to seek out and find former members of the ATG and their surviving spouses.

Goodman immediately began to run into difficulties achieving his goals. When he went to then AG Campbell to discuss funding for the project, Goodman states that AG Campbell told him that he had no money. Goodman further alleges that when he suggested that a supplemental budget request be filed, Campbell stated to him; "that's not one of my priorities".

Yet in an excerpt from a letter dated 4 October 2004 from Acting Secretary of the Army R.L. Brownlee to Ted Stevens stated the following;

On September 30, 2005, the U.S. Army Human Resources Command (HRC) officials spoke with senior representatives from the Alaska National Guard and the Department of Veteran's Affairs. All parties agreed that the Army would immediately process the 23 ATG applications currently in HRC's possession. Within two weeks HRC will send discharge certificates for deserving members to the Alaska National Guard headquarters.

To quickly evaluate the records of the remaining surviving members of the ATG, the Alaska National Guard will verify their ATG service and forward to HRC their applications for recognition; HRC will give these applications priority processing. The Alaska National Guard's goal for completing the verification process for surviving ATG members is January 1, 2005.

DMVA failed to initiate anykind of workable program that would achieve the goal of registering all of the ATG members as had been agreed by phone conference between the HRC and the DMVA.

In all fairness, when NEWSNETUSA Media contacted Lt. Governor Campbell's office to ask ask him the following questions based upon the documentation that had been forwarded to us from Bob Goodman, a message was left and his representative contacted us. Unfortunately Lt. Governor Campbell was not available due to famly concerns out of state, but we were told that they would try very hard to track him down and have him call us here to respond to the following questions.

- 1.) During your tenure as the Adjutant General it was your task to see to it that all surviving ATG members and their surviving spouses be registered to recieve Military Discharges. Why didn't this happen?
- 2.) Bob Goodman of the Alaska Territorial Guard Organization claims that despite his best efforts both you and your Assistant AG Thomas Katkus apparently showed nothing but indifference and disinterest in the plight of the former members of the ATG and their surviving spouses and his efforts to see to it that members of the ATG and their surviving spouses were registered. He also apparently filed numerous ethics complaints with the Alaska State Attourney General's office. You reaction please.
- 3.) He further claims that it was apparent that the DMVA was obviously making every effort to not pay the recognised veterans bennefits due to them from the state of Alaska, nor were they interested in seeing to it that they received the bennefits due to them from the Veterans Administration in the form of survior bennefits. If this is true was it due to the amount of money that it involved?
- 4.) In several documents presented to NEWSNETUSA he stated that when approach by him about funding, you told him that your department didn't have the money to accomplish the mission and when he suggested that you submit a supplemental budget request you stated that, "it wasn't one of your priorities." Would you clarify this please.
- 5.) When the Obama Administration made the announcement that a reinterpretation of the law was made and that ATG service would no longer count as military Service, to your knowledge did some one from the State of Alaska contact the Obama Administration to complain or bring this directly to their attention?

As of press time we have not yet received any answer from the Lt. Governor Campbell and were forced to go with this story as is. We will however give the Lt. Governor the opportunity to respond to these questions in a follow up article planned for the near future.

Bob Goodman's limited success in finding and registering members of the ATG is due in large part to his realization that because of the oral traditions of the native Alaskans there was a possibility he would be able to get information from them by going to local a Rendevous where native arts and products were sold and by talking to the older natives present.

His initial successes in finding members of the ATG was due in large part to the cooperation of these individuals who were able to give him names and relay the paperwork back to their villages for the signatures.

Another source and in Bob Goodman's words, "a gold mine of information" was Helna Williams, a native of Akiak. Bob met her on a visit to the hospital where she was recovering from infections to her knees after knee surgery.

He had initially been told that her husband Timothy was a member of the ATG and a retired Master Sergeant of the Alaska National Guard prior to his death, and wanted to get the information so that he could file the paperwork on her behalf. During the course of his meeting with her he discovered that her knowledge of the other members and their surviving spouses of the ATG within her village and another village not far from Akiak was extensive. This gave him even more to work with.

As a side note to Bob Goodman's meeting with Helna Williams, in a conversation with NEWSNETUSA Media, he stated that he had obtained the Discharge Certificate for Timothy Williams and filed the paperwork for Helna to receive payment of the benefits due to her. As of the publication of this story she had yet to receive those benefits from either the State of Alaska or the Federal Government.

In a document received from Bob Goodman, founder and head of the Alaska Territorial Guard Organization (ATGO), dated July 23, 2007, he specifically outlines those benefits lost to the surviving members of the ATG, and to their surviving spouses due to the apparent inaction of the DMVA.

1. Approximately 6,600 ATG members have been due a federal discharge under Section 8147, Public Law 106-259 since AUGUST 9, 2000 and which establishes their service category as a World War II veteran.
2. The State of Alaska did not establish a plan to apply for these discharges.
3. A pilot program was tried in July 2003. Of the 6,600 members, less than 200 have received discharges. Only 56 were initiated by the state DMVA.

#### BENEFITS LOST

1. At the least, each family of a deceased member of the ATG would be due a U.S. Flag, a burial marker, and a burial allowance.
2. ATG members surviving as of August 9, 2000 and who had retired from other military service would be due an increase in their retirement pay as well as back pay to that date.
3. ATG members who had retired from civil service, state service, or any union occupation which gives additional credit in retirement pay for active military service have lost that money due since August 2000.

4. Surviving spouses of ATG members who died before August 9, 2000, who are in a low income category and who qualify for widow's benefits up to \$9,000.00 per year or more under the Veteran's Administration, have lost that money due since August 9, 2000.

5. The approximately 750 surviving spouses of ATG members who died after August 9, 2000 and who are in a low income category and who qualify for widow's benefits up to \$9,000.00 per year or more under the Veteran's Administration, have lost that money since their husband's death.

This loss to the state of approximately 5.5 million dollars a year is the result of the State of Alaska, Department of Military and Veteran's Affairs, not having a comprehensive plan in place to emphasize the need to obtain these federal discharges, a follow-on plan to obtain a correction of records when necessary, or a definitive and controlled follow-on plan to refer these surviving spouses to the Veteran's Administration for assistance.

During the writing of this story the most obvious thing that has been seen by us here at NEWSNETUSA Media is that there is much much more to this story than can be covered here. It seems it is one of very quiet and prevalent mistrust and prejudice against the Native Alaskans who stood up and met the challenge of defending both their homes and their nation from invasion. On a national level it is also one of the United States government seeing an opportunity to once again discount the service of a group of veterans who's contributions to both the defense of this nation, its history and social change which are far more reaching than any other ethnic group in America. The Alaska Territorial Guard and its members were actually the pioneers of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, and it was their example that paved the way for Martin Luther King to Achieve equality for Black America as well as Native Americans everywhere.

More remarkable is that the Obama Administration, with no real logic in its actions has deliberately failed to understand just how important the Alaska Territorial Guard and its members were to the protection and social history of the United States. Yet at the same time it must be said that over the years the United States Government has failed all of its veterans who served their nation selflessly and were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice if needs be. Instead, the Administration seized an opportunity to show its disdain of the most important heroes of this nation, the American Military Veteran, and in the process its disdain of the Alaska Territorial Guard, its heroism and sacrifice. At the same time the question must be asked; how did the Obama Administration become aware of this situation in the first place?

Known as the Eskimo Scouts, all of the Native members of the ATG have shown a quiet dignity inherent to their culture and quietly accepted the injustice to themselves slowly accepting the inevitable death and indignity being forced upon them by an uncaring and indifferent government. ...Is this the legacy we want to leave our nation?