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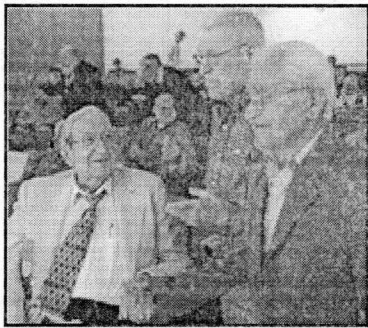
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'Castner's Cutthroats' recall Aleutian campaign in World War II

James Halpin/Anchorage Daily News

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- In the early days of World War II, while most of the world's attention was focused on Europe and the South Pacific, a small band of scouts began patrolling the reaches of the far-flung Aleutian Islands to spy on invading Japanese forces.

Hard men, many of them Alaska Natives with skill as rugged outdoorsmen, formed the base of the unit that would later be known as "Castner's Cutthroats" - a tribute to their rough existence and appearances. Once there were 66 of them. Only

three are still alive.

Those three met at the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center on Sunday afternoon to tell their tales at the unveiling of a yearlong display, in collaboration with the Alaska Veterans Memorial Museum, to honor the unit and Aleutian campaign.

About 100 people showed up to hear Earl Acuff, William "Billy" Buck and Ed Walker tell about their service in the 1st Combat Intelligence Platoon, the creation of Col. Lawrence Castner, an officer who saw the need for a sly reconnaissance unit in the state's far reaches. At the gathering, the men - along with Buck Delkette, who recently died - were awarded the Alaska Veterans Honorable Service Medal.

The unit's first members were miners, trappers and Alaska Natives who had no combat training. But they knew the land, how to live off it unaided and how to move about undetected - a perfect fit for spying on the Japanese.

"I think we learned more from them than they did from us because they had all this

experience in Alaska," said Acuff, 90, a Lower 48 officer who led the men. "The scouts were all very talented outdoorsmen. They could live and operate anywhere."

To the regular Army, the windswept Aleutians were miserable: a cold, wet, hilly land without fixed airstrips, roads or electricity. But the Cutthroats excelled.

"We learned Morse code and surveying," said Walker, also 90. "We didn't need to learn how to feed ourselves. We all knew how to do that."

The scouts fed on wild birds such as ptarmigan, ducks and geese, but their favorite dish was king crab. The soldiers didn't have crab traps. Instead, they would dive out of skiffs and pluck the crustaceans from the seabed by hand, he said.

When asked whether the unit had encountered any Japanese forces, Acuff said, "We killed a lot of them," to laughter from the audience.

He described at times getting pressed to capture prisoners of war. The only problem was whenever the Japanese soldiers were defeated they would hug a grenade and pull the pin, he said.

"I never saw soldiers like that," Acuff said. "I never saw anybody as idiot as that. They kill you, then they kill themselves."

The Battle of the Aleutian Islands effectively ended in May 1943, when American forces defeated the Japanese at Attu Island at the cost of about 550 American and 2,350 Japanese lives. The Army also stormed Kiska Island in August that year, but by that time the Japanese had already abandoned it. Walker said he was in the lead boat for that assault, the last major operation for the scouts.

They returned to Fort Richardson and helped survey Western Alaska until the unit was deactivated in 1946.