

Statement of John C. Kirtland, Esq.
Before the Subcommittee on Administrative Law
and Governmental Relations
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.
June 21, 1984

The Aleut Experience in World War II

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, my name is John C. Kirtland. I practice law in Washington, D.C. with the firm of Bishop, Liberman, Cook, Purcell & Reynolds. Our firm represents the Aleut people of Alaska in their effort to obtain just compensation for the losses sustained during World War II.

I am accompanied today by five Aleut leaders. They are Philemon Tutiakoff, Chairman of the Board of the Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association ("APIA"); Agafon Krukoff, Jr., President of the Aleut Corporation; Father Paul Mercurief, Chairman of the Aleutian Housing Authority; William Ermaloff, of Nikolski Village; and Vincent Tutiakoff, of Unalaska Village. With the permission of the Chairman, we will each make a short prepared statement. Then our panel will be pleased to answer any questions the subcommittee may have.

Mr. Chairman, in addition to the five Aleut leaders who will testify this morning, we are very pleased to recognize two additional leaders from Alaska -- Gregg Brelsford, Executive Director of the APIA and the Aleutian Housing Authority; and Dimitri Philemonof, Deputy Director of APIA. These gentlemen

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are the principal managers of APIA, the legally-recognized tribal governing body of the Aleut people of Alaska. Gregg and Dimitri are available to assist our panel in responding to your questions.

Mr. Chairman, our law firm was retained more than six years ago on the matter of the Aleuts' treatment in World War II. We were asked by APIA to research the facts and the law, and to make recommendations that Congress might consider fitting and proper restitution for the losses sustained by the Aleuts in the wartime years. In 1980 the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (the "Commission") was given the same mandate. Our own research paralleled that of the Commission and its staff. The archives were combed for relevant documents. The Commission evaluated the evidence we submitted, and uncovered more evidence on its own.

As the Commission's report reveals, the facts and circumstances of the Aleuts' treatment are now beyond dispute. The record of the injustices suffered and losses incurred by the Aleut people is based almost entirely on contemporary U.S. government correspondence, memoranda, and other official documents. After the fall of Attu and Kiska Islands to the enemy on June 7-8, 1942, the Aleut villages of St. Paul and St. George on the Pribilof Islands, and the Aleut villages of the

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Aleutian Island Chain west of Unimak Island were evacuated on very short notice. The Commission concluded that the evacuation of some 881 Aleuts from these villages was a rational wartime measure to protect civilians in an active theatre of war, and we do not challenge that finding.

The Aleuts' case for compensation derives not from the relocation orders executed by military commanders on the scene, but rather from the treatment suffered at the hands of the government following the evacuation of the villages. The Aleuts were transported to temporary camps in Southeastern Alaska. These camps were established by Department of the Interior officials in abandoned fish canneries, an abandoned gold mine, and an abandoned CCC camp. The conditions were deplorable.

The people in the camps suffered from inadequate medical care, inadequate shelter, inadequate sanitation facilities, lack of potable water, and other life-threatening conditions. For the most part the camps were isolated, transportation in and out was controlled by government supervisors, and the people were impoverished. Although food apparently was adequate to sustain life, the complete breakdown of other services resulted in epidemics of disease that ravaged the camps. The very old and the very young, in particular, could

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not survive. More than ten percent of all the people died in these camps established for their "care and protection."

While the Aleuts were in the camps, their homes and community buildings were occupied by military forces under the Alaska Defense Command. The local commanders in these remote outposts lost all control of the troops. As official Boards of Inquiry determined after the war, the Aleuts' homes and property, left behind out of necessity, were ransacked and looted. Their churches were desecrated, and religious icons of immense cultural value to the Aleuts were taken for souvenirs. Incredibly, the situation in all the villages was the same. There was not a single case where the local commanders were able to protect the Aleuts' property, as it was their duty to do.

Mr. Chairman, the Commission correctly has concluded that no effective system of records exists by which to estimate the Aleuts' losses exactly. A dollar value cannot be placed on the suffering and death brought to the Aleuts in the camps. Therefore, traditional claims procedures cannot be regarded as appropriate for determining the level of compensation due the Aleuts for the grossly negligent treatment they suffered while under the domination and control of government officials in that difficult wartime period.

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The Aleut people therefore respectfully petition the Congress for redress in the nature of private relief legislation, along the lines of H.R. 4322, offered by Congressman Don Young of Alaska. That bill is identical to companion legislation in the other body, offered by Senators Matsunaga, Inouye, Stevens, Murkowski, and others (title III of S. 2116). In their statements, the Aleut leaders will address specific aspects of the pending bill and other relevant issues.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement.
Now I will introduce Philemon Tutiakoff, Chairman of APIA.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.