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First Among Men: The Story of the Invasion of Attu Island

Jerry Coker

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Seventy years ago, 11,000 American soldiers landed on a tiny, frozen, snow-swept rock 750 miles east of Siberia to take back US property—Attu Island. A tiny 35 by 20 mile dot on the map, Attu represented the end of the Aleutian Island chain at the far reaches of the North Pacific Ocean. Captured by 3,000 Japanese Imperial Army infantry and engineers months before, this virtually unknown battle would become one of the most costly in WWII history, with a casualty rate only surpassed by the invasion of Iwo Jima, two years later. At the end of the two and a half week battle, nearly 4,000 Americans would be dead, wounded or environmental casualties—code words for frostbite that would cost hundreds their arms, legs, feet and fingers. For the Japanese defenders, it would portend the brutal reality of future island campaigns, with all their men dead, with the exception of 28 survivors. First Among Men is a fictionalized account of the battle no one ever heard of, remembered and developed because the author, Jerry Coker, listened to his father slowly unravel and dispel his demons releasing bits and pieces of the story over his lifetime. A regular Army infantryman with the US Army's 7th Infantry Division in May of 1943, his father could not forget the horrors of those bloody weeks in the snow and freezing rain. A combat veteran himself as a US Marine rifleman during the Vietnam War, Jerry Coker decided, after shelving a corporate and business career, the story needed to be told. After ten months of meticulous research and another six writing, the story captures a battle that would be characterized later in official Army records as a battle of honor over an island nobody wanted. This is a painful, yet poignant tale of incredible suffering and sacrifice, where the two sides not only fought one another, but faced constant rain, wind, snow, and some of the toughest terrain in the world.

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