

Applying the Alaska Territorial Guard Concept to Modern Indo-Pacific Irregular Warfare

Description

Editorâ??s Note: This article earned second place in the Irregular Warfare Initiativeâ??s [2025 Writing Contest](#), â??Irregular Allies: Strengthening Regional Partnerships through Unconventional Means.â?• Authors were asked to explore how the United States and its partners can use irregular warfare to strengthen security cooperation, build trust, and enhance resilience among Indo-Pacific nations, particularly those with limited conventional military capacity.

Patrick Lathamâ??s piece stood out for its compelling combination of historical insight and forward-looking analysis. By drawing lessons from the Alaska Territorial Guard, the article demonstrates how local knowledge, unconventional partnerships, and preemptive preparation can form the backbone of effective irregular warfare strategies. We have lightly edited the piece after its selection.

For the other winning articles in our contest, look back to our winnersâ?? announcement [here](#).

They were coming. After months of buildup, the Japanese Imperial Army again struck the United States, this time attacking the [Alaskan Island of Attu](#). Charles Foster Jones, one of only 47 residents of Attu, sprinted to his house, where he had stashed a shortwave radio. He sent one simple message: â??THE JAPS ARE HERE.â?• The message was received by the U.S. Navy garrison at Dutch Harbor, who immediately began preparations for additional Japanese incursions. For months, Alaska Defense Command had braced for the moment when warning would become reality; military intelligence had predicted the Japanese would make a move on Alaska. The problem, however, was there were simply too many possible landing areas to guard them all. Anticipating this challenge, Major Marvin â??Muktukâ?• Marston had already begun preparing local defenses, enlisting and training Alaska Natives to defend their land, a solution that would prove crucial when the attack finally came.

The Birth of the Alaska Territorial Guard

Major Marston had traveled extensively across Alaska, frequently visiting the local tribes as he inspected defensive preparations across the state. He saw the need for localized irregular units during a mission to Gambell, Alaska in 1941, and wrote in his [memoir](#):

â??I said to myself, â??These fellows know everything.â?? They had to know everything to have lived for generations under the most rugged conditions man has known. Suddenly, like the sun breaking through storm clouds, there came to me an idea for their defense and ours as well.â?•

In the following years, Marston traveled across the state of Alaska by plane, boat, and dog sled, arming and training as many Alaska Natives as he could, honing them into a highly effective irregular force. They patrolled the coastline in their sealskin canoes, using radios to report Japanese naval patrols. They guarded platinum mines, critical to the manufacture of airplane parts. They built hidden bunkers in the mountains containing caches of weapons, food, and shortwave radios. These native warriors formed the fledgling Alaska Territorial Guard, which would help retake the Aleutian islands of [Attu and Kiska](#) a year later.

Lessons in Irregular Warfare

Major Marston knew that Alaska simply did not have the resources or personnel to fight the Japanese conventionally. He decided that if they were to succeed, they would have to fight irregularly and leverage the skills of the locals to their advantage.

It is a reasonable assumption that in the event of a modern conflict in the Pacific, few nations would be able to withstand an invasion using strictly conventional means. According to the [Lowy Instituteâ??s Asia Power Index](#), the majority of U.S.-Allied nations in the Indo-Pacific pale in comparison to China and Russia in conventional power. Rather than planning to fight a conventional fight on such unequal terms, U.S. allies should establish networks in the Indo-Pacific similar to the Alaska Territorial Guard, leveraging local knowledge and skills to collect intelligence and conduct irregular attacks, bleeding and delaying invading forces long enough for larger forces from the United States and other allies to consolidate and conduct a counterattack.

This can be accomplished through simple modifications of an already existing, heavily resourced, multinational exercise. [Pacific Pathways](#) is an annual military exercise involving nearly every U.S. ally and partner in the Pacific. This exercise presents the perfect opportunity for the Army to create irregular warfare development teams, drawing on experience from the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center, Special Operations Command â?? Pacific, and 5th Security Forces Assistance Brigade. These teams would travel throughout the Pacific, training guerilla detachments under the auspices of the training exercises that are already underway. Just as with the Alaska Territorial Guard, these guerilla units would begin establishing caches of supplies in preparation for conducting irregular warfare, as well as preparing escape and evasion plans to aid downed aviators or other displaced

allied personnel in escaping capture and returning to friendly lines. Special Operations forces throughout the Indo-Pacific could be aligned to support the irregular units they help develop, providing continuity and a level of mission command, enabling them to be even more effective. Through this method, U.S. allies would have a prepared, combat effective irregular warfare contingency plan in the event of an escalation from competition to crisis or armed conflict.

Preparing Before Hostilities: A Call to Action

The time for preparing irregular warfare groups is before the onset of hostilities, not after. Major Marston knew that and was able to develop the Alaska Territorial Guard into a formidable force, which helped prevent the spread of Japanese forces beyond the initial incursion. These irregulars were able to leverage their knowledge of the operational environment to conduct extremely effective guerilla operations. That is the model the U.S. should emulate today. Irregular warfare development teams, traveling in conjunction with Pacific Pathways, would mitigate this gap in readiness and prepare U.S. allies to have the best chance of survival in the event of an armed conflict.

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Main Image: USCG guard in Alaska in WW2. [Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons](#).

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