

A test of readiness in case of war

by Barbara Crane
Tundra Times reporter

NOME — Their mission was a massive undertaking — airlifting men, vehicles and equipment from home units stretching across Central Alaska.

From Arctic Village in the north and south to Kodiak Island, men of the Alaska Army National Guard's 5th Battalion converged in Nome to begin annual training exercises designed to test their readiness in case of war.

Quartz Creek, 85 miles north of Nome, was their final destination.

While it might take only a few hours to reach Quartz Creek by snow machine, the 5th Battalion was traveling in huge, heavy armored personnel carriers bearing 50-caliber Browning machine guns capable of firing up to a mile accurately.

The road to Quartz Creek crosses Bureau of Land Management and local Native corporation lands, and before the training started, the Guard had to promise their exercise would have minimal impact on the land.

In the blowing and drifting snow, it wasn't always possible to tell where the road was, so Scouts on snow machines tested the way and guided the convoy.

"The Native corporations and the BLM are trusting us to take care of the land, to treat it the way they would," said Maj. Bruce Gabreys, A Company's commander.

This meant staying on the road even when a detour around overflows or deep, slushy snow drifts with the consistency of wet cement would have made their trip much easier and quicker.

"Of course, if we were really in a

war-time situation, we would take the easiest and most direct route," Gabreys said. "But it was an important part of our training mission to keep our promise to take care of the land."

To avoid damaging the tundra, the convoy camped overnight on the site of a snow-covered gravel pit.

Tent pegs couldn't be used because of the deep snow and frozen ground, so large rocks were pried loose and carried over so the tent ropes could be tied to them.

Ordinarily the vehicles and tents would have been spread out to make their detection more difficult. But again impact on the land was the first consideration, so they squeezed together within the gravel pit's borders and relied on camouflage nets to mask their presence.

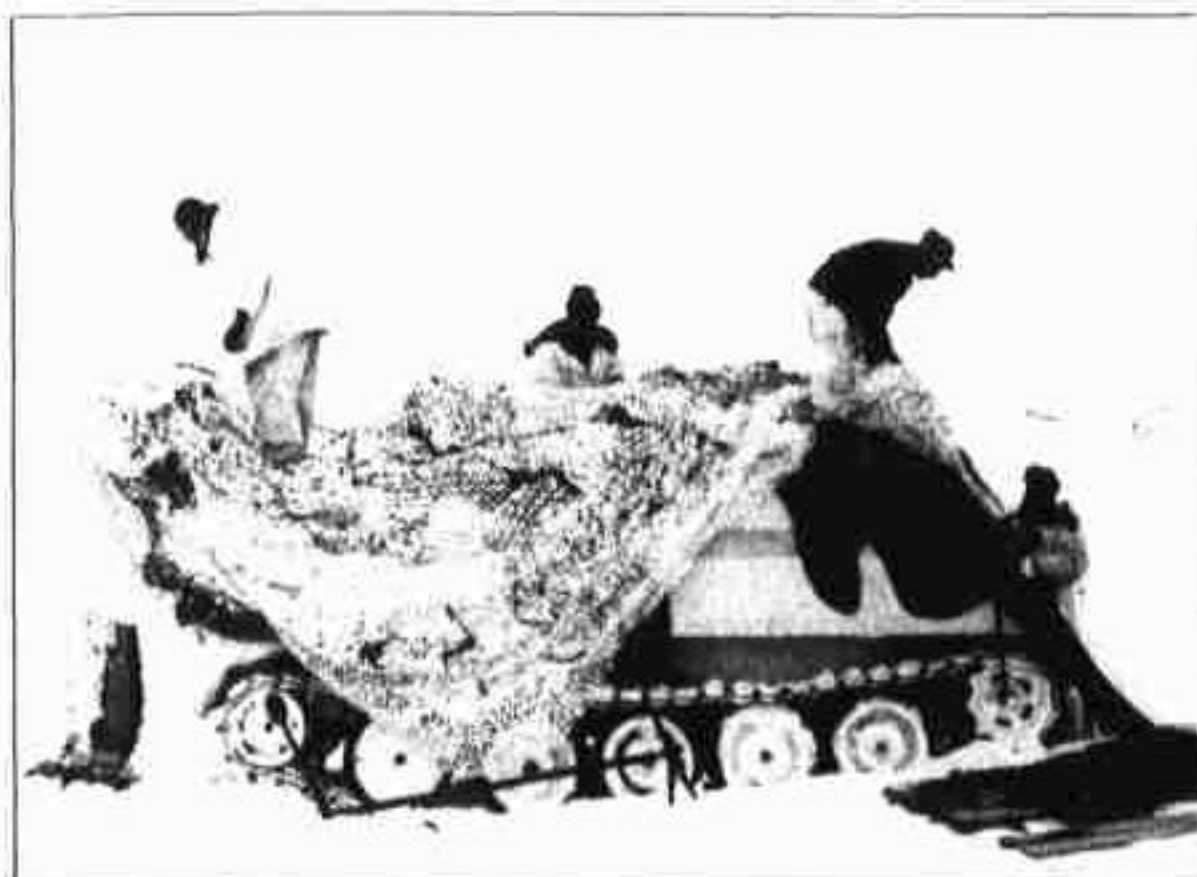
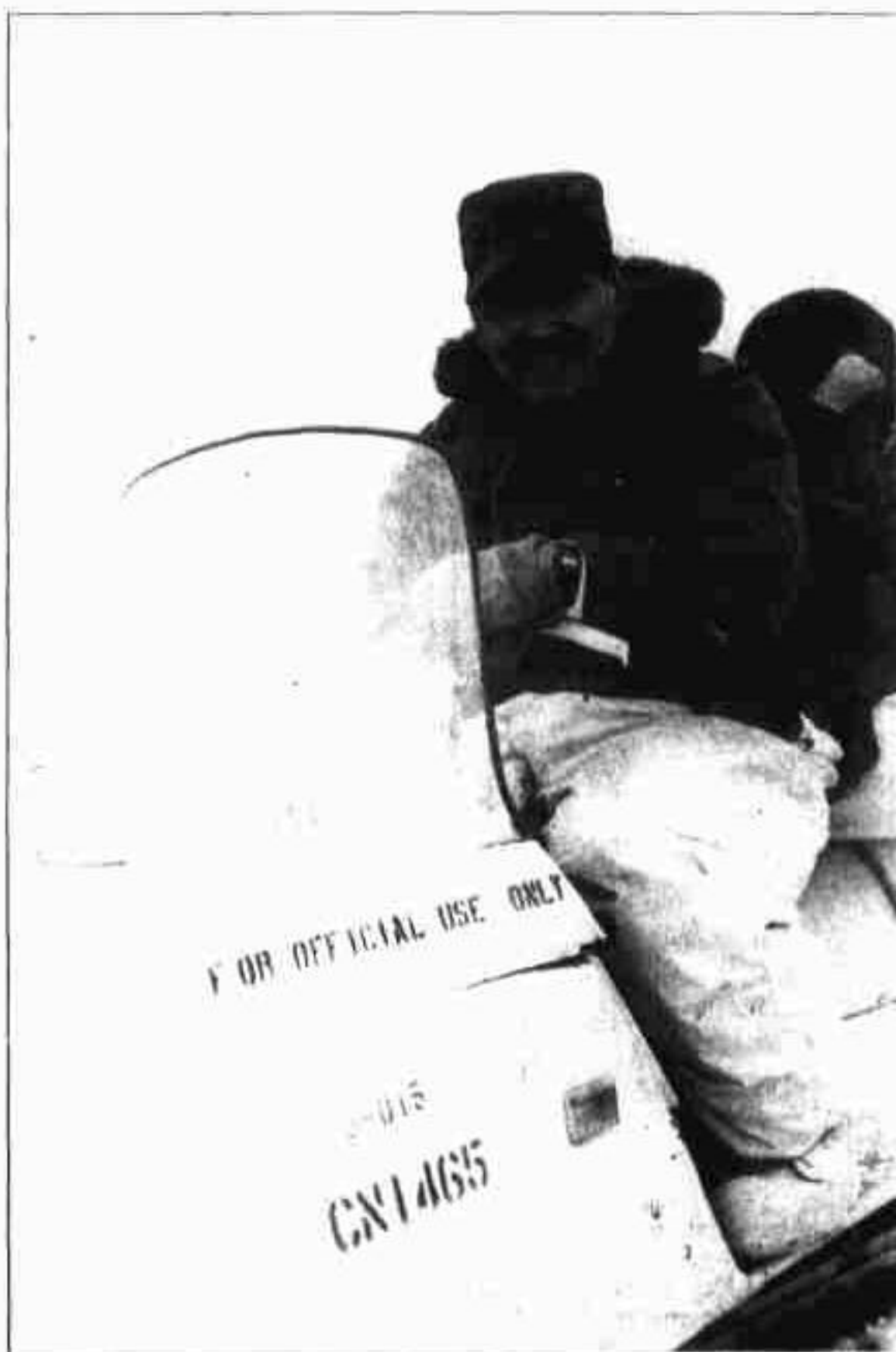
The BLM monitored the 5th Battalion's movements throughout the exercise, and on the last day an official inspected the training area with Lt. Col. Jim Dexter, commander of the 5th Battalion.

"The BLM man said there were no problems," Dexter reported, "and he was very pleased with the care we took."

Dexter was proud of his men's efforts and congratulated them for accomplishing their mission despite the land use restrictions and harsh winter weather conditions.

The soldiers were proud of what they had accomplished, too.

"It may look like we're just out here playing games," said Pvt. John Tritt of Venetie, "but we have an important job — we are learning how to defend our homes and our country."



Scouts on snow machines, as Spec. 4 Pete Peter of Venetie, top photo, tested the way and guided the convoy during the Alaska Army National Guard's 5th Battalion training exercises. Center left photo, 5th Battalion soldiers cover their armored personnel carrier with camouflage nets to hide it from the "enemy." Above, Spec. Marvin Kernak of Anchorage ties his tent's ropes to rocks to hold the tent secure in high winds. At left, Pvt. John Tritt of Venetie.

photos by Barbara Crane