

'We will be able to serve the nation'

by Vern Metcalfe

for the Tundra Times

My son Peter Metcalfe rang me up recently to enquire about a joint venture we have relating to the 75th Anniversary of the Alaska Native Brotherhood.

The question concerned my first acquaintance with Native legislators, and I recalled that I had lobbied for the Veterans of Foreign Wars in 1949 in an unpaid job. I was post commander of the local group at the time.

Our efforts on behalf of the veterans for that year were to gain some funding on a loan basis for the Veterans Loan Program as adopted in 1946 and the re-institution of the Alaska National Guard. The latter was to re-enact enabling legislation which had expired when the previous Guard units had been called up in 1941.

I told my cohorts we would undoubtedly run into road blocks as far as the loan for funding was concerned, but that the National Guard was a "piece of cake." My batting average was zero on this bit of predicting since the thing was worked out by borrowing from the Teachers Retirement Fund and it went through nearly unanimously. Not so with the Guard.

And hereby hangs the tale. It would seem that then Gov. Ernest Gruening had caused the Legislature in 1943 to create a "Territorial Guard" which was to consist of those either too old, too lame, or otherwise not eligible for regular military duty.

This was recruited by no less a personage that Col. "Muktuk" Marston who did some sort of a job in putting together what came to be known as "Eskimo Scout Battalions." And in the process he caused any number of people to believe that "Gruening's

Guerrilla's" were a political arm of the administration.

This caused the Alaska Canned Salmon Industry Inc. a bad case of heartburn. The replacement of that group, disbanded in the aftermath of World War II, by a new Guard unit was simply more than their emissaries to the legislative scene could stand and they opened up with all of their lobbying firepower to kill the bill. They were joined in this effort (for the first time in the memory of man) by the organized labor lobbyists who feared that the Guard would revert to what it had been during previous times (mainly in the '20s and '30s) when they were used as strike-breakers.

This caused me grave doubts about all of this, and in the House I could count only eight sure votes (out of 24) for the measure. At this juncture I was advised by Gov. Gruening that I should concentrate my efforts on the five Native legislators then serving in the House. These were William E. Beltz, D-Nome; Andrew Hope, D-Sitka; Percy Ipalook, R-Nome; Frank G. Johnson, R-Kake; and Frank L. Johnson, R-Nome. It should be mentioned that Frank Peratrovich, D-Klawock, was by then serving in the Senate and provided support, too.

What we did (myself and the legislators named) was to have lunch about once a week to discuss the state of the Territory and the condition of the Native population. We could term this the "education of Vern Metcalfe."

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In fact, the day of the vote, as I was entering the House chambers, the Canned Salmon lobbyist and one of his captive legislators told me, in high glee, "Well, Vern, you won't win this one."

"How about that," I replied. And I told him, with false bravado, "I wouldn't place any bets on that." And I most surely would not have at that moment.

The bills came for final passage and the nervous 26-year-old in the gallery was me. The first suggestion that things were looking up came when Chester C. (Red) Carlson, D-Cordova, with great command of the language, excoriated the labor lobbyists for opposing it. Red was an organizer, the creator of the fishermen's union in Cordova and most importantly a World War I veteran who minced no words on the need of a Guard.

The turning point came, however, after those opposed had their innings and Percy Ipalook asked for the floor. This soft-spoken Presbyterian minister said (I paraphrase here): "We are criticized, us Native people, for being on welfare and for draining the treasury. . . We don't like this. . . We now have the opportunity to have our people join the Guard for which they will be paid for their drills. . . This will help all of us. . . We will also be able

to serve the nation and Alaska, too."

I must admit that I looked over at the Canned Salmon lobbyist and grinned from ear to ear. The final vote? Fourteen to 10 with all five of the Native legislators and Red Carlson carrying the day. Later I was one of the first six Alaskans to be sworn in. I was, despite four years in World War II, still draftable, and was to become the commissioned officer.

As such I was privileged to read reports gained via our Eskimo Scouts scattered all along the Bering Sea. Later we were to have the "Distant Early Warning Line," which was radar stations. I might point out here and now that beginning in 1949 we had a human DEW-line.

We called them the Eskimo Scouts. And since it would hardly be considered classified now I might note that some of these people managed to visit "cousins" in Siberia from time to time. Thought you might like to know. I know that Bill Beltz, Frank G. Johnson and Andrew Hope, are all deceased, but the present Guard owes them a vote of gratitude — posthumously.

It would be of interest to Bill Beltz that the present adjutant general, John Schaeffer, just happens to be an Eskimo. What goes around comes around.