

# Guard inquiry board takes first testimony

*Natives and others complain of blatant disregard for workplace conditions*

by Anna M. Pickett  
*Tundra Times staff*

The Alaska National Guards Board of Inquiry heard testimony from current and former Guards members of various ethnic backgrounds about alleged discrimination by high ranking Guard officers in its first session last week. The testimony included statements by Guard members seeking to keep their Guard units active, complaints of unsafe and unsanitary working environments, mistreatment for those who sympathize with Native Guardsmen in rural areas, violation to policies, and promotion denials.

Only two Natives, Col. Milt Cross and retired Major Billy Atseriak, gave testimony. Other witnesses included five Afro-Americans, two Asian Indians, one Caucasian female, and four Caucasian males.

Harold "Hal" Wolverton, a Board member, says that he expects to see many more Natives come forward throughout the hearings.

Dave Rose, chairman of the Board, said because of the number of witnesses that want to give testimony, additional meetings will have to be scheduled. A subcommittee was designated by the chair to take testimony outside of regularly scheduled hearings. The subcommittee consists of Dennis Metrokin, Gene Peltola and John Hoyt. The last scheduled day for taking testimony is March 31.

"It is clear that if we have a lot

of verbal testimony, then we will have to publish notices and request written testimony," said Rose. "If we can get all the testimony by the end of March, then we can meet and discuss it and put together a draft report early in April with a final report for the adjutant general, governor and legislature by the third week in April."

Rose asked the Board to compile a list of who they would like to appear, including those accused of discriminatory acts. However, those asked to appear will not be

*Page 12, please*

# Guard inquiry board takes first testimony . . .

Continued from page 1  
subpoenaed, he said.

"Clearly up to date, we see that there are problems with communications," said Rose. "But some of that is expected. Some matters are clear, others are a little cloudy."

"We're not going to adjudicate individual cases," Rose said. "We are looking for atmosphere and obvious patterns. If we hear recurring matters, that can give us some indication of whether we should press further for systemic problems, that's what we're looking for."

There may be cases for which the Board would suggest full-fledged investigations, but Rose said it is too early to tell.

Muhammad Khan, a Guard senior planner testified that be-

***The warehouse had no running water, the warehouse had no toilets. The warehouse had nothing. I was told to 'put up or shut up,' said Khan***

cause of his dark skin, he was subjected to racial remarks, denied promotion, and made to work in a warehouse.

"(They sent me) to the warehouse, it was never used for a year," said Khan. "The warehouse had no running water, the warehouse had no toilets. The warehouse had nothing. I was told to 'put up or shut up.'"

Khan also stated that he is fifty times more qualified than his Caucasian counterparts who were hired into positions he qualified and applied for. He stated that he was suspended from work for praying, part of his Asian Indian culture. He finally wrote a letter to Gen. Hugh

Cox and to this day, he has not received a response.

Former Alaska Guardsman Dennis Rogers heard about the Board of Inquiry hearings last week and immediately flew with his wife from Virginia to Alaska to testify about the treatment he received while stationed in Bethel.

"I was told Natives were 'slovenly, inefficient and undependable'," said Rogers. "I couldn't believe (my supervisors) would say that. I met a lot of Eskimos and they took me in. I got along with every single one of them."

When he countered the remarks made by his superiors, Rogers says he was retaliated against. He states that he was given a technical position, but not informed about the position, or that he had it. Things were expected from him, but he didn't know he was responsible for the work. He states that nobody for-

mally or informally told him about his extension of service in Bethel. He said that the line of communication in the chain of command was cut off for himself, as well as for Col. Moses Owen, Maj. Billy Atseriak,

***"I'm encouraged with the number and the freedom with which people have come forward," said Wolverton.***

and other Native officers who wanted to make formal complaints about Rogers' immediate supervisors.

Retired Major Billy Atseriak, formerly a personnel warrant officer in Anchorage, supported statements made by Lt. Col. Milt Cross regarding violation of policies. He also said what damaged the promotion capability of many of the Natives was the variety of waivers that were issued under retired Gen. John Schaeffer's administration.

He said that the waivers put Alaska Natives at a disadvantage for promotions. He said, 'essentially, these officers won't meet the standards that are required of them.'

Atseriak also noted the culture shock that rural Alaskans face when they are transferred to Anchorage.

Atseriak and Frank Pagano, a former Guardsman and now president of Koniag, Inc., agreed that cultural factors sometimes dictate that Native Guard members approach their assignments with perspectives different than their non-Native colleagues.

"It's like subsistence hunting," said Pagano. "If the freezer is empty, we go out hunting. If it's not, we don't."

Pagano also posed the question to *Tundra Times*, "where is AFN during these proceedings? They say they represent their people,

but I don't see them here defending them."

Lt. Col. Gregory "Bo" Austin, says he has mixed feelings about the discrimination allegations in the Guard.

"On one hand, I'm glad this is happening," Austin said. "My hopes and expectations are that we can clear this up once and for all. I sympathize with some of the members who have legitimate complaints. The ones that really suffer are the soldiers. My sympathy and loyalty lies with the soldiers."

"I would have said that my job is to insulate the soldiers from what is happening," continued Austin. "Unfortunately, the news media got a hold of it. Once it got out on the street, there's nothing we can do about it. I would like to see this thing over and I would like to see the people who have legitimate complaints be satisfied."

Austin does agree that there is a communications problem within the Guard.

"Lack of communication and not being able to communicate from the highest level to the lowest level creates a problem within the chain of command," said Austin. "I (was) been asked by Gen. (Hugh) Cox to conduct a study in the periphery (outside of Anchorage) with the soldiers and ask them 'why do soldiers leave the guard?'"

The one thing that kept coming out in that study was that there was a lack of communication. What happens at this level (high) isn't exactly what's communicated at Emmonak or Brevig Mission. The information gets distorted because it has so many conduits in which to pass through."

"Col. Cross is a personal friend of mine. I'm familiar with his situation and he chose to

do what he felt was right," said Austin. "And I respect him for it. There are only a very few of us Natives here, whether it was by design or by accident, there are just a few of us here. I see that we need to bind together because those of us that are left are being watched. The future of Native leadership is going to depend on our success."

"Our people are capable, very capable," said Austin. "We don't need to be so controversial, we still have to work here. I see my role as mentorship. My job as a leader is to build them up, not tear them down. All too many times,

it seems easier to cut somebody off at the knees rather than take the time to explain why we didn't want it that way. They want to be recognized for the things they do."

***"It's like subsistence hunting," said Pagano. "If the freezer is empty, we go out hunting. If it's not, we don't."***

"I'm encouraged with the number and the freedom with which people have come forward," said Wolverton. "I've watched the audience about 1/3 of the time that I've watched and listened to witnesses. I feel that there is little inhibition, there's nervousness, but little inhibition about coming forward. That makes me feel good."

"I know that in my limited dealings with individual Natives and people of another culture that it takes a great deal more personal conviction and fortitude for them to come to a setting like with senior folks, if you will, and I feel bad about that but I understand it. I hope that there is some way we can make it clear that coming forth is not a threatening a thing, is not something that there's even a hint of reprisal," said Wolverton.

Wolverton was not the only Board member who peered into the audience. Retired Gen. John Hoyt, after hearing a response to his question from Cross about his promotion, was clearly upset. He turned and glared at Col. Mike McCourt.