



Lena Hensley, a Kotzebue youngster gets her eyes examined by Dr. Allen Wills during Operation Kotzebue Care.

Photo by Pam Ogland

Villages receive health care from military training

by Pamela Ogland
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During the first two weeks in April, military physicians and

dentists provided health care for Kotzebue, Noatak, Noorvik, Selawik, Ambler, Buckland and Shungnak as part of Operation Kotzebue Care '95. Eighty phy-

sicians, dentists and medical specialists from the Alaska Army National Guard, Alaska Air National Guard, Marine

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Forces Reserve and U.S. Public Health Services were based in Kotzebue with teams traveling to the smaller communities.

The operation's basic mission, according to Col. Tom Bowman, Marine Forces Reserve, was to train participating units in real life situations, trauma or problems. A normal field drill would mean sending units into a huge field, like Camp Pendleton, and acting out simulated situations. A commander would then walk around 'tagging' various 'wounds,' then send in a medical battalion to treat the various 'casualties.' Of course, since this is a drill and staged, there is no real life hands-on training for the medical units.

The value of Operation Kotzebue Care '95, is that medical units were able to come into a rugged Arctic environment, use their equipment, training and skills to serve the Kotzebue and surrounding villages with much needed and very much wanted medical and dental care. Also, unlike in standard drills, they were able to confront a host of unexpected situations, thereby stretching and testing their abilities more fully.

In Noatak, Capt. Robert Anthony, Naval Reserve, had treated approximately 30 dental patients, including 4-year-old Agnes Lona Penn who was in for a routine cleaning and was all smiles when she was done with her exam.

Cmdr. Karen Trueblood, 4th Medical Battalion, Marine Forces Reserve, saw 4 month old David Pungalik, who was in with a fever, and grumpy. David's mother, Della, was pleased with Operation Kotzebue Care '95 and wanted to see more operations in rural Alaska. She also stated, "The cost of travel, housing, and money is what keeps a lot of the villagers from seeking medical care in Kotzebue, most people wait until a physician is sent out or they see the public health nurse in their area."

In addition to many units being in the smaller villages in the Kotzebue area, there were physicians, pharmacists and specialists at the Kotzebue Hospital. In the optometry department, Dr. Allan Wills saw Lena Hensley of Kotzebue, who was in for a prescription for eyeglasses. She said, "I'm gonna get flexible ones so they won't break. My last ones,

the lenses fell out!"

An elder couple from Kivalina, who asked not to be named, were in the cardiac unit to check his pacemaker. The husband had been out snowblowing when he went off a 10 foot cliff, his snow machine flipped over onto his chest. Other than bruises, he was fine. His wife was very happy to have Guard and Marine units in the area. She wants them to come more often and do health care again in the near future.

Buckland was not originally one of the villages on the schedule, to but because of the immediate medical care needed there, a unit was sent. The unit consisted of a medical doctor, a nurse and a corps medic.

Dr. Richard Asaya, a commissioned officer with the U.S. Public Health Services, in Kotzebue stated, "Operation Kotzebue Care '95 was an excellent operation, as the need out here is great. Although IHS and Maniilaq Association provide as much care as possible, the need is much greater than we can handle here."

There is already unofficial talk of doing a similar operation in the near future. If another such opera-

tion were to take place in Alaska, the target area would again be picked on the basis of where the most need for care is.

The three military units together used approximately \$350,000 for Operation Kotzebue Care '95. The cost included shipment of medical and dental sup-

plies, equipment, travel of personnel and fuel for the Alaska Air National Guard. The Alaska Army and Air National Guard played an important part in Operation Kotzebue Care '95, as they were instrumental in getting units, supplies and equipment to and from the remote villages.