

Report alleges ~

Native Guard members hit by high ranking bias

ANG called 'welfare' for Natives

by Jeff Richardson and
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Tundra Times staff

Top Alaska National Guard officers have systematically discriminated against Alaska Natives and African-Americans during the last two years, according to a federal civil rights official.

Arthur A. Fletcher, chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, told *Tundra Times* that he had received findings of a preliminary investigation by a private Wash-

ington, D.C. firm accusing high-ranking Guard officials of making threats and preparing unfavorable evaluations targeting Native and black subordinates and trying to force their resignation from the Alaska Army and Air National Guard.

The report alleges "numerous" instances of racial bias by top officials, resulting in a pervasive "general attitude of demoralization and fear."

The report released by Fletcher
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Alaska National Guardsmen 1st Sgt. Gus Johnson and 1st Lt. Danny Togiak, of the 1st Platoon, B Company, 6th Battalion, pause a moment for a photo shoot by *Tundra Times* staff during the Guard's two week training period at Camp Carroll, Ft. Richardson in the spring of 1994. Both Guardsmen are Yup'ik Eskimos. Allegations of racial bias have been made by Natives and Caucasians through an investigation by a private firm. Clients of the firm have not yet been identified.

Photo by Anna M. Pickett

Native Guard members hit by high ranking bias . . .

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was prepared by Hightower Investigations, Inc., a firm with offices in Washington as well as Martinez, Georgia.

Although the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights has no authority over discrimination cases in the military, Fletcher said he has taken a personal interest in the issue for several years, collecting information from military and civilian defense employees both in the U.S. and abroad.

"This is not a commission operation, as such," said Fletcher. "When I get a report from a reasonably reliable source, I use my independent status as a citizen to get the information into the hands of interested parties and agencies."

The 15-page investigative report was forwarded by Fletcher to President Bill Clinton on December 13. Signed by the head of the Hightower firm, it implicates former Adjutant General Hugh Cox and five others in the alleged wrong doings.

"Investigation has revealed that ever since Major General Cox has taken over as the Adjutant General . . . there has been a concerted effort to remove Native officers from positions of command/control. During his tenure . . . the number of Native Alaskan officers who have been promoted has trickled to almost a full halt. In fact, there now remain only a handful of Native officers and only two Native officers in key positions in the Alaska State Guard where approximately 70-80% of the enlisted people are Native Alaskans, a disproportionate ratio by any evaluation," the report states.

A Guards spokesman, Capt. Michael Haller, took issue with some report findings, denied comment on others pending further review, and said only 33-38 percent of Guard enlisted members are Alaska Natives. Based on 160 hours of taped interviews with NCOs and higher-ranking officers, the report also indicates that Caucasian officers who were reluctant to cooperate with the pattern of discrimination were singled out for similar mistreatment, including threatened withdrawal of Federal Recognition for Guard service, with a resulting loss of retirement benefits.

Implicated along with Cox in Hightower's report are: Lt. Col. Ken Allen, Col. Michael Byington, Brig. Gen. Kenneth Taylor, Col. Jerry Gillian, and Col. Michael McCort.

Efforts to reach the men prior to press time were unsuccessful. The Hightower investigation suggests that at least one reason for biased treatment of Native and African-American officers may have been an effort to create vacancies that could be filled by friends of these superior officers. Allegedly, some of the officers and their friends were active duty military personnel who did not hold state Guard commissions.

"Why active duty Title X officers were placed in lead positions of senior command . . . still remains unclear, especially when . . . there were several Alaskan Guardsmen in the Guard at that time, who were

qualified and fully capable of taking over those senior positions, and that General Cox was aware of this. When Colonel Byington and Lt. Col. Allen, were selected to fill these positions, it was expected that this would only be a temporary measure. However, more than two years later these active duty officers are still occupying those positions," the report says.

"The feeling among the traditional Guardsmen (a large number of whom are Native Alaskans, and the majority of whom have a tradition that goes back generations of supporting their state as Army and Air Guardsmen) is that Lt. Col. Allen and Col. Byington who are both Caucasian, are getting rid of the Native Alaskans who are in senior/command positions in the guard to replace them with their buddies who are prior active duty Army/Air Force personnel who have been passed over/non-selected for promotion or simply retiring from active duty. The fact that these prior active duty officers may be located outside of the state of Alaska seems to pose no problem."

The report also states:
• There is evidence to support the fact that a double standard exists with regard to the criteria being used for promotion of Natives and non-Natives;
• Allen allegedly told Major Donald Cummings that the Alaska Guard was "no-thing but a welfare system for the Native Alaskans;"
• Some Guard members expressed fear of being followed, threatened or retaliated against for speaking to investigators;
• Investigators were also threatened in the course of their work;

According to Fletcher, the Knowles Administration is aware of the Hightower investigation. "To his credit, I did get a call from the attorney general up there (Bruce Botelho). We talked for about half an hour. There's interest at the executive level," said Fletcher. Botelho confirmed the conversation with Fletcher and said he is taking the allegations seriously. "We are looking into those allegations as well as other complaints lodged by other agencies against the National Guard, (including) the Governor's Office and the Dept. of Law," said Botelho. "(There) will be appropriate action by the governor."

Gov. Knowles recently named Jake Lestenkof, an Aleut veteran

of Guard service, to replace Cox as adjutant general. Lestenkof will

"I am comfortable standing by my findings," Hightower said. "I've still got information coming in, and I didn't put everything I had in the preliminary report." He added that he expected to complete his final report by the end of the month and forward it to Fletcher as well as others who received the preliminary report including the House and Senate Arms Services Committees of the Congress, Dept. of Defense officials and the head of the National Guard Bureau. Fletcher, himself an African-American, said his interest in military discrimination grew from an awareness of his own experiences in the service during World War II, and those of his father, a Buffalo Soldier in the U.S. Army.

investigations, said he had been hired by several Alaska Natives and Caucasians to conduct the investigation, which he expected would be criticized by Guard officials.

"... There has been a concerted effort to remove Native officers from positions of command/control."

~ Willie Hightower, Hightower Investigation

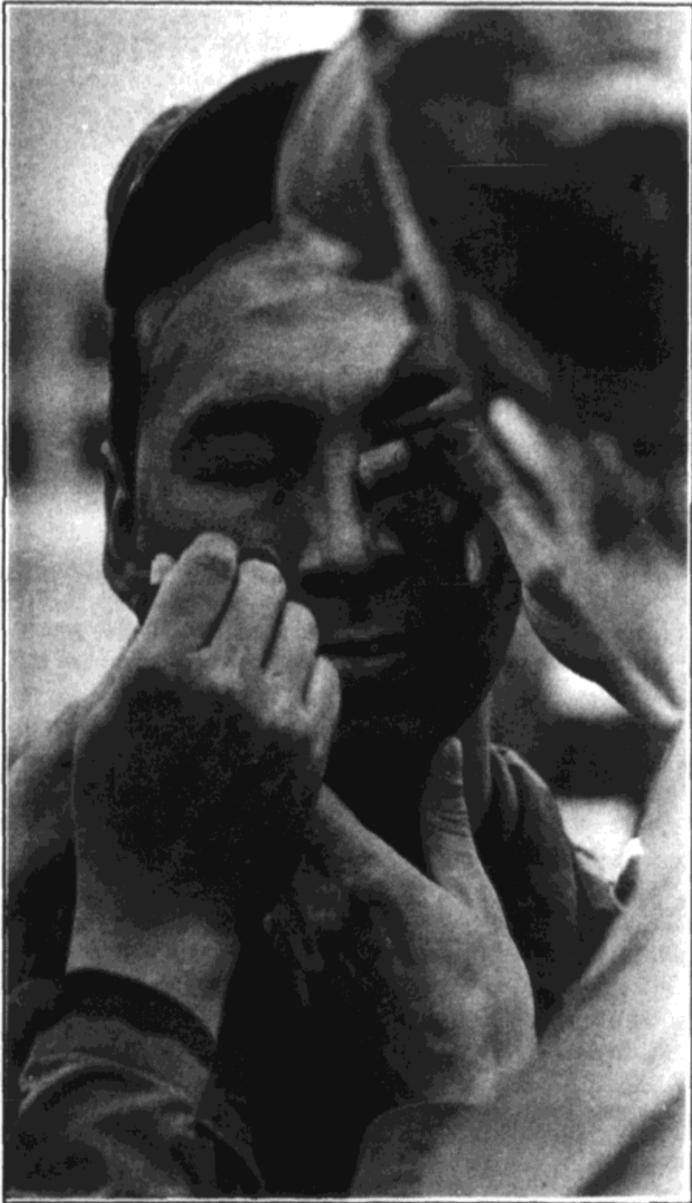
"... There were several Alaskan Guardsmen in the Guard at that time, who were qualified and fully capable of taking over those senior positions."

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Fletcher said he is acquainted with previous Hightower investigations and vouched for the firm's integrity. The report states that Hightower has photos and other documentation to back up the allegations.

"We are looking into those allegations as well as other complaints lodged by other agencies against the National Guard."

~ Bruce Botelho, State Attorney General



Guardsman Elia Abruska gets a little camouflage applied to his face. Allegations of racial bias have been made by Natives and Caucasians through an investigation by a private firm. Clients of the firm have not yet been identified. Tundra Times File Photo