

Learning how to survive — at 55 degrees below zero

by Barbara Crane

Tundra Times reporter

FORT GREELY — It was cold — too cold to register on most thermometers, and colder than many people can imagine.

But for two weeks last month, 213 men and women of the Alaska Army National Guard's 3rd Eskimo Scout Battalion left their families and homes in North and Northeastern Alaska to better prepare themselves to serve their communities, state and country in case of emergency.

"During our training exercise,

the highest it got was about 5 degrees above zero," said Lt. Col. Charles Soxie, the 3rd Battalion's commander. "And it was usually much lower, as low as 55 degrees below zero."

While most of the 3rd Battalion's members grew up in villages near or above the Arctic Circle, cold weather survival skills were reviewed.

"We think safety first," Soxie said.

The units spread out over several campsites, where the first priority was erecting the 10-man tents that

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would be their homes for the next two weeks.

Each tent was heated with a Yukon stove which allowed the soldiers to shed a few layers of insulation while working or sleeping inside.

Whenever the stove was burning, one person assigned to fire watch duty kept the stove from going out or getting too hot and catching the tent on fire.

Outside, the soldiers learned and practiced skills such as map reading and navigation, patrolling, reconnaissance, marksmanship and radio communications.

Despite the intense cold, morale was high as hardships were shared.

"The hot chow is usually cold by the time it reaches our camp," Spec. Henry Nathan of Kotzebue said, "but we know they are trying their best."

While most soldiers admitted to feeling the cold, Sgt. Harry Tagarook of Wainwright thought his stay was almost like a vacation compared to the cold and darkness he was used to at home.

"The way the sun shines here," he said, "it's just like Hawaii!"

For those not bringing their own food from home, the standard meal was an Army-issued MRE, which officially stands for Meal, Ready to Eat, but is more commonly referred to as Meal Rejected by Eskimos.

"We brought our own muktuk, caribou meat and fish to eat," Tagarook said, "so we are doing fine."

Another group of soldiers happy to be training at Fort Greely was from the villages of Gambell and Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island.

They are actually members of the 1st Battalion, whose training exercise is scheduled for later this spring.

But the St. Lawrence Islanders were invited to join the 3rd Battalion's training exercise so they wouldn't have to miss the start of whaling season at home.

Many of the soldiers sharing in the hardships of training were women, and they performed just as well as the men.

"These women in the 3rd Battalion are strong physically," Soxie said. "They don't complain and they pull their own loads. I wish we had more of them."

Staff Sgt. Elvira Ticket of Kotzebue, who was on her 14th annual training exercise, remembered how hard it was to be accepted at first.

"Years ago, when we were out in the field, the men used to pick on us women because they thought we were just women and couldn't do anything," she said.

"But we worked harder and did better because we wanted to prove to them that we were just as good."

Among her many skills is the art of setting booby traps to protect her camp's perimeter, a skill she learned while in service in C Company out of Selawik.

Because she remembers how confusing things sometimes seemed at her first training camp, Ticket goes out of her way to help the new soldiers.

"A new private might not know how to turn on the stove, but be afraid to ask," she said. "So I show them how without making them feel bad. I tell them I am still learning, too."

In the evenings Ticket enjoys visiting with old and new friends in the other tents.

"To tell you the truth," she said, "I'm sad when camp is over. I meet people from different villages and get to know them, but most of them I won't see again till next year's camp."

When the field exercises ended, tents were taken down, equipment packed up and camping areas restored



to their former condition. The men and women moved into barracks at the center of Fort Greely.

There they enjoyed hot showers, a steak dinner and a good night's sleep before attending an awards ceremony on the last day the battalion was together.

As part of the ceremony, Levi Cleveland, whose home is in Shungnak, was promoted to the rank of sergeant major. Wilbur Atoruk of Kiana became a first sergeant. Both also received the Army Commendation Medal.

Also awarded the Army Commendation Medal were Capt. Ray Woods of Shungnak, Sgt. 1st Class Frank Bozanich of Barrow, Staff Sgt. Glenn Hunnicutt of Kotzebue and Staff Sgts. Allen Siwooko and Joe Koonooka of Gambell.



Among those participating in the training from Wainwright were, top photo, from left, Sgts. William Bodfish, Harry Tagarook, Yaaki Nayakik and John Anashugak. Taking a break at the snowmachines are, from left, Pfc. Paul Wesley of Noatak, Cpl. James Ramoth of Kotzebue and Sgt. Don Foster of Kotzebue.

photos by Barbara Crane