

'It was rough, but I knew I could handle it'

by Barbara Crane
for the Tundra Times

FORT BENNING, GA. — Graduation Day: The day they'd been praying for; the day they sometimes thought would never come.

For 13 weeks they'd sweated and struggled and done more than they'd thought humanly possible. But now was the time to celebrate what they'd accomplished.

With their hardships temporarily forgotten, 40 Alaska Natives proudly marched onto Fort Benning's parade field April 13 for graduation exercises honoring their successful completion of the U.S. Army's basic infantry training course.

The men, members of the Alaska Army National Guard's Buddy Platoon, had come from villages all across Northern and Western Alaska to meet in Anchorage last January.

There they got to know each other and practice some of the skills they would need for basic training. They also got advice on what to expect at Fort Benning to help make their abrupt transition from village life to Army life a little easier.

"It was rough, but I knew I could handle it, and I did," said Pvt. 2 Gerasim Merculief of St. Paul.

Merculief was named the Distinguished Honor Graduate at the graduation ceremony. The Buddy Platoon was also named the Honor Platoon among all the others who were graduating, and they took top honors in Basic Rifle Marksmanship, Hand Grenades, Barracks Inspection and Army Physical Readiness.

"I see a lot of changes in the platoon members," Merculief said. "They had to do things they never had to do before, like taking care of themselves and taking orders."

As a graduate of Mt. Edgecumbe High School, Merculief said he was used to dormitory living, but he knew others had a hard time getting used to life in the huge 56-bed barracks.

The Army Guard members took the same demanding course as regular Army soldiers would. Physical fitness was stressed, as well as rifle marksmanship, map reading, hand grenades, camouflage techniques and nuclear and chemical weapons decontamination.

"The hardest thing was the 15-mile march with our packs on," said Pvt. Peter Elachik Jr. of Kotlik. "I thought that would take forever."

The men reported having a hard time adjusting to Georgia's high humidity and warm temperatures.

"Our 13-week mission is to produce infantrymen who are proud, highly disciplined and motivated, physically fit and technically and tactically proficient," said Lt. Col. Bobby Hoffman of the Infantry Training Center.

To be able to accomplish so much in only 13 weeks, a typical day at Fort Benning begins at 4 a.m., and the men put in 15- or 16-hour days, six days a week. The pressure is always on.

"When we first got here, the drill sergeants were always on us, making us do pushups and situps a lot," Elachik recalled.

Elachik was overwhelmed at first by all he was expected to learn.

"But the drill sergeants kept going over and over everything until it got easy," he said. "By the end, everybody got to love our senior drill sergeant, Sgt. 1st Class Lewis Collins."

Collins remembered that the Buddy Platoon members did have a rough time at first.

"It was hard for them to adapt to the training; everything was new to them," Collins said. "But by about

the fourth week, they were doing great."

Collins said he saw a lot more maturity in the soldiers than when he first met them.

"When they get home," he said, "they will be ready to assume more responsibilities in their communities."

Maj. Gen. John Schaeffer, adjutant general of the Alaska Army National Guard, was the reviewing officer and graduation speaker. He talked about some of the opportunities and responsibilities the young men would be assuming.

"As you get older and grow in your career, you're going to find that one of the most important opportunities you have in life is the opportunity to learn," Schaeffer said. "It is by learning that you are able to grow."

Schaeffer noted that the graduates had just proven to themselves that they were capable of learning and achieving a lot more than they thought they could.

"You also have the opportunity to serve your fellow man and your country," he said. "There is nothing that can give you more satisfaction in life than serving others."

"Of course," he added, "along with these opportunities comes the responsibility of doing the best job you possibly can for your country."

The graduates left immediately after the ceremony to begin their long trip back to Alaska. They were anxious to see family and friends after their three-and-a-half-month absence.

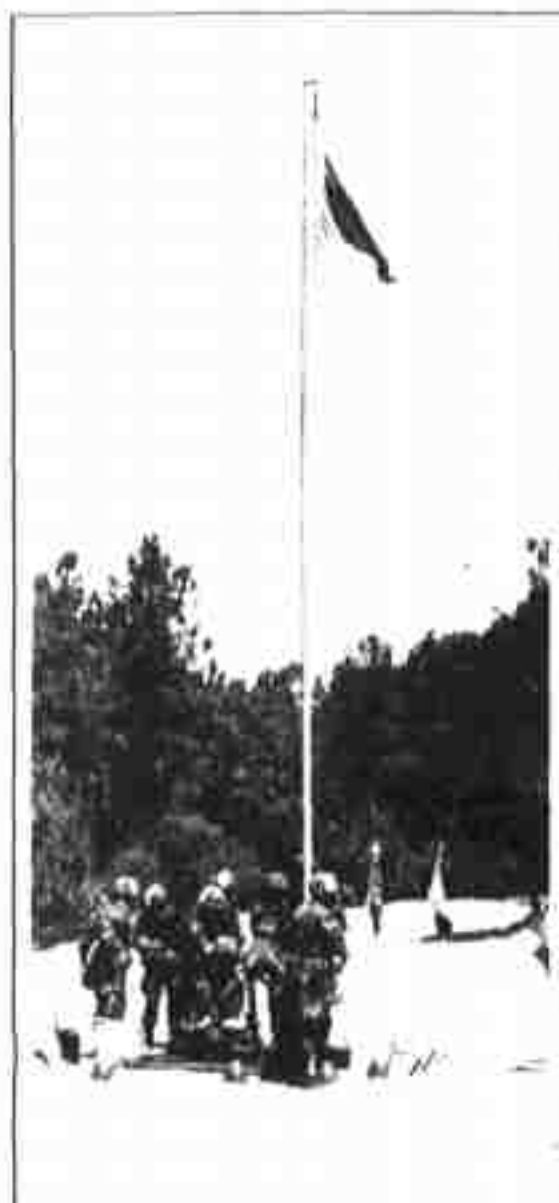
"I'm glad I went through it, but I wouldn't want to do it again right away," Merculief said. "It was hard staying away from my family for so long."

Anxious to resume his civilian life, Elachik had big plans for his return to Kotlik.

"First thing I'm going to do," he announced, "is grow my hair back!"

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—Maj. Gen. John Schaeffer



Alaska National Guard soldiers spent 13 weeks training in Georgia and finally celebrated completion of the U.S. Army's basic infantry training course. At left, top, they raise a flag. Center left, Pvt. Melvin Andrew of Manokotak takes a break, and lower left, Maj. Gen. John Schaeffer congratulates Pvt. 2 Gerasim Merculief, who was named Distinguished Honor Graduate. At top right, the Buddy Platoon poses for a photo. Other photos at right, moving clockwise, include Gerasim Merculief; soldiers in camouflage; and, from left, Command Sgt. Maj. Winifred Manuklook, Command Sgt. Maj. Levi Cleveland, Maj. Gen. John Schaeffer and Merculief.

