

Pagano gives the National Guard his best

By Bill Hess
Tundra Times

Young and middle-aged National Guardsmen from across the state are studying codes in a grey Fort Richardson classroom when the door opens and an unexpected guest walks in. The student who is trying out his hand as teacher stops talking and there is a sudden moment of silence in the room.

No one knew that Major-General Edward G. Pagano, the Adjutant General of the Alaska National Guard, was going to stop by this morning.

The general walks slowly past the tables where the guardsmen sit with books and papers spread about, stopping to chat with different men. "Where is your home?" he asks one young Inupiat.

"Elim, sir," the soldier responds.

"Is it colder up there than it is here?"

"It's colder here now than it was in Elim when I left, sir," the young man replies.

Pagano, an Aleut born in the village of Unga in 1926, says such unannounced drop-in visits are among his favorite ways of getting a feel for what is happening among the men who make up the Alaska National Guard.

This way, Pagano believes he can get a better feel for what really is happening at events such as the Non-Commissioned Officer School at the Alaska Military Academy. If the leaders and instructors know in advance that he's coming, they could insure that he heard what they wanted him to hear, and that he saw what they wanted him to see, Pagano explains later.

"I find that if you can just sit down with one of the men, have a cup of coffee with him in a relaxed way, he will normally tell you what's going on," Pagano says.

Although the National Guard is present throughout the United States, the men and the battalions commanded by the general on behalf of the governor of Alaska are unique. Most of the nearly 3,000 troops are Alaska Natives living in the Bush. Many of them reside in villages a very short distance from the Soviet Union.

In any conventional attack or military operation which the Soviets might ever launch on American soil, the first soldiers to pitch their bullets, bodies and blood against them would likely be the Eskimo Scout units of the First, Second, and Third Battalions.

In fact, Pagano notes, out of 3,350 guard units nationwide, the only ones who are considered "deployed" are numbered among the 84 units in Alaska. Alaska also has the only "Scout" battalions in the entire nation, Pagano notes.

Consequently, the role of the Alaska Guard is much greater than that of other states, not only locally but

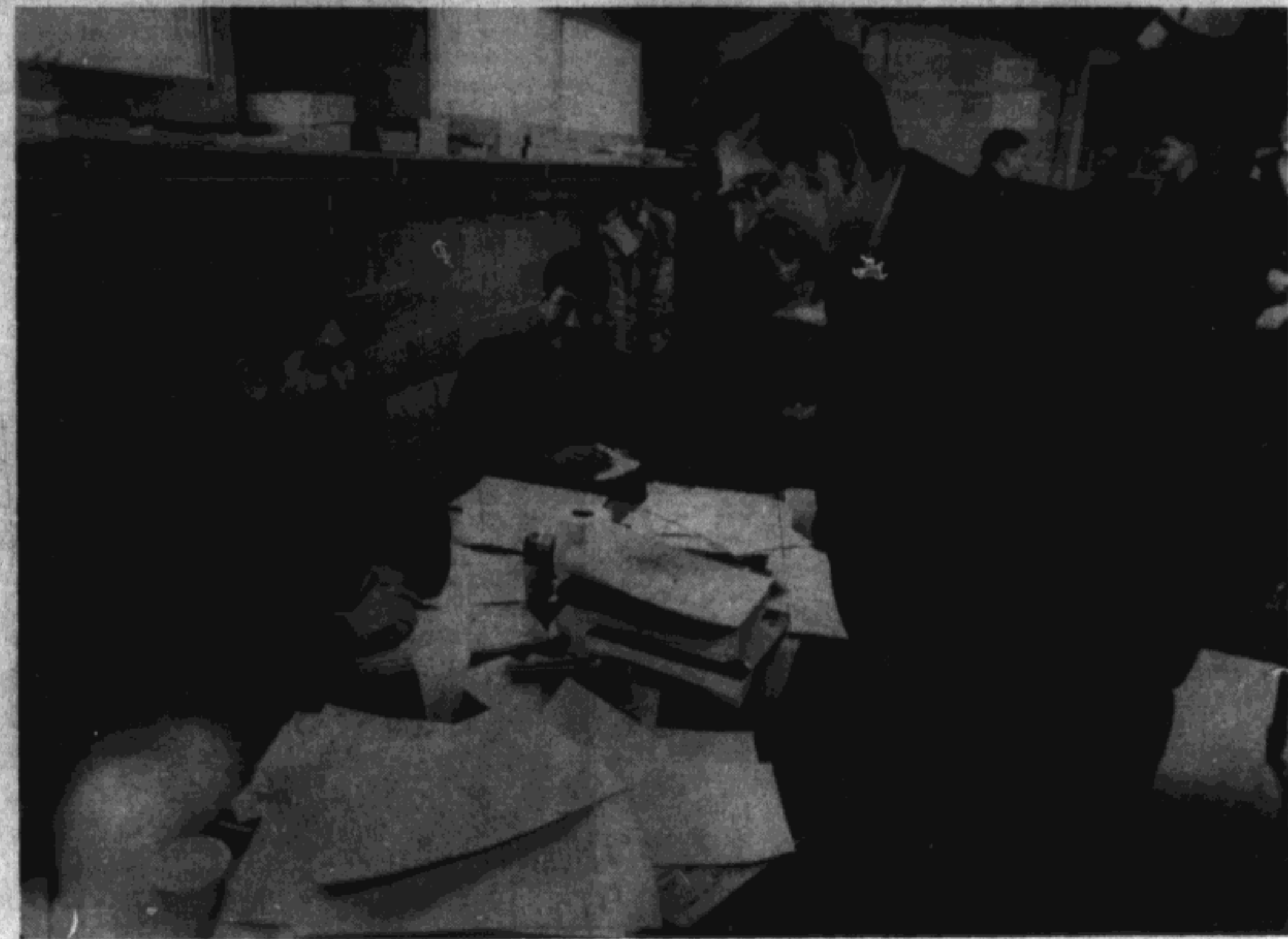


PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Adjutant General Edward G. Pagano visits guardsmen undergoing NCO training at Fort Richardson.

for the entire country. "Our troops employ what we call mission readiness, the ability to go to war tomorrow if necessary," Pagano explains.

"It's a simple fact that you cannot take a battalion from the South 48 up there," Pagano speaks of the homelands of the Eskimo scouts. It would be tremendously expensive to build and supply support services necessary for southerners to survive in the Arctic environment, Pagano says.

As Adjutant General, it is Pagano's responsibility to see that the men in the Army and Air Guards have the administration, training, and equipment necessary to carry out their mission.

With conflicts brewing nationwide and tension growing between the United States and the Soviet Union, the possibility of the Guard going into combat cannot be taken likely, no matter how improbable it seems.

"I don't feel good about it," Pagano says when he thinks about the world situation. "I don't want to see a war. But I think we have to be realistic about it and be prepared. The better prepared we are, the less likely we are to have a war."

"I feel the men are prepared; they can handle themselves. I sure wouldn't feel good if they weren't prepared; that would be asking for war."

Pagano has seen war himself, and like so many men who have, he does not care to discuss the experience in any detail. In 1944, Pagano was drafted as an enlisted man in the Army. While still in

his teens, he was sent to fight in the South Pacific, and he invaded Okinawa as a member of the 96th Division.

"I saw enough to last me," is his only comment when asked about the experience. Pagano was wounded on Okinawa, and he received both the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star with V Device. He will not talk about the action which led to the Bronze Star.

"I don't think that's important to bring up now," Pagano evades the issue. "Let's just say that in my young days I was a bit gung-ho, and I probably wouldn't do anything like that now."

Combat is not the only skill the guard is trained for. Pagano notes that reconnaissance and surveillance are important duties of the Alaska National Guard.

They do not sneak across the international dateline to spy on the Soviets but the Guardsmen are trained to keep a sharp eye out for Soviet planes, boats, or personnel who might try to sneak into U.S. territory. This is a job they can perform even when they are out seal hunting, fishing, or taking part in other activities of the Bush lifestyle.

"They would be detected," Pagano says of any aliens who might try entering Alaska, despite the state's vastness. "No stranger could come in without the knowledge of the village people."

Another mission of the guard is to respond to any crisis in Alaska, such as an earthquake, flood, tidal wave, or civil disturbance.

After the war, Pagano served with a cadre of the Philippines

Scouts. After leaving the army, he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Business Administration from San Francisco State College. In 1954, he joined the Alaska National Guard and was assigned to Company D, the 207th Infantry Battalion, at Kodiak.

He later returned to active duty in the army, and served with the Selective Service. He retired from the U.S. Army as a colonel in June of 1982.

Pagano is pleased with his role of Adjutant General. "I think it's the greatest job in the world," he says. "When I started out in the Guard 30 years ago, it was my ambition to one day be Adjutant General."

Pagano says involvement with people makes the job enjoyable to him. "It's good to work with people who share a patriotic sense of duty, who want to serve."

"The men in the villages are a very patriotic people," he adds. "They believe in service. Conscientious objector status is unknown to them. Most of them are the sons and grandsons of the members of the original Alaska Territorial Guard who served under Muktuk Marston. They have a proud tradition of service; we don't have any recruiting problem."

"They believe in providing protection, if necessary. It's their homeland."

In recent years, there has been a movement growing in many areas of the world to freeze the production of nuclear weapons, and perhaps to eventually eliminate them. The movement has reached into the villages of Alaska.

The Inuit Circumpolar Con-

ference, which represents the different Inuit peoples in the villages of Alaska, Canada, Greenland and hopefully one day the Soviet Union, has called for the Arctic to be established as an internationally nuclear-free zone. The Arctic environment is extremely fragile, ICC has pointed out, and could receive irreparable damage even without a major nuclear confrontation.

"I believe that if we have a strong conventional force, the possibility of our ever having to use nuclear weapons is greatly decreased," Pagano expresses his feelings on the subject. "However, I wouldn't want to see a complete ban on nuclear weapons for us, any place. I don't want to see a war. I know what war is. Military people are the ones who would most hate to see a war, because we suffer the most. We've been there; we recognize the horrors of war more than anyone else."

"But we've got to be realistic enough to see the possibility and to realize that we can't sit back. I'm not overly frightened that we'll get into a war now, because I know that we could hurt them as much as they could hurt us."

Although Pagano expresses some frustration that in commanding the Guard, he must deal with the government bureaucracy, which tends to slow things down and create inefficiency, he is proud of the Alaska Scouts and other National Guardsmen.

"I feel they do a hell of a job, and they deserve the best. That is my job, to give them the best. To do less would be to shirk my responsibility."