

Air National Guard takes over search and rescue missions

WASHINGTON, D.C. — A Senate subcommittee recently approved Sen. Ted Stevens' request for \$73 million in federal funds to acquire aircraft for a new Alaska National Guard search and rescue unit.

The fund would provide the Alaska National Guard with four MH 60G helicopters and two HC 130 tanker aircraft to refuel the helicopters.

The helicopters would be delivered within the next nine to 12 months, with the tankers to follow by mid-1989. All the aircraft would be new and would be based in Anchorage.

The funding is contained in the Fiscal year 1988 defense appropriations bill approved recently by the Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. Sen. Stevens is the ranking Republican on the subcommittee.

Search and rescue for downed military and civilian aircraft in the state have been conducted by the Alaskan Air Command. However, the Air Force last year announced that the refueling tankers which are used for search and rescue activities would be moved to other military installations for special operations. The tankers

were relocated in the fall, thereby diminishing the ability of the Air Force to continue search and rescue operations.

"Already this year, the Alaskan Air command has saved 23 lives through its search and rescue operations," Stevens said. "The removal of the Air Force tankers severely limits their ability to maintain the level of service."

"I agree that it's in the national interest to provide special operations with the tankers, but it shouldn't be done at the expense of Alaskan lives," Stevens said. "The appropriation approved would modernize the search and rescue aircraft used in Alaska and ensure that this essential service is not allowed to lapse."

The legislation approved also included language providing for the transition of search and rescue activities from the Air Force to the Alaska National Guard. The Guard will work with the Air Force on search and rescue missions for approximately the next year and have responsibility when the aircraft and crews are operationally ready.