

# General Schaeffer confirms serious guard bias

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*Board of Inquiry called as more officers come forward with discrimination allegations*

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Governor Tony Knowles has instructed Adjutant General Jacob Lestenkof to appoint a five member Board of Inquiry to review "the general working atmosphere within the Alaska National Guard, including the policies of those in command."

This follows a broad range of allegations against several National Guard officers concerning biased treatment of minorities and minority sympathizers in a preliminary report by Hightower Investigations, Inc. of Washington, D.C. The firm, which has indicated a final report is imminent, was hired by one or more National Guard members who felt their grievances would not be addressed through the normal chain of command.

## **The Board of Inquiry**

"Under the terms of the order, the report has to be completed by the end of the legislative session and the report itself is made to Gen. Lestenkof, with copies to the Office of the Governor, the Speaker of the House and President of the Senate," said state Attorney General Bruce Botelho. Announcement of the board members is expected by February 10.

"The Governor has made it quite clear that it is neither a witch hunt nor a white wash and he expects the commission to get in and fully determine what the facts are and, if corrective action is necessary, to make those recommendations," added Botelho.

## **Is there discrimination?**

Lestenkof said he is not personally aware of any racial discrimination, but he agrees there is a serious morale problem.

"I think there are morale problems," said Lestenkof. "Anytime an organization that has been exposed to this big letter writing campaign and media interest about problems in the guard, it effects the health of

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the organization which is the morale. I'm very concerned about that. We have to get this thing settled so that we can move ahead."

However, ongoing investigation by *Tundra Times* suggests that racial bias in the National Guard is indeed a reality.

"I'm going to believe that most of these allegations are true because these guys that have made these allegations have been coming to me with their problems for the past few years," said (retired) Gen. John Schaeffer, former commissioner of military and veterans affairs and adjutant general of the National Guard during the Cowper Administration. "They come to me asking for advice and I told them what they should do. At one point, I tried to talk to Gen. (Hugh) Cox about some of these things and it didn't work. I tried to talk to Gov. (Walter) Hickel, he said that he was sorry I felt the way I did, but he had a very good man in the position and he was going to back him up."

Several Native and non-Native guardsmen have shared their experiences with *Tundra Times* on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation by superiors.

According to Schaeffer, the difficulties encountered by Lt. Col. Milton Cross, an Inupiat from Kotzebue, illustrates the level of bias encountered by several high ranking Native guard members.

"Milt Cross, they've been trying to get rid of him right along. At one time or another, they had different reasons. One time, it was because he wasn't physically fit, so he started passing all his physical fitness tests. Then it was, 'you don't meet all your civilian military requirements.' So he got his degree. Then it was, 'you're not doing your job properly.' And they caused a series of inspections on his facilities that he was responsible for and he passed them all. It was just one thing after another. He became qualified under military board recommendation for promotion to colonel. They passed him over, even though he was the only one at some times that was qualified, they would pass him over and give it to someone who was less qualified or weren't qualified. It is hard *not* to see that there was some reason for it. The reason has got to be that he is a Native officer. He is just as well decorated, if not more than anybody else. He's had a lot of time on active service, he met all his requirements. I don't know what's wrong with him. They got rid of a whole bunch of other ones, too. Milt is a good example because anytime they found something they could hang him for, he would go ahead and take care of it so he wouldn't be unqualified. They've tried everything. They tried, because he was making allegations and getting investigations done, they've tried to silence him by giving him promotions and he has refused. In a sense, Milt is better off than some of the others be-

cause he's still there. He still has his job and his career. The others are gone," Schaeffer said.

According to Schaeffer, other Guard members who have been dealt with in a similar way include Joe Beans, Vince Beans, Jack Hopstad, Billy Atseriak and Charles Soxie.

Charles Soxie of Unalakleet, a former lieutenant colonel in the Army National Guard, confirmed he was subjected to discrimination.

"The past administration won't admit it," said Soxie, who was determined ineligible for retention at his last State Selective Early Retention Board (SERB) evaluation. "But I knew I was phased out. It was a very subtle, yet deliberate action that (Gen. Hugh) Cox and (Col. Michael) Byington did. I saw it coming when I was working at the National Guard State Headquarters (in Anchorage) - my full time position."

Soxie says that the reason given to him for non-retention was because he did not attend his regular drill assemblies.

"I never did get calls from my boss or the director of operations about my schedule or anything else," Soxie said. "So they basically left me alone out here (in Unalakleet). That caused me to miss a lot of the drill assemblies that I would have liked to went to. That was a pretty lame excuse." Soxie states that he has 29 years in the service, that he's in good health and meets all the criteria and educational qualifications military wise. "There was no reason for me to be separated."

## **Bias a major cause of demoralization**

Demoralization in the Alaska National Guard has been attributed by some officials to downsizing or elimination of predominantly rural battalions and units, and other factors. But Schaeffer suggested the down-siz-

ing is part of the bias problem, not strictly a budgetary issue as some have claimed.

"That was an excuse to use to get rid of people in units they didn't want, and to reorganize," said Schaeffer. "I think that a disservice has been done to the State of Alaska, to the people of Alaska and most of all to the Eskimo scouts and their units. It's going to be reflected next time we have a big earthquake or other major disaster because there won't be anyone out there to assist the civilian population. By (the guard's) own calculations, they've shut down at least a third of the guard units, a third of the villages have been shut down since Gen. Cox has been there."

Soxie agrees with Schaeffer.

"This General was supposed to represent the Air National and Army National Guard of the State of Alaska," said Soxie. "He's never made one visit, as far as I can tell, out to the centers like Barrow, Kotzebue, Nome, Bethel, Juneau, and Fairbanks to present himself as the adjutant general. He's never placed an interest. He's never made an effort to go out to present the flag or to uplift the morale of the men and women he's supposed to take care of."

Soxie added, "Subsequently, the senior Army Guard staff are ultimately responsible for letting their units reach a sorry state of readiness. This past administration effectively got rid of all the senior Native officers with the exception of a couple."

Efforts to reach Cox have so far been unsuccessful.

## **Who do you talk to?**

According to Lestenkof, guard members are supposed to be able to bring complaints to the attention of superiors without reprisal. Others say it's a nice theory that doesn't work in reality.

"I want to strengthen the chan-

nels of bringing grievances to the fore," said Lestenkof, announcing plans to re-establish an open door policy where anybody can get talk to him very quickly. "We're looking at establishing a small office here for people that feel they may be discriminated against or they have any operational problems .... they can have private counseling as to how to approach it."

## **Vote of confidence**

Several guard members have voiced concern about Lestenkof's retention of Roger Schnell as assistant commissioner of DMVA, suggesting that as a holdover from the previous administration he is part of the bias problem.

But Lestenkof says that as a former guardsmen and now a civilian, Schnell understands the department.

"I trust him," Lestenkof continued, "I feel very comfortable with his proficiency, his honesty and integrity. You try to have people around you that will help you run the department. It's not my intent to come in here and fire everybody and sit here all by myself and try to assemble a team. It would take me two years before I could even get to first base."

"The important thing, though, is people that are working under you must mirror the goals and direction that you want the organization to go. If they don't, they're no longer there."

Gen. Lestenkof was the Assistant Adjutant General under Gen. John Schaeffer. Schaeffer believes that Lestenkof is the perfect man to rebuild morale in the guard.

"He already got a good start on it. He indicated to them (the guard) that they had some problems and he was going to take care

of it," said Schaeffer. "He's a very capable, caring person, so he's going to do a good job."

Schaeffer also noted that help is available to Lestenkof in his endeavor to rectify the situation.

"Myself and a whole bunch of other former guardsmen indicated that if he ever needs our help for anything, we're willing to help," said Schaeffer. "It's still probably going to take longer than he's going to be adjutant general to fix and undo what's happened. Guard units have to be rebuilt from the ground up, you have to use the resources available in every village. It takes ten years to build up the leadership structure in units. That's if you're successful."

## **A long road ahead**

Lestenkof has his work cut out for him if he does decide to rebuild the guard units in rural Alaska. He said he would be looking at that possibility very closely. He also stated that he intends to build back the morale and increase recruitment.

"I want to look at that because part of the health of the small villages is to have a good guard unit," said Lestenkof. "If you don't have a good guard presence there, it's not good in the long run. Once you have deactivated units, it's always hard to get back."

Schaeffer remains optimistic.

"In spite of those things, if people want to take care enough to give their young men and women an opportunity to serve their country, state and to get some good experience and training, we can do it," said Schaeffer.

*Note: Associate Editor Jeff Richardson contributed to this story.*