

Santa wings his way to Kotzebue, Nome, Bethel

by Barbara Crane
for the Tundra Times

KOTZEBUE, NOME, BETHEL — Santa Claus arrived a little early this year for kids in some Alaska villages. "My reindeer are resting up for their big Christmas Eve trip," explained Santa, so he borrowed an Alaska Air National Guard C-130 cargo plane to visit Kotzebue, Nome and Bethel Dec. 11.

This trip was part of Operation Santa Claus, a project of the Salvation Army, Alaska Jaycees and Alaska National Guard. The three organizations

collected and wrapped a mountain of gifts and distributed them on a series of flights this month.

"We've been doing this type of program for over 30 years," said Lt. Mike Haller, an Air National Guard spokesman. "This year we have 16 communities or villages on our list."

Santa first visited Kotzebue Elementary School. He was preceded by Chief Elf Kristine Weston (Air National Guard) who gave away candy canes during the children's recess.

Sandy Covey's and Linday Hadley's

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• Kotzebue teacher: *This is just too wonderful*



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5- and 6-year-olds sang "Jingle Bell Rock" as Santa himself entered their classroom.

Each child, assuring Santa of his or her good behavior during the year, received a gift and had a chance for a hug or a private word with Santa.

"This is just too wonderful," said Hadley. "It means so much to the children."

Next stop for Santa was Nome, where a load of presents was dropped off for later distribution.

In Bethel Santa brought gifts and visited with patients and staff at the Yukon-Kuskokwim Regional Hospital.

Andrew Alexie and Jamie Beaver, two young patients, were at first too shy to say anything to Santa. But soon Andrew was chatting away about his

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upcoming trip to Disneyland, and Jamie managed a wide-eyed "thank you" for the stuffed teddy bear she received.

Back on the airplane that afternoon, Santa relaxed and rested up for his Friday to McGrath, Aniak and Shageluk.



photos by Barbara Crane



Santa spent a lot of time with rural Alaska children recently, thanks to the Alaska Air National Guard. Above, he listens to children in the Kotzebue Elementary School. Shown center is Candace Brown of Kotzebue who got a teddy bear. At right, Santa visits Andrew Alexie, who is in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Regional Hospital in Bethel.