

Metrokin: Highest ranking Guard member

by Barbara Crane
Tundra Times reporter

When Dennis Metrokin is asked how he became what he is today — a Koniag Inc. board member and the highest ranking enlisted member of the Alaska Army National Guard — he begins by talking about the people and places of his childhood.

"I am Aleut," Metrokin said. "My father's family is from Kodiak, and

Metrokin said. "I was naive as you could be. About the second day the teacher asked everybody what they wanted to be when they grew up. It came my turn and I said, 'I want to be Superman.'"

"Everyone started laughing at me, and I didn't understand why. I was the only one there who didn't understand what was so funny.

"Another time I got a homework paper back with 'OK' written on it. So I asked the teacher what that meant.

father resumed speaking the Russian language, and his family began attending the Russian Orthodox church. There wasn't a Russian Orthodox church in Naknek, so they had been attending the Lutheran one.

"So that was another big change for me," Metrokin said. "Going to a new church and not understanding the customs or the language either."

Metrokin graduated from high school in Kodiak and worked for a while as a commercial salmon fisher-

"I'm the enlisted soldiers' representative to the adjutant general," Metrokin said. "I travel around and see how things are going and explain new programs and policies to the enlisted soldiers. Then I advise the general on how his programs and policies are being implemented and how they are affecting the soldiers.

"Through me the enlisted men and women have direct representation to the general with their problems or complaints."

Last December Metrokin was elected to the board of directors of Koniag.

"I liked what I saw at the board meetings and I thought the Koniag board was heading in the right direction, so I decided to run," Metrokin said. "I hadn't really kept up with the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and everything that goes with it, but I am learning. It's been very interesting."

Metrokin also serves on the Alaska Native Veterans Council.

"Our goal is to communicate to Alaska Native veterans what their benefits are," he said. "For some reason, not very many Alaska Native veterans are using the benefits they have earned."

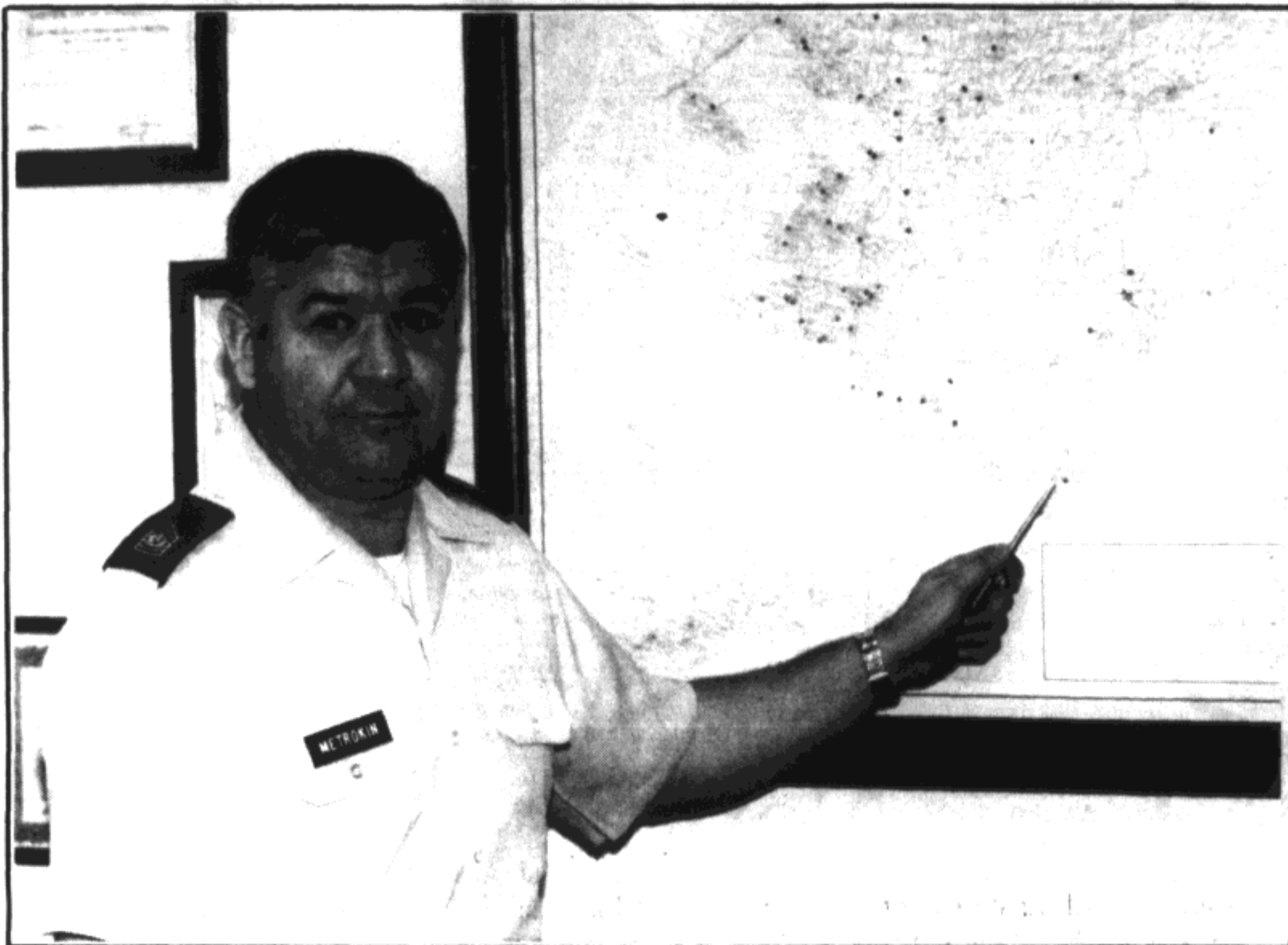


Photo by Barbara Crane

that's where my Russian name comes from."

"My grandfather on my father's side was a Native leader in Kodiak. One of his hands was shot off in a hunting accident, but he could still row a boat and run a trapline."

Metrokin's mother's father ran away from home in Denmark when he was 13 years old, and he became a cabin boy on a sailing schooner. He sailed around Cape Horn seven times and finally ended up working at a whaling station at Akutan on the Aleutian Chain.

"That's where he met my grandmother," Metrokin said. "They got married and moved to Naknek where my mother was born."

"My father was a commercial fisherman who went to Bristol Bay and met my mother in Naknek. That's where I got my start, just outside of Naknek a little ways, where my dad was the winter man at a cannery."

"We were the only family who lived there, so I was raised in a rather isolated and remote environment."

With no school nearby, Metrokin's mother, Feckla, attempted to teach him first grade through a correspondence study program.

"That was a mistake," Metrokin recalled. "She only had an eighth grade education to begin with, and she couldn't control me. So between the two of us, I almost failed the first grade."

"But I squeaked by, and the next year my parents decided to send me to the 'big' town of Naknek so I could get a real education."

Metrokin stayed with his grandmother in Naknek while attending class in a one-room schoolhouse. Being around strangers and so many other children was a tremendous change for him.

"I didn't know anything,"

She looked at me strangely and said, 'That means it's OK.' But I really had no idea what 'OK' meant. Things like that really frustrated me."

When Metrokin was 9, his father decided to move the family back to his old hometown of Kodiak.

"Talk about a culture shock!" Metrokin said. "You have to understand that Naknek in the early 1940s was a very small place. We had one store. Everybody knew each other. I think most of the people were related."

man. Then in 1962 he joined the Alaska Army National Guard as a private.

"It was sort of a traditional thing in Kodiak," he said. "All the young guys joined the Guard. At first, I couldn't wait till my first three years were over so I could get out."

"But after a while, I made some rank and was given some responsibilities so I decided to stay in for another enlistment period."

"I often think about what I would

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"But even those people we weren't related to, the kids called uncle or aunt. It was a very close-knit community."

"But Kodiak was like a real city. It had one street that was paved. There were real businesses with neon signs and all of that. It was so much larger than what I was used to."

Once back in Kodiak, Metrokin's

be today if I hadn't enlisted. I can imagine me hanging around in Kodiak and really not going very far or achieving anything. Now the opportunities are there, and if I don't achieve something, it's my own fault."

Metrokin now holds the rank of command sergeant major and is the highest ranking enlisted member in the Army Guard.

'I've been thinking about how lucky I was to grow up the way I did, in a small village where everybody knew everybody and kids could really be kids. So much of that is lost now.'

Though Metrokin and his family have lived in Anchorage since 1969, he makes a point of returning to Kodiak at least once a year.

"But I haven't been back to Naknek since 1970," Metrokin said. "One of these days, I'll take the family and show them where I got my start."

"I've been thinking about how lucky I was to grow up the way I did, in a small village where everybody knew everybody and kids could really be kids. So much of that is lost now."

"My son and daughter had the advantages of going to big schools and participating in organized sports here in Anchorage, but they've missed out on being able to live the way my brothers and I did."

At 46, Metrokin is looking to the future.

"I do still have some goals," he said, "and my message to younger people is that you have to believe in yourself and set priorities. You have to be striving for something."