

A case of policing family and friends

By PETE SPIVEY
For the Tundra Times

Mekoryuk, Nunivak Island—Howard T. Amos had been home from his training course at the Department of Public Safety academy just three days when he was called on to use what he'd learned in Alaska's first Village Public Safety Officer class. Amos, a Nunivak Eskimo, had scored top honors in the five-week course on basic police procedures, search and rescue operations and emergency medical treatment. But he had no idea how soon his classroom training would be tested in a real situation.

"I was still setting things up in the office, when one of the village kids came and got me and told me my sister's husband was trying to kill her," Amos said. "I ran to the school where she worked and found a teacher holding her up trying to slow the bleeding from a wound in her chest."

Amos' sister had been shot with a 30-'06 rifle. The powerful hunting round had amputated one of her breasts and she was slipping into shock from the trauma and loss of blood.

He says the fear he felt at seeing his sister's life slipping away was overcome by the training regimen he'd been through. He did what he'd learned, stopping the flow of blood and preventing her from

sliding further into shock. With her condition stabilized, he called for an airplane and continued to treat her as he accompanied her on the "longest hour-long flight in the world" to the Bethel hospital.

His sister lived. Amos arrested her husband and he was eventually sent to prison for 10 years.

"That was one event in my life that I could never forget," Amos says now, 18 months after the shooting. "If I hadn't have been lucky enough to get that training there's no way she would be alive right now."

The Department of Public Safety didn't necessarily have such life-or-death rescues in mind when it launched the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program in 1979.

The basic idea was to give rural villages greater self-sufficiency in running their own law-enforcement and public-safety programs. Normally, that amounts to little more than warning a few speeding snowmachiners to slow down and encouraging the purchase of state-subsidized fire extinguishers.

"Howard's coolness and professionalism in saving his sister's life might be an example that sells the program politically, but it's the mundane, everyday things these guys do that really make it work," said Trooper Sgt. Ron Cole, statewide coordinator of the program.

The 52 village officers Cole

loosely shepherds are the evolutionary results of 10 years of state efforts to improve public safety in the Alaska Bush without stationing a trooper in every village. And the village officers are better trained in all aspects of public safety than the narrowly focused constables and village police officers who preceded them, Cole says.

So far, the department has had pretty good luck with the officers. Only two have been dismissed—both for beating their wives—and there have been no serious incidents of abuse or firearms mistakes, Cole says. The department has been so encouraged by the results that it is asking the legislature for more funding in fiscal year 1981—50% increase to \$4.5 million—to train and fund positions for 106 officers and supporting troopers next year.

Candidate officers, after being selected by their local village councils and screened by trooper coordinators, are sent to Sitka for five weeks of intensive training at the trooper academy. Besides learning the basics of police work, the brightest of the prospective officers receive enough training in first aid to earn Emergency Medical Technician certificates.

They're also trained in search-and-rescue operations and boating safety. After academy graduation, the candidate officers are brought to Anchorage

for two weeks of firefighting training.

Rookie officers earn about \$1,200-a-month starting pay. They work for their local village councils and are paid through the statewide organization of Alaska Village Council Presidents.

Even after returning to his home village, the new officer continues to undergo training. Regional trooper detachments try to send a trooper to the village every few months to review and update the officer and groups of officers are sometimes called together for training seminars.

"This whole program is based on the concept of continuous training," Cole said. "The goal is to get them all past the basics and into advance levels, meaning that the real goal is self-sufficiency."

Self-sufficiency benefits more than just the villagers and even does more than simply free regular troopers from a lot of misdemeanor police work. It also allows troopers to make simple goodwill visits to villages and, perhaps more importantly, lets them end a visit without taking along a manacled prisoner.

Sgt. Glen Godfrey, who oversees the activities of 19 village safety officers from his Bethel trooper detachment, says the psychological benefits of goodwill visits are significant.

"We have excellent rapport with most villages. But, still the Yupik term for trooper means 'he who comes and takes away,' Godfrey said. "Before this program started, all the local law enforcement officer did was wait for us, so most of our trips to villages were for the sole purpose of picking up prisoners."

Now, except in cases where the most serious crimes are involved, the local officer makes the arrest and after checking with the troopers by telephone to make sure he's got a valid case, he usually flies with the prisoner to the nearest town that has a trooper detachment and a jail.

Godfrey says that has given local officers more authority and makes troopers seem less like the heavies.

Amos, who Godfrey calls "the cream of the crop," says he took the job because no other young people in his village seemed interested. Now 30, he's since recruited three young partners, primarily to make late-night rounds and to help with occasional searches for villagers lost or stranded during snow-machine forays on Nunivak Island.

Amos works out of a portable building near the village center which houses two holding cells and features a wall adorned with the various training certificates he's earned. Near his desk sits a citizens band radio, a constantly chattering squawk box that makes up for Mekoryuk's lack of telephones.

The village is far from being a hotbed of crime. Other than the constant battle of trying to keep snowmachiners from tearing through at breakneck speeds, Amos says his biggest law enforcement problem is the periodic flareup of alcohol abuse.

He has the nightmare of his own sister's shooting to remind him of what can happen to an otherwise peaceful village when alcohol is in town.

"It come and goes and when
(Continued on Page eight)

● VPSO

(Continued from Page Four)

it's here, we have lots of problems with people getting drunk and fighting," he said. "After my sister's shooting and being threatened by drunks a few time myself, I would be really happy if we could get alcohol banned here altogether."

Village voters approved such a measure last fall, but state Attorney General Wilson Condon struck it down because the referendum was based on a defunct state statute. Village elders are preparing another petition drive to get the proposed ban on the ballot again.

Amos hopes that will leave him only the lightest of misdemeanants to deal with and give him time to devise public-service projects as punishment for those found guilty.