

Federal employees get taste of life on St. Lawrence Island

by Barbara Crane

Tundra Times reporter

GAMBELL — When 30 senior federal officials from Washington, D.C., stepped off their plane in Gambell, they didn't know what to expect.

With attire ranging from light wind-breakers to heavy down parkas, it was apparent that stories about our frigid Ice Box of the North were met with varying degrees of skepticism or belief.

Their Alaska National Guard cargo plane was met by Winnie James and others who rode out on 4-wheelers to see who had landed. Most of the visitors declined offers of a ride, preferring to brave the strong wind for a chance to stretch their legs and sightsee on the walk into town.

The 30 were part of the U.S. State

Department's Senior Seminar, a training program for the top ranks of senior foreign and civil service federal employees.

They had come to Alaska to learn about the culture, geography, history and problems of this far-away corner of the country.

And they wanted to get a better idea of how the federal policies they create and implement affect the people of our state.

About half of the participants work for the State Department, and many of them had been stationed at overseas embassies for many years.

A major goal of the nine-month program is to reacquaint these people with all the different regions and cultures which make up the United States, so they can better represent our country abroad.

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About seven additional field trips are planned to visit other areas of the United States.

"When we first thought of coming to Alaska, we thought of just investigating the effects of the Prince William Sound oil spill," said Ambassador William Bodde, dean of the Senior Seminar.

"But we quickly realized there was so much more of Alaska we should see. Our travel budget is limited, so we greatly appreciate the National Guard's assistance in getting our group around Alaska."

The group's first stop in Gambell was the Army Guard armory, where they quickly became aware of the sort of problem they had come to discover — the limited plumbing facilities found in many villages of rural Alaska.

Sgt. Mike Apatiki, who was born and grew up in Gambell, talked with the group about the mission and special traditions of the Eskimo Scouts. As he talked, his son Abel, age 5, shyly peeked around his legs to get a look at the strangers.

The visitors were told about the economic problems of rural Alaska, the limited job opportunities, the vast distances and harsh weather conditions, and the social and cultural makeup of the region.

As they talked, word circulated throughout Gambell about the visitors, and as they left the armory they were met by ivory carvers, doll makers and skin sewers eager to sell their crafts.

Many of the visitors said they had never seen crafts like these, but they were impressed with the workmanship and bought many pieces as souvenirs of the trip.

The group next visited the elementary school. They brought Halloween decorations and books for the children and visited with the first and second graders.

They also visited the Gambell Native Store, where they were astounded by the prices and wondered out loud how anybody could afford to live there.

This experience brought home the importance of the subsistence lifestyle in a village where prices are high but



photo by Barbara Crane

Dave Giddens, U.S. Air Force, talks with six-year-old Jill Campbell of Gambell.

cash is in short supply.

On the flight back to Anchorage, the visitors talked about their impressions of life on St. Lawrence Island.

"I'm glad our group was able to

make the trip to Gambell," Bodde said. "We've seen a lot of new things, and I'm sure it's given all of us a lot to think about when we get home."