

# Alaska Gen. Schaeffer visits Soviet Union

by Barbara Crane

Tundra Times reporter

When an Alaska National Guard C-12 aircraft landed in Provideniya recently, it was another first in the continuing story of improving U.S.-Soviet relations.

This aircraft, carrying Gov. Steve Cowper, Maj. Gen. John Schaeffer and other Alaska officials, was the first U.S. military aircraft to land in the Soviet Far East since World War II.

"And as far as I know," Schaeffer said, "I was the first U.S. military general to visit since World War II."

Schaeffer, who is adjutant general

of the Alaska National Guard, visited military bases in Provideniya and Anadyr and outposts in some of the smaller communities, including Big Diomed Island.

"Where we have local National Guard units in many small communities," he explained, "they have regular army and KGB border guard detachments. They are not people who grew up in the communities — they are regular military people who are just stationed there."

Schaeffer said he didn't visit the Soviet Far East planning to sign any new agreements. Instead, his goal was

to get to know the people on the other side of the Bering Strait who would be involved in conducting future joint search and rescue missions.

"I talked with their people," he said, "but it was with the understanding that actual agreements would have to be worked out between our Coast Guard and their search and rescue organizations."

Schaeffer explained that, as far as the U.S. is concerned, the Coast Guard has the lead role in search and rescue operations.

The terms of the agreements they make will determine how the Alaska

Guard search and rescue people will work with their Soviet counterparts.

"I hope eventually we will be able to work directly with the Soviets — just pick up the phone and talk when there's an emergency situation," Schaeffer said. "And the Soviets have indicated they feel the same way."

With the assumption that the new openness between the U.S. and Soviet Union will continue, Schaeffer is looking at ways of teaching the Russian language to those Guard members who will likely be coming into contact with their Soviet counterparts.

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photo courtesy Alaska National Guard



*Posing with Gen. John Schaeffer in the Soviet Far East are, from left, Yuri Tototto, Yakov Tagyek, Schaeffer and Valeri Nopevgi.*

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He would also like to find ways of teaching Guard members more about the history and culture of the Soviet Far East and the people who live there.

While most of his days and nights were filled with official meetings and briefings, there was time for some recreation and sightseeing, including a fishing trip and a tour of an ivory carving shop in Uelen.

"Some of us were wondering what their night life was like," Schaeffer said. "We were told they do have nightclubs for young people, but we weren't taken to any — I guess they thought we were too old to enjoy that!

"Instead, we usually had late dinners, not starting till about 8 p.m., and with our busy days we were ready to sleep after that."

Schaeffer said that everywhere they went he and the other members of his group were treated very well.

"The people were great," he said, "very friendly, especially in the smaller communities."

"The Native people over there treated me as if I were one of their own people. I think they were more proud of me being a general than the people in Alaska are!"

Schaeffer said the people living in the Soviet Far East feel isolated from Moscow, just as Alaskans feel somewhat isolated from Washington, D.C. And he had the impression they are more independent than their fellow countrymen, just as Alaskans seem more independent than other Americans.

"I was impressed by their openness," he said. "I think they are much more willing to forget the recent past and the bad feelings we had towards each other."

"They really want to make *glasnost* and *perestroika* work, while I think

we're still somewhat suspicious of it."

According to Schaeffer, Americans' unfamiliarity with the Soviet system and their history and culture makes it difficult for us to relate to how the Soviets live.

"But as far as the people are concerned," he said, "I didn't see a community over there where I couldn't live and get along with the people. I would, however, have a lot of trouble trying to figure out how to live within their system."

Schaeffer would like to return to the Soviet Far East soon, to continue his talks and to meet more of the people.

"I really enjoyed visiting over there," he said. "There just wasn't enough time for everything."

The general said that he wants to continue discussions on search and rescue coordination, as well as visit Native people there again.

"I'd like to look at things like their reindeer herding operation and if possible help with the development of business between Alaska and the Soviet Far East," he said.