

ESKIMO SCOUT BATTALIONS

EYES OF DEFENSE



ALASKA'S ELITE ESKIMO Scout Battalions, Alaska National Guard, participated in the recent Fur Rendezvous parade in Anchorage. Pictured

here is the Point Barrow Scout contingent, led by Capt. Eben Hopson of Barrow.

—Guard Photo by TIM BRADNER

'Impossible' Operation Works Well

By TIM BRADNER

In theory, it's an impossible operation.

By all the ordinary rules, moving 1100 men of the Alaska Army National Guard's elite "Eskimo Scout" battalions from 70 widely-scattered Alaska villages to Anchorage in the space of two days just can't be done.

State National Guard officials, advised of the impossibility of the project, decided to do it anyway back in 1952.

They did it, and they've been doing it every year since with the skilled help of veteran Alaska bush pilots and almost every commercial air carrier in Alaska.

This year over a thousand men were picked up in 64 villages over Western, Northern and Interior Alaska. In a series of well-coordinated shuttle flights, scattered elements of the two big Scout battalions were brought together at staging points and then jetted to Anchorage for two weeks of training at Camp Carroll, eight miles north of the Cook Inlet city.

The mass troop movement took the combined efforts of 10 Alaska commercial carriers. Wren Consolidated carried out most of the charter flights, although Alaska Airlines and Reeve Aleutian played a major part.

Such bush carriers as Munz (Nome), Samuelson Flying Service (Nome), Teller Air Service (Teller), Unalakleet Air Taxi (Unalakleet), Galena Air Service (Galena), Faulkner Flying Service (Bethel), and Ft. Yukon Air Service (Ft. Yukon) also took part.

The combined man-mileage flown passes 1.3 million miles, or enough mileage to send an Eskimo Scout to the moon and back three times. Some village Guardsmen flew over 1,000 miles to get to their annual encampment; five from Barter Island, near Canada on Alaska's forbidding, storm-swept Arctic coast, flew 300 west to Barrow then 740 miles south to Anchorage.

"To accomplish this mission each year in the face of weather and tremendous Alaska distances, we've enjoyed some splendid cooperation on the part of airline people," says Col. Charles W. Casper, the Purchasing and Fiscal Officer for the Alaska Army Guard.

Col. Casper, with a small staff, coordinates the entire movement every year.

"Every year these airline people put on their best performance to get the Scouts to camp on time, and then to get them home again. And every year the operation gets a little smoother."

There are the inevitable problems, though. Alaska weather is fierce and unpredictable, and every year two to three villages are weathered in. This year it was Savoonga, on St. Lawrence Island, Wainwright village near Barrow, and Goodnews Bay in Southwestern Alaska.

One year a contingent of King Island scouts were weathered in at Nome on the way back from camp. They waited from February to April to get to their homes on the island.

The price tag on moving in the First and Second Scout battalions runs a little over \$131,000 in charter fees. But this is cheap, Army Guard officials point out, compared to alternate ways of handling the job.

Military troop transport planes are actually more expensive to operate than civilian airliners, as the big cargo planes are designed for combat operations. Plus, there just aren't enough transports available in Alaska to do the job.

Doing it with military craft would require flying up transports from the "outside," and with the Vietnam war still in progress cargo craft are hard to come by.

Added to this is another factor: Safety. Alaska bush pilots are world renowned for their prowess in making it through the thickest and worst that Alaska can offer.

They are intimately acquainted with bush landing strips and every pothole and pebble from Tuntuliak to Barter Island; runways that would turn any "outside" pilot prematurely gray.

"We must weigh this safety factor heavily," Col. Casper says, "as the stakes are tremendous."

"The Eskimo Scouts are elite outfits. In the villages, esprit de corps in the units is high, and in many places every able-bodied male belongs to the Scouts. We certainly have almost every village leader and council-member."

"Because of this, if we lose a plane on the way to Guard camp the entire male population of that village goes with it."

Despite difficulties of distance, terrain and foul weather, there has never been an accident in the 16 years that the Scouts have come to Anchorage for their annual encampment.

But just in case, Col. Casper points out, air carriers are required to carry \$75,000 in insurance for each man flown.

At times weather is so severe that even hardy Alaska bush pilots can't fly. Storm-bound Guardsmen in villages have hitched up dogteams and snow machines for a quick cross-country trip to a neighboring village,

where the weather may be better.

The once-a-year two weeks of training is eagerly looked forward to in the villages. For most of the men, the trip offers an annual opportunity to get to a major city for buying clothes, a snow machine, tools or parts and other supplies hard to come by in remote communities. Guardsmen can shop during off-duty hours, and they must pay the freight themselves to bring their purchases home.

And for some new recruits in the Guard, it's the first trip to a city; the first time they've seen automobiles, paved sidewalks, big buildings.

Oddly enough, many also see their first moose. The big animals roam in numbers around Ft. Richardson; in many areas where the Scouts come from, there are no moose.

While at Camp Carroll, the scout battalions train in weapons firing, tactics and other field exercises.

"It seems odd to be sending these fellows to the field for training," one Guard officer comments, "They live under conditions far more rigorous in their day to day hunting and fishing than any military bivouac. They could teach us a few things."

Actually, the field training near Ft. Richardson offers the only opportunity for company commanders to assemble the Scouts in company and battalion formations. In the villages, the Scouts are organized in five-man "teams," and it's only during the two-week training that they can gain experience operating in larger than team-size units.

Army pay for two weeks in training also means a lot to village men, many of whom have incomes of less than one to two thousand dollars a year. Pay ranges from \$50 for a private to around \$280 for a sergenat, and the Scout payroll will total \$270,000 for the two weeks. The money is a welcome addition to village family budgets stretched thin this time of year.

Bringing the Scouts to camp is well worth the cost. Village Guardsmen perform a vital intelligence role for the military in Alaska.

"The real story of the Guard is here in the men," says Maj. Donald Shantz, commander of the Second Scout Battalion headquartered at Bethel.

"These men are hunters, trappers, fishermen, traders, councilmen and leaders in their communities. While out on hunting and fishing trips in the shadow of Siberia, they keep an eye out for unusual things. They are the real eyes and ears of our Alaska defense."



SOMETIMES TRAINING GETS TOUGH, as this Second Scout Battalion trooper from Bethel plainly shows. He has just come out of a room full of tear gas, in which he was ordered to take off his mask for a few brief seconds.



GENERAL BRIEFED—Four Eskimo scouts participating in Exercise Spotted Seal discuss the "war" with Lieutenant General Robert A. Breitweiser, commander in chief, Alaska. Spotted Seal, an Alaska National Guard field training exercise, took place in the Campbell Creek Air Strip area near Anchorage. The scouts are (from left) Staff Sergeant Daniel Horace, Fort Yukon; Staff Sergeant John B. Charles, Emmonak; First Sergeant John A. Hanson, Alakanuk and Sergeant First Class Timothy Williams, Akiak. Horace is a member of the 1st Scout Battalion while the others are members of the 2nd Scout Battalion.

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