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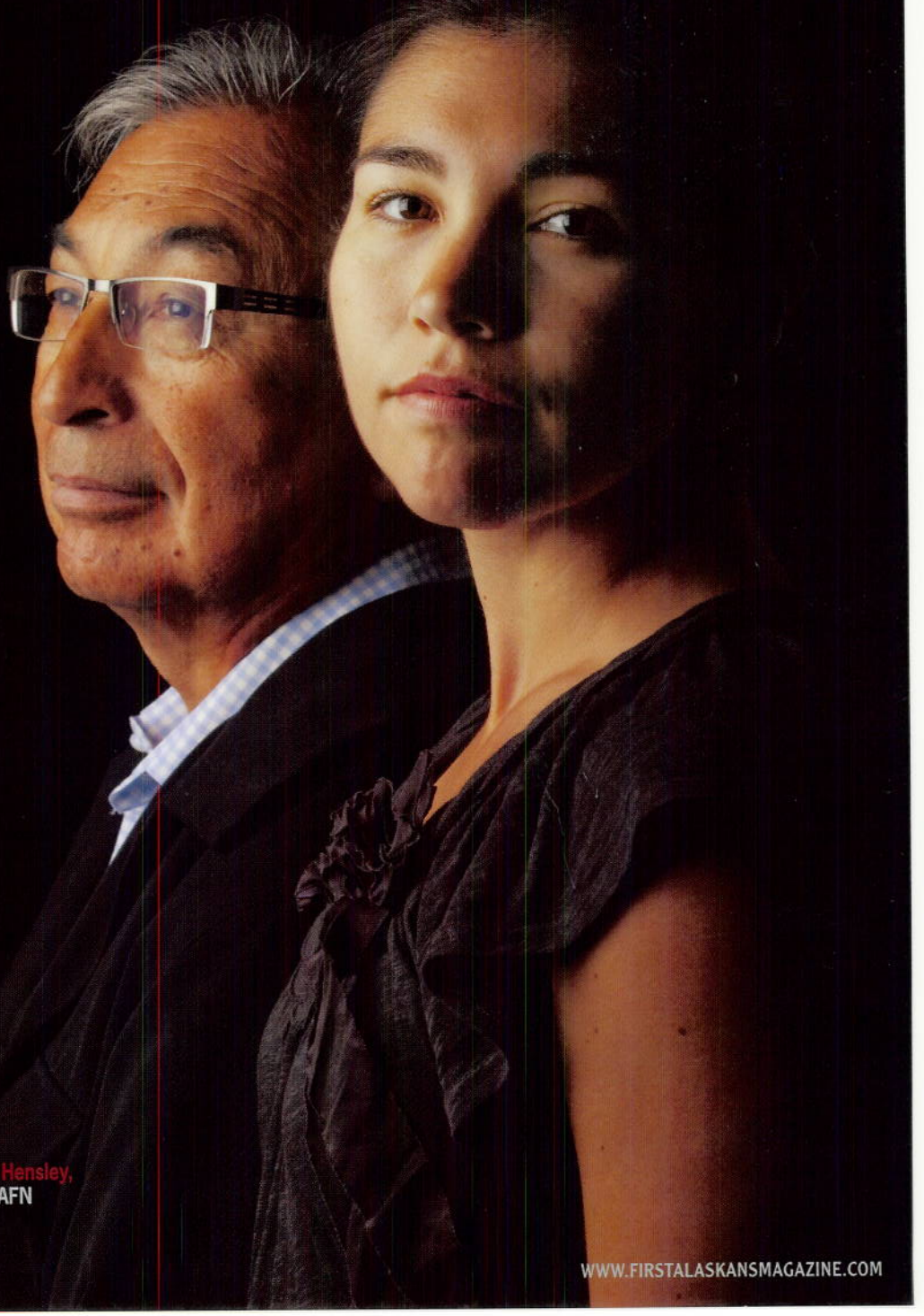

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Cpl. Steven Baker is one of many military personnel who became Mertarvik's first residents this summer.

NEWTOK'S opening MOVE

Military lays groundwork to shift flood-threatened village

STORY BY ALEX DEMARBAN
FIRST ALASKANS

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ANI COMMUNICATIONS & ASSOCIATES

Massive tides swept away a temporary road. A supply boat repeatedly ran aground. Forklifts bogged into the tundra.

And in July, snow fell.

Construction isn't easy. Especially in Alaska.

This summer, about 50 soldiers, sailors and airmen arrived on a patch of bare tundra near the Bering Sea and began building a village.

That's right, a village.

Under a program that provides military muscle for projects on U.S. soil, the servicemen launched a five-year effort to build a new home for the imperiled village of Newtok.

State officials involved in the project say the military's help will reduce the move's estimated cost.

Taxpayers will likely foot most of the bill. One study, which state officials say is too high, set the cost of moving at up to $130 million, more than $370,000 a resident.

At any rate, Newtok needs to leave. A widening river will wash away the village, population 350, in a decade. Many blame global warming for softening the permafrost.

Spring-fed site

The new site lies on high ground nine miles southeast of Newtok, on a treeless, emerald-green island that rises out of Baird Inlet.

Newtok residents call the place Mertarvik. That means "Getting water from the spring" in the region's Yup'ik language, because a spring flows there.

Others would call it the middle of nowhere.

The site is roughly 500 miles west of Anchorage and the state's road system, accessible in summer only by boat or helicopter.

Despite the isolation, the military conquered the boggy wilderness in a matter of weeks, creating a construction camp complete with warm showers, composting toilets and heated tents.

The place is paradise compared to the early days of the Iraq war, said a smiling Graham Hilson, the camp commander and a Marine master sergeant from Eugene, Ore.

He was part of an assault force that marched under fire across the Iraqi desert in 2003.

"There were no tents, no showers. You slept on the ground where your feet stopped," he says. "Out here, there's not much to not like, except the mosquitoes and the mud."

The camp will be a military outpost for future summers of work. Under the Department of Defense's Innovative Readiness Training program, several personnel from reserve units in the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force will return the next four summers to receive their annual training at Mertarvik. The Alaska Army National Guard operated the Blackhawk helicopters that flew in personnel.

The servicemen will build an evacuation shelter, a gravel air strip, access a rock quarry and create roads by connecting together heavy plastic slabs called Dura-Base Mat.

Lance Cpl. Adam Hurst, middle, and Cpl. Robert Jenkins, right, work together with other miliary personell at Mertarvik, moving some of the last sheets of Dura-Base mat that will be used this year in preparation for next year.

Three homes built at Mertarvik in 2006 are still being worked on. They may be moved.

The walk to Mertarvik is treacherous. The military working at Mertarvik struggled with the terrain this summer.

This summer, the men—most were Marine reserves from Oregon—began laying down the Dura-Base, creating a small road and two foundations the size of large parking lots, one for the large communal tents and the other to support future building materials.

They finished their work in mid-August, one week ahead of schedule.

"Despite any obstacles we had, in the end, we accomplished exactly what we set out to do," says Hilson.

It will be up to Newtok's residents, with support from state and federal agencies, to put the finishing touches on the new village. They've talked about placing their houses on sleds in the winter and hauling them over snow to the new site.

There's no date yet on when that would happen, but it would likely occur after the new airport has been built at Mertarvik, because that's a key link for critical supplies such as food, medicine and fuel.

After years of watching the river chew toward their homes, they're grateful for the military's help, said Stanley Tom, the tribal administrator who has led much of the relocation effort.

"Those guys are really speeding up the process," he said.

Master Sgt. Graham Hilson, camp commander, stands on top of the base for camp next year at Metarvik. The current base will be used as a loading/unloading area.

Years of tradition

Mertarvik is located on Nelson Island, which is bordered to the east by Baird Inlet. Two major rivers that connect to the Bering Sea create the island, including the Ninglick River that threatens Newtok.

Other villages occupy Nelson Island. The people in those villages, like the people in Newtok, are called the Qaluyaarmiut, or "dip net people."

Their ancestors have lived off the Bering Sea's salmon, seals and birds for 2,000 years.

Mertarvik is more than 25 miles from the closest village, Tununak.

It can feel pretty lonely.

Ptarmigan cluck in the brush. Musk oxen graze on the rolling hills. Grizzlies leave their prints near crowded salmon streams.

But Newtok is coming.

Three years ago, a privately hired barge nosed against the shore and unloaded wooden beams and other building materials.

Several Newtok men dragged the materials up the slope and built three blue houses.

No one lives in the houses now, but they'll be ready when the village arrives.

The houses, which seem to have dropped from the sky, are less than a mile from the military camp.

One sunny day in August, the camp seemed straight out of Iraq, with men in desert camouflage walking among the big, sand-colored tents.

TIM BLUM/FIRST ALASKANS

With the bulk of their summer work done, soldiers that day swept clouds of dust off the Dura-Base and shoveled mud onto the tundra—military brass would arrive later that day to inspect their progress.

In July, an Army landing craft dropped off more than 400,000 pounds of Dura-Base mats.

Roads can be built quickly with the "expeditionary matting," and the mats are critical at Mertarvik. The 18-ton forklifts and other heavy equipment can't operate on the soggy, bumpy tundra.

Lance Cpl. Nathan Morris found that out.

A member of Alpha Company, 6th Engineer Support Battalion, 4th Marine Logistics Group out of Eugene, Ore., Morris often operated the machinery that heaved the 1,100-pound Dura-Base sheets into place.

One day, he drove a Bobcat with a heavy load of gravel. He was trying to scoop the gravel onto the tundra so the men could lay down another Dura-Base sheet atop it.

But the Bobcat's wheels spun off the plastic and began chewing into the wet ground. The Bobcat rocked over, sinking into the tundra and coming to rest butt end up. Morris hung in the air like a roller-coaster rider.

"We had to pull it out with the extended boom forklift," he says.

As the military laid down the Dura-Base and the work moved along, Newtok residents told Hilson they had another name for Mertarvik.

Newtok is surrounded by water on all sides, and the shore line is receding.

The walkway to the barge landing site in Newtok is formed by loose wood planks and mats.

Newtok's shoreline is receding at a rate of more than 70 feet per year.

"Newertok," says Hilson, laughing.

Hike up the hill above the tents, look beyond the blue inlet, and you'll find a string of dots — the village that Newtok residents hope to leave behind.

From the military camp, a small boat can get you to the village in less than half an hour, if the weather is good and tide is right.

The servicemen occasionally went there to buy snacks at the tiny store or to tour the village, where per-capita incomes are less than $10,000 a year.

They said they were stunned by the conditions, especially the severe poverty and ramshackle houses without plumbing.

Adrian Diaz, a chatty boatswain's mate with the Naval Cargo Handling Battalion No. 3 out of Alameda, Calif., called the locals incredibly friendly. Some invited him into their homes to taste moose jerky and dried salmon.

Inside, he saw the buckets that residents use instead of toilets.

He visited the laundromat, where the community fills jugs with drinking water.

Boys play basketball in Newtok on a warm summer evening.

The water is treated, but it's green and needs to be boiled, Diaz says.

Because Newtok has a limited lifespan, state and federal agencies won't invest in new projects there, such as a water and sewer systems.

Learning about the village helped Diaz understand why the move was important.

"It definitely makes me put more heart into my mission," he says.

Time-limited village

Other Alaska villages face a short future because of flooding caused by global warming. But none are eroding as fast as Newtok.

The village sits precariously on a thin, waterlogged stretch of land surrounded by widening rivers and lakes.

The main threat is the Ninglick.

For five decades, the river has annually carved an average of 70 feet from Newtok's waterfront, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers says.

One storm removed 25 feet in a single swipe. In the last 13 years, the river swallowed the landfill and a barge landing.

Newtok will lose its fresh water source by 2019, says Mike Black, a deputy state commissioner who arrived with the military leadership in a Blackhawk helicopter.

The situation is unhealthy and will only get worse, he says.

Villages without plumbing usually have higher rates of respiratory disease because hand washing is less frequent.

Among school-age children, Newtok has Alaska's highest such rates, Black says.

"Just remaining at that site would not be wise or sustainable," he says.

Newtok residents voted more than a decade ago to move to Mertarvik, and their village already has an abandoned feel to it.

Some say it's sinking.

Telephone poles lean at odd angles. A rusting fuel silo seems ready to slide off its wooden foundation.

The community center floor rises and falls like a ruffled sea. It floods so often that someone cut a hole in a corner to sweep out water.

Graying boardwalks connect buildings, because the ground is too soggy for four-wheelers and pedestrians.

A one-bedroom house clinging to the edge of a growing lake belongs to Joe Stewart. He lives there with his wife and six children.

A few years ago, Stewart used wenches and cables to pull the house away from the banks. But the lake kept coming.

During one big storm, floodwaters ripped the insulation from beneath the house. Waves pounded the plywood walls. It felt like an earthquake, he says.

"We have nightmares. 'Oh no.' We wake up in the lake all toppled over," he says.

Another Newtok shack looks ready to cave in, the middle sagging into the earth.

Inside, the entry slopes one way. The kitchen floor slopes another. A tote and a garbage can catch dripping water from the ceiling.

Martha Simon leveled the stove and table with wood blocks. Driftwood logs placed under the bed frame keep her from sliding down when she sleeps, she says.

Simon, the tribal court clerk, lives in this one-bedroom house with her boyfriend and two children. When the house flooded last spring, she bailed it with a dustpan.

Newtok's history

Like other Alaska villages, Newtok sprung up beside the water, where barges bring supplies and fish and wildlife are plentiful.

People established Newtok shortly after World War II to escape seasonal flooding at nearby Old Kealavik. Also, barges could access Newtok, so a federal Indian school was built there in 1958, according to a state historical paper.

Cpl. Brennon Clifford is hugged by a child while shopping at a store in Newtok.

For most residents, the village remained a winter home through the 1960s, as people traveled to camps to catch herring, salmon, seals and birds.

Moving to Newtok was much easier than moving to Mertarvik will be. Back then, people lived in sod houses and there were no airports and schools to build.

The first major hurdle in the move was acquiring land outside the village.

In 2003, Newtok won the help of U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska. She pushed a bill through Congress allowing the village to exchange land at Mertarvik with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Another hurdle came in the huge price tag proposed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In 2006, the Corps estimated that a village move would cost between $80 million and $130 million.

That report put a chill on efforts to move the village. Many critics said the people should pack up and move to the city.

But that would mean giving up a connection to the land that's defined a people for centuries, Tom says.

He knew there had to be a cheaper way to move the village.

He spoke at state meetings in 2006, saying the villagers would do all they could to move but needed help from state and federal agencies.

He sparked the interest of Black, head of the state's Division of Community and Regional Affairs at the time.

Black picked Sally Russell Cox, a state planner, to help the village. She realized that moving the community required a multi-agency effort and organized the Newtok Planning Group. The state and federal representatives started looking for solutions.

One breakthrough came from the Economic Development Administration, which put up $800,000 for a dock at Mertarvik.

It was the first money awarded for the new site and opened the door for funding from other groups, including more than $6 million from the state, Cox says.

"That really set the precedent," she says.

Military motivation

Another breakthrough came in 2007 when Jamilia George, a state official, met with Navy Capt. Karen Trueblood, assistant deputy director with the Innovative Readiness Training program at the Pentagon.

The IRT wanted training opportunities in remote areas, and George told Trueblood there was plenty of that in Alaska.

The IRT program, part of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, brings together various branches of the military to help communities around the country do such things as build roads, erect facilities and provide medical care.

The military benefits because soldiers receive training. Relocating Newtok is one of the program's top priorities, said Maj. Gen. Darrell Moore, commanding general of the 4th Marine Logistics Group.

"It's a clearly demonstrated need," says Moore, one of the officers who toured the camp in August. "The village is disintegrating. And it offers great training in an austere environment, so it rated out very high."

"Here we're getting the chance to improve an entire culture by allowing them to maintain their traditions."

— Marine Cpl. Robert Jenkins

Lance Cpl. Mike Anderson pets a dog in Newtok while on a trip for grocceries.

Trueblood says the project is valuable because it offers a lot of training for each branch.

"There's a good variety of people from different services, each bringing their own expertise to do a cohesive job," she says.

The move will still cost the federal government and the state of Alaska millions of dollars. For example, Trueblood says the Marines spent several million dollars this first summer alone.

But Cox and others say the total cost will be less than the Army Corps of Engineers' original estimate.

"We're looking for efficiencies every step of the way," she says.

It takes an Army

The military's task wasn't easy.

When a small advance group arrived at Mertarvik in July to set up camp, temperatures plunged, snow flurried and rain fell for two weeks straight.

Some houses from Newtok will not be moved to Mertarvik.

"It was difficult," Diaz says. "I can't even explain how difficult."

It was a big change for the servicemen.

"You're coming from the Lower 48, Burger Kings, cars, everything at your convenience, cell phones. That's the first thing everyone did when they got here," he says, holding a hand up. "'Oh, my cell phone don't work.' Well, duh."

One big problem: A docking ramp built by the Alaska Department of Transportation, meant to be a landing site for the Army's landing craft, wasn't long enough.

As a result, the 170-foot Malvern Hill, also know as Landing Craft Utility 2025, couldn't get close enough to shore to offload Dura-Base and other supplies.

The mud was too "soupy" for the concrete blocks the contractor lined up for the ramp, says Mike Coffey, statewide maintenance and operations chief for the Department of Transportation.

"When they started putting in the concrete planks, they sank out of sight," he says.

The contractor, Northern Mechanical out of Dutch Harbor, even tried putting down Dura-Base to support the concrete planks, but that didn't help, Coffey says.

Plan B: Unload tons of rocks onto the nearby shore and create another ramp.

That worked.

The contractor also built a short Dura-Base road leading from the rocky ramp along the shore. But at one point, the high tide swept away several slabs.

They weren't locked together, Hilson says.

Some of the military men saw them float across the inlet and retrieved them.

Also, the silty Ninglick River menaced the landing craft, says Scott Carpenter, captain of the ship and chief warrant officer from Tacoma, Wash.

As the military officials and others toured his ship in mid-August, Carpenter says he lost count of how many times the ship went aground.

The river changes dramatically because of huge tides, and the mudflats on the river bottom shifted often. Carpenter, shaking his head with a sigh, called the trip his most difficult mission in 10 years of sailing.

Somewhere along the way, both propellers slammed the bottom. A crewman standing in frigid water pounded them into shape with a sledgehammer.

Maps of the river didn't help. The most detailed chart was 55 years old. A more recent electronic map showed land where there was none.

"We can't come in here without touching," Carpenter says, shaking his head. "It's just impossible."

Modern charts might not help, he says.

At one point, the crew found a channel in the mudflats and sailed smoothly.

"Three days later it was gone," he says.

Still, the craft hauled in everything that was needed, the Dura-Base, forklifts and other materials. The ship's crew had to repeatedly drop off supplies at the village of Toksook Bay, also on Nelson Island, to lighten the load.

But they got the job done.

Preserving a culture

Toward the end of summer, the men were upbeat and ready to head home.

The best thing about the mission, besides the teamwork and the chance to work with different service personnel, was helping people in Newtok, Diaz says.

"We're working for the Yup'iks out here. That's who we're working for," he says.

Marine Cpl. Robert Jenkins, also with the Eugene, Ore., unit, says he and other members of the unit will head to Afghanistan soon.

He says that thanks to Alaska, they'll be acclimated to Afghanistan's cold weather.

Not long ago, Jenkins helped build a school in Trinidad with the Marines, he says. Working in his own country, though it was far from home, was more meaningful.

"Here we're getting the chance to improve an entire culture by allowing them to maintain their traditions," he says.

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