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ALL HANDS

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TOTAL FORCE

Sub-Zero Sailors

Operation Medical Outreach

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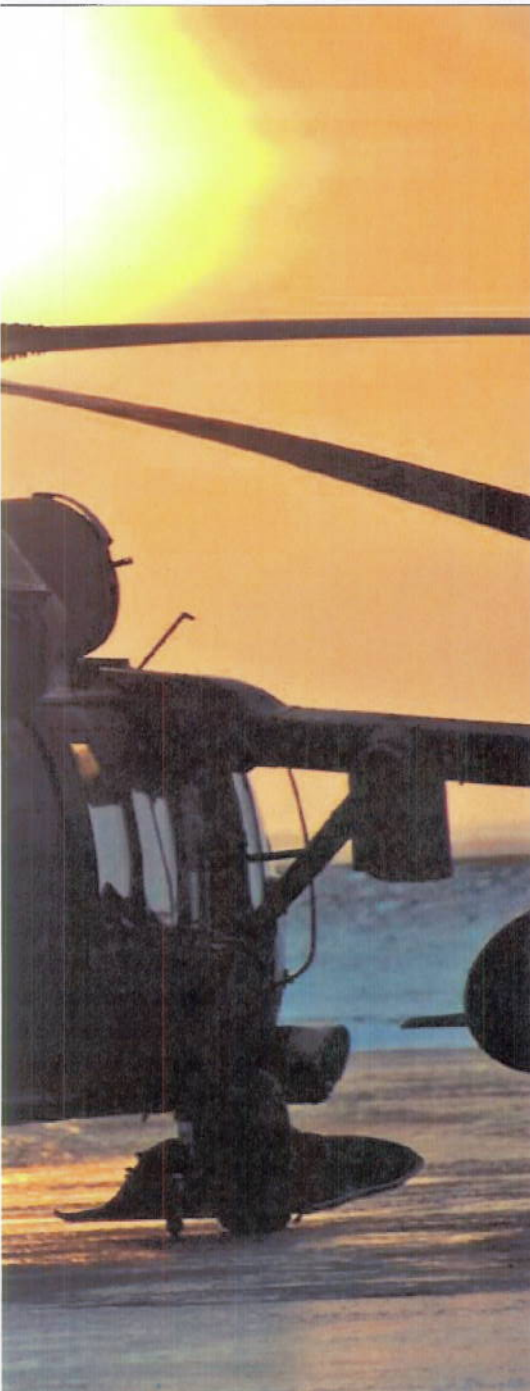
Western Alaska boasts some of the world's most difficult terrain, remote and rugged. Moose, caribou, brown bears, black bears, wolves and musk ox roam a vast wilderness, where the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers slowly wind their way through the tundra and empty into the frigid waters of the Bering Sea.



Sgt. 1st Class James Morris of the 1st/207 Aviation Regiment prepares to tow a *Black Hawk* helicopter that will transport an Army Veterinary Corps team to the village of Alakanuk, Alaska.

Arctic Care '09

in America's Last Frontier



The region has almost no roads. For the 25,000 Yup'ik Eskimos and other people living in the port city of Bethel, Alaska, and 55 distant villages, travel is limited to bush planes, boats, and in the winter, snowmobiles. During the coldest months of the year, rapidly changing weather conditions include freezing rain, ice and subzero temperatures as low as -25 degrees F. Winds can get as high as 60 miles per hour.

In this challenging environment, military members conducted Operation *Arctic Care '09*, a joint exercise that, since 1995, has tested the ability of Navy, Marine Corps, Army, Air Force and Army National Guard members – both active duty and Reserve – to deploy and operate as one team in a harsh environment. *Arctic Care* is meant to simulate medical outreach operations in time of crisis, conflict or disaster.

"*Arctic Care '09* was a tremendous learning experience for all of us, working side by side with the other service branches to provide the best care possible to the region," said Capt. Patty Reisdorfer, the exercise's lead planner.

The exercise is also a medical outreach, offering no-cost health care and veterinary support to underserved native communities across Alaska. Villages do have health clinics, but getting an appointment with a doctor, dentist or other specialist often requires flying to the nearest large city or even into Anchorage. Veterinary services are practically nonexistent.

Each year, *Arctic Care* rotates to a different area of the state; Bristol Bay, Kodiak, Kotzebue, Nome and the interior are among the cities and regions that have benefited from it.



▲ Cmdr. Nancy Moya of Pueblo, Colo., attached to Operational Health Support Unit Bremerton Det. P, checks Carole Alexie's heartbeat at a health clinic in Mountain Village, Alaska.

This year, the Navy took the lead in planning and execution of *Arctic Care*, which is sponsored by the Innovative Readiness Training program under the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs. Nearly 200 military health-care providers volunteered for the operation, bringing their equipment and expertise to the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

In little more than a week, *Arctic Care '09* teams saw 3,503 patients in 10 villages and Bethel.



▲ Army Sgt. Shirley Grant, left, of Beaufort, S.C., and Army Capt. Amy Clark of Anchorage, Alaska, both from the Army's Southern California District Veterinary Command, locate the village of Alakanuk on a map as they prepare for this year's Operation Arctic Care.



▲ HM2 Chris Lutton of Simi Valley, Calif., attached to the 4th Marine Division, Weapons Company 223, checks Martha Wasky's blood pressure at a health clinic in Mountain Village, Alaska.

The mission "footprint" actually began in January, when two Marine Corps electricians and one Air Force biomedical technician traveled to Western Alaska and installed wiring connections for video teleconferencing at local clinics, Reisdorfer said. The hook-ups made it possible for the exercise's 11 designated villages to communicate with the Arctic Care '09 command cell at the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation in Bethel. The advance team didn't stop there, and wired clinics in additional villages for a total of 33.

By March, mixed teams of doctors, dentists and optometrists began deploying to 15 villages, where they treated patients during the day and slept in schools at night.

"We sleep together; we eat together, so we've gotten to know each other well," said Marine Corps Capt. Cynthia Heins, commanding officer of Operational Health Support Unit Headquarters Camp Pendleton, Calif., the exercise's host. She spent a week practicing medicine in Kwethluk, a village of 730.

At the local clinic, she treated an assortment of cases, ranging from a broken finger and an ear infection to hypertension and congestive heart failure. Down the hall, an Air Force optometrist and optometry technician conducted eye exams. In the next room, a Navy dentist and an Air Force dental tech did teeth cleanings, fillings and extractions.

"I love being part of joint exercises because I

like getting to know the other services," Heins said. "These types of experiences teach us how to work as a well-oiled machine in the event that we have to go someplace quickly."

The Kwethluk team also connected with the villagers they came to help. From the minute Heins' team arrived via helicopter, they felt welcome, she said.

"All the kids were waiting at the edge of the runway. They came up and grabbed my hands, wanting to show us to the school. Everyone was waving as they went by on their snowmobiles. The local priest came out to greet us, and said thanks for helping. The teachers got together and threw us a spaghetti dinner. Folks greeted us with open arms."

In Mountain Village, Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Chris Lutton of the 4th Marine Division made fast friends with the school's kindergarten through 12th-grade students, sharing breakfast and lunch with them every day. They had all kinds of questions: 'Why are you in the military?' 'What's it like?' 'How does an MRE taste?'

"We talked with them about career paths, what we do in the Navy, what we do in our civilian jobs and emphasized staying in school," said Lutton, a paramedic and firefighter from Southern California.

Besides CPR classes, Lutton and other medics taught topics such as nutrition and healthy eating; hygiene and infection control,

self esteem and suicide prevention.

"We all took a briefing we're familiar with," explained Air Force Tech Sgt. LeTroy Mays of the 445th Aerospace Medicine Squadron, who said Arctic Care taught him quite a bit, too. "I set broken bones, did lab draws, helped people with preventative care – this is one of the best trainings I've done."

Villagers were especially eager to see veterinarians. Dog bites are a leading cause of injury in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Every year, bites and maulings cause dozens of injuries and hospitalizations – sometimes even death. Children are usually victims of these attacks.

Teams from the Army's Alaska District Veterinary Command at Fort Wainwright visited nine villages and vaccinated 2,991 animals, mostly dogs. They also spayed and neutered 77 animals at pet owners' requests.

"We encourage people to have their animals spayed or neutered," Staff Sgt. Christiana Ramos said. "Some do; others are not too keen on it, but they definitely want to have the vaccinations."

The exercise's "heartbeat," Reisdorfer said, is the Alaska Army National Guard, which transports teams by UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters. Poor visibility plagued the start of this year's mission, making it a challenge to get the first few flights out on time, but adding to the realism of the exercise.

Arctic Care '09 covered an area the size of



▲ A dentist rinses out the mouth of Dylan Sergie, a 2-year-old Alaskan native, after he had two cavities filled at a health clinic in Kwethluk, Alaska.

North Dakota and South Dakota combined. Army Capt. Todd Miller, commander of Bravo Company 1/207th Aviation, said the challenge for his pilots was a winter landscape without much contrast.

“When the snow moves in, it’s all tundra,” Miller said. “There’s not much to look at, and that’s what you’re dependent on. The brush is what tells you where you are over the ground. If you end up navigating your way over a good-sized lake and hit nothing but white snow, you can’t tell if you’re at 10 feet or 100 feet.”

The weather forced Miller’s crews to think on their feet, occasionally scrubbing a mission and hastily rescheduling others when conditions cleared up.

“They practiced safety every step of the way,” Reisdorfer said.

Not every *Arctic Care* '09 team traveled to villages. In Bethel, the Naval Ophthalmic Support and Training Activity produced 610 pairs of eyeglasses. From the villages, optometrists called in patients’ prescriptions, and Hospitalman Derek Gaudin and Army Spc. Thomas Cochran ground lenses and fit them to frames.

“Many of these people aren’t fortunate enough to have the amenities we take for granted,” Gaudin said. “It’s cool to know we’re able to help them in this way.”

As lead service, the Navy also provided colonoscopy and pediatric oral surgery teams to augment staff at the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Regional Hospital in Bethel, along with an audiologist, a mental-health clinician, a physical therapist, an emergency-room physician and an obstetrician/gynecologist.

Cmdr. Sandra Bierling, an obstetrician/gynecologist assigned to Operational Health Support Unit Bremerton Detachment P, spent weekends covering labor and delivery. She

delivered some babies, and was able to relieve, for a few days, Bethel’s only two doctors to carry a high-risk pregnancy pager.

At the walk-in Yukon-Kuskokwim Dental Clinic, Cmdr. David Greenman extracted impacted wisdom teeth and removed tissue lesions. An oral surgeon assigned to Operational Health Support Unit Portsmouth Detachment A, Norfolk, he said many patients had waited years for the procedures rather than fly to Anchorage.

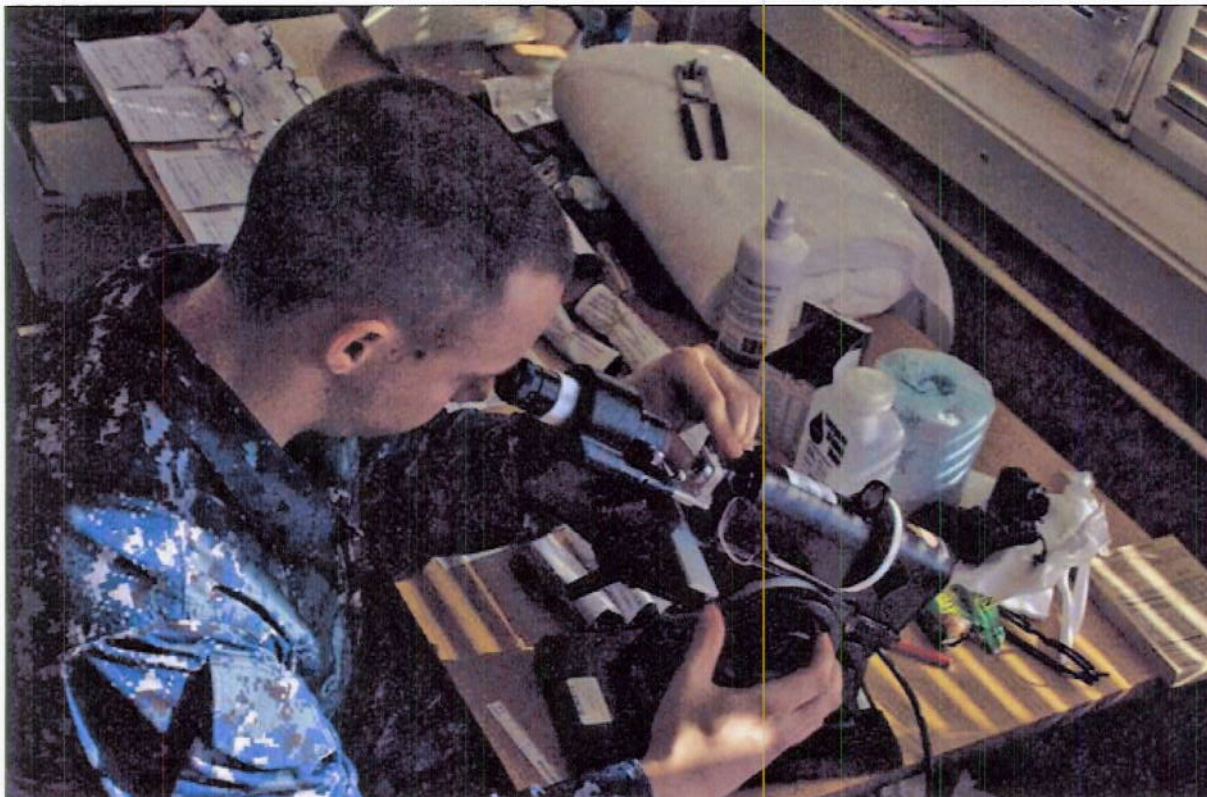
“Each year *Arctic Care* just gets better and better, because we bring in new resources,” said Navy Capt. Karen Trueblood, who oversees the Innovative Readiness Training program at the Pentagon. She considers it great preparation for overseas deployments.

“Everyone here knows their medical profession quite well,” Trueblood said. “What they don’t know, really, is how to go into a strange location with no prior experience, learn to get along with the community, what to do when you’re not in a hospital clinic like in the lower 48. You have to improvise here. Weather becomes a factor. Logistics become a factor. You’re not in your comfort zone.

“The Office of the Secretary of Defense where *Arctic Care* resides says it’s one of their best programs running. This is the first

time the Navy’s been involved to this extent, and it’s just done a great job. This is how we go to war now; we fight as one,” she said. ☞

Grills is assigned to Navy Public Affairs Support Element, East Reserve.



◀ HN Derek Gaudin of Baton Rouge, La., an optical laboratory specialist with the Naval Ophthalmic Support and Training Activity, conducts a quality assurance test on a pair of glasses in Bethel, Alaska.