

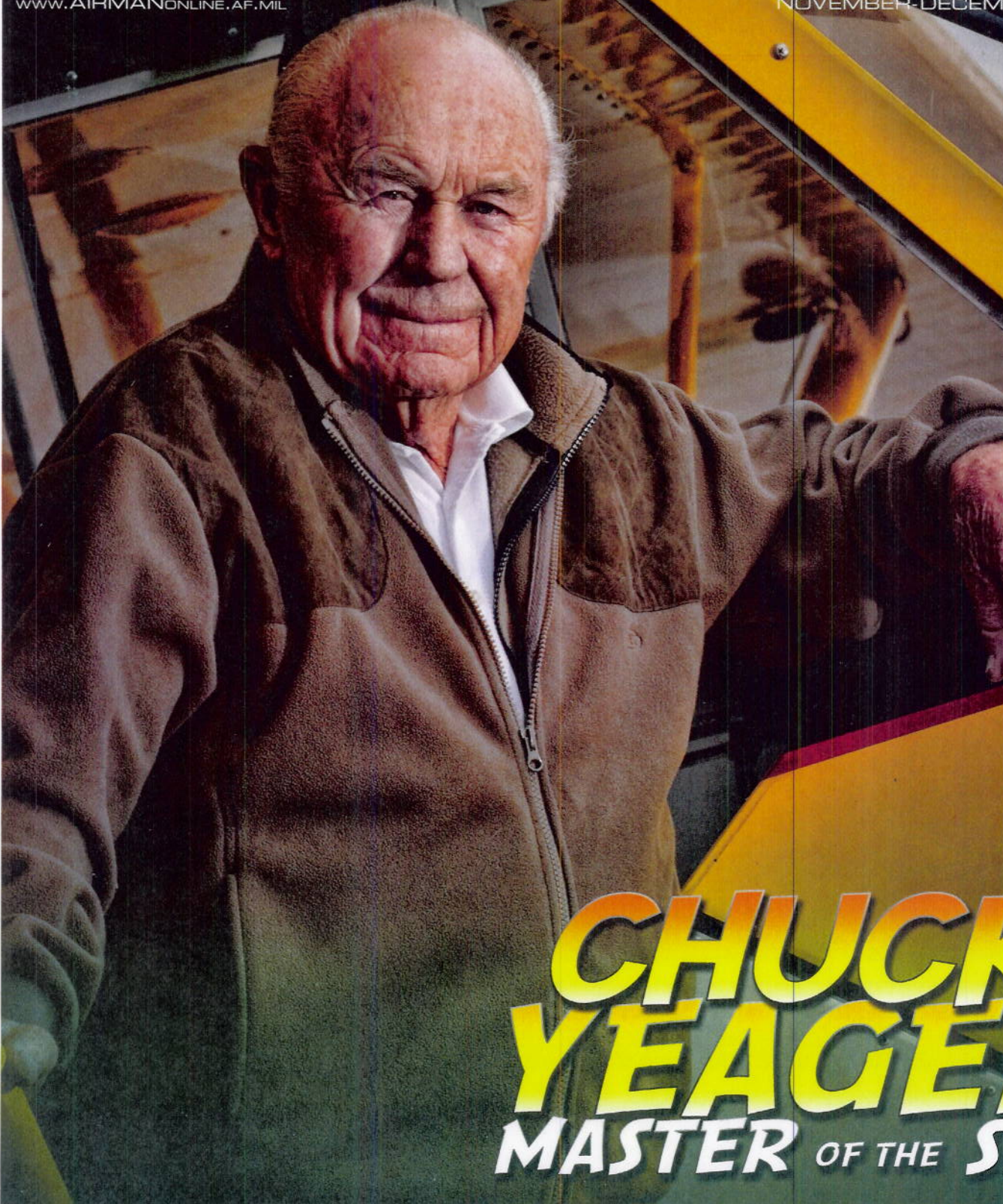


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# ARCTIC HOUSE CALLS

## AIR FORCE MEDICAL TEAM TRAVERSES THE ARCTIC TO BRING HEALTHCARE, EDUCATION TO ESKIMO VILLAGES

STORY BY STAFF SGT. J. PAUL CROXON ✪ PHOTOS BY MASTER SGT. JACK BRADEN

**O**utside Clarence Jackson's Noorvik, Alaska, home a newly-constructed dogsled sits unused. Its

humble construction contrasts with the snow machines that speed past. When Jackson was a boy, the dogsled was the only way to travel from village to village in winter, the only way to bring in supplies or medical care. It was by dogsled that he went to a neighboring village and met his wife Dorcus. To him, it is a symbol of who the Eskimo people are and what remains the same.

Despite the changes in his village: snow machines, Internet, soda, a few of the old ways remain and with them, daily challenges. Villages are still remote; no roads link them in the winter; much of the diet comes from subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering; and medical care is still hard to get. At least one of these challenges was alleviated this year when a joint medical exercise brought a traveling team of military medics to town and, with them, much-needed care that Jackson and his wife would have otherwise had to go without.

### **A CHANCE MEETING**

Operation Arctic Care is an annual

exercise with a different service leading the operation each year. Arctic Care 2010 was an Air Force Reserve-led exercise. Each year the operation sets up in different areas of Alaska. This year the teams landed in Kotzebue, in the far northwest part of the state. When the more than 200 doctors, nurses, medics, veterinarians and others landed in Kotzebue April 17, they were divided into teams.

Most of the teams were to stand up clinics in specific villages and work out of those clinics for the three-week operation. However, one team was different. It was hand-picked and given the mission of traveling between villages to augment the clinic staffs, providing specialty care and education.

This team of a podiatrist, pediatrician, dietician, medics and nurses went to the homes of the Eskimo people and the schools to educate children. Although predominately made up of Air Force Reserve Airmen, the team also had active-duty Air Force and Navy Reserve members.

The teams traveled with all the supplies they would need: sleeping bags, uniforms and food. Traveling by helicopter, snowmobile and even dogsled, the teams moved from village to village like a band

of wandering medics. They slept in the schools and never stayed in one place for more than a few days before moving to the next village. As they traveled, they learned more about the Eskimo people, though it wasn't until they got to Noorvik that they were fully immersed in the culture.

### **INTO THE VILLAGES**

Noorvik is a small Inupiat village about 30 miles north of the Arctic Circle. The village sits along the Kobuk River, which serves as the only highway between Noorvik and the larger cities of Kotzebue and Anchorage beyond. Villagers can canoe down the river in the summer months, but primarily wait until it is frozen to make the journey to the city via snow machine and dogsled. The village is made up of ordered rows of houses, many raised above ground on stilts. At the center of the village sits the school, which is also the center of daily life for most of the Inupiat.

The village has only one medical facility. About the size of an average mobile home, it's staffed with healthcare aides who, though they are not doctors or nurses, use video conferencing to talk with doctors in Kotzebue. Through conversations with these healthcare aides, the



doctors decide whether a patient needs to be sent to a physician or can be treated locally. Though this system can provide some medical care, procedures as simple as school physicals require licensed doctors or nurses, part of what makes Operation Arctic Care such an important exercise.

Once the team arrived at Noorvik, they immediately set out to find where they were most needed. Some, like active-duty pediatrician Capt. Donald Traver, went to the clinic to help the embedded Arctic Care team with sports physicals and well-baby check-ups. Other travel team members split into other specialized groups.

Lt. Col. Jacki Kaszuba, a Reserve dietitian from Homestead Air Reserve Base, Fla., and Tech. Sgt. Danielle Foster, a Reserve medic from Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska, primarily worked out of the schools, teaching classes on nutrition, which is needed because the influx of processed foods and beverages and the decline of the native Eskimo diet has wreaked havoc on the health of the village youth.

"The native diet is actually quite

healthy," said Colonel Kaszuba. "They traditionally ate a lot of fish, lean meats and local berries. Talking to the kids in the villages, we learn that they drink more than a dozen cans of soda a day."

**VILLAGES ARE STILL REMOTE; NO ROADS LINK THEM IN THE WINTER; MUCH OF THE DIET COMES FROM SUBSISTENCE HUNTING, FISHING AND GATHERING; AND MEDICAL CARE IS STILL HARD TO GET.**

— Staff Sgt. J. Paul Croxon

Colonel Kaszuba said the increase in sugar and the tendency for the youth to be more sedentary and not go on the traditional hunts has contributed to the dramatic incidence of diabetes and tooth decay in the children.

"It's so sad to see children with

most of their teeth missing or rotten," said Sergeant Danielle Foster, a medic from Elmendorf AFB, Alaska. "We use visual aids to show them how much sugar is in the soda and what it does to their bodies. They seem to respond, especially the younger children."

While part of the team worked in the clinic and the schools, the remaining team members went out into the village for home calls. That's how the team met the Jacksons. Mrs. Jackson's inability to bend down and properly care for her feet had resulted in painful ingrown toenails.

When podiatrist Lt. Cmdr Jeffrey Johnson, a Navy Reservist, Reserve medic Master Sgt. Jenny Carney, and Reserve medic Senior Airman Emily Mormino arrived at the Jackson home, they were greeted with children spilling out of the modest house and flowing around the newly-made dogsleds outside. Inside the home, a small television and DVD player sat in the living room, though the most dominant feature was the crackle of the short-wave radio announcing information every minute or two. "A family needs someone to help fix

**The traveling medical team unloads their gear in Selawik, Alaska from a UH-60 Blackhawk provided by the Alaska Army National Guard.**



**1 Navy Cmdr. Jeffrey Johnson**, foreground, a podiatrist with the Navy Operational Support Center in Bangor, Maine, and Master Sgt. Jenny Carney, a medical technician with the Massachusetts Air National Guard's 439th Aeromedical Staging Squadron, make a house call for a diabetic patient in Noorvik, Alaska.

**2 Navy podiatrist Cmdr. Jeffrey Johnson**, right, visits Dorcus Jackson, one of the village elders in Noorvik. Commander Johnson is assisted by Senior Airman Emily Mormino, a medic with the Air Force Reserve at Scott Air Force, Ill.

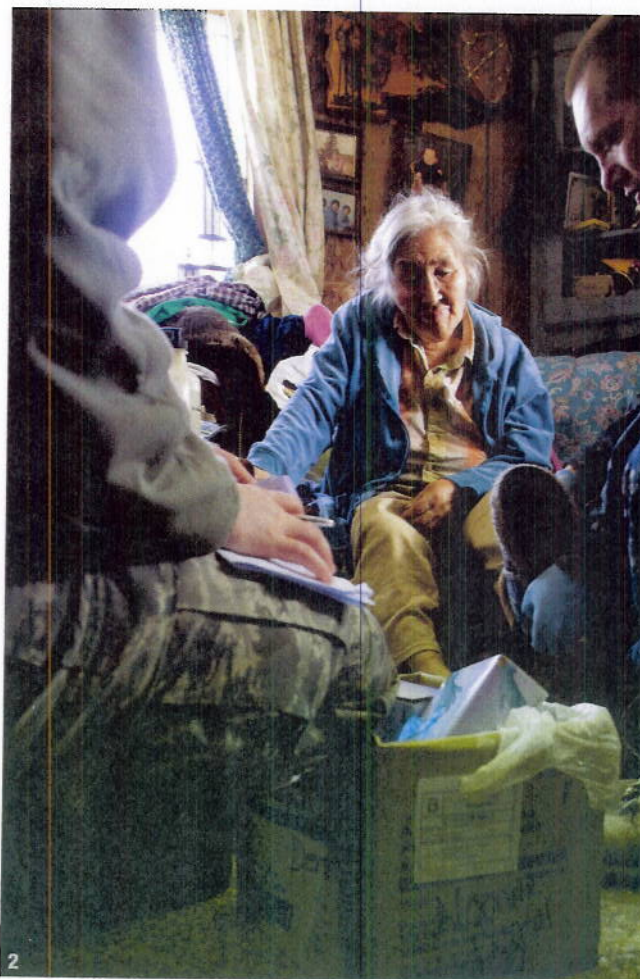
**3 Dorcus Jackson** watches intently while the doctor examines her feet for diabetes related symptoms.

their snow machine, someone shot a grizzly and is sharing the meat, the caribou herd was spotted 50 miles to the south." The radio is the lifeline of the village, and announced the arrival of the traveling team and Mrs. Jackson's request for the team to visit her house.

As Dr. Johnson and the other medics made their way into the home, brushed the snow off their feet and introduced themselves, they were greeted with smiles and offers to sit and talk. Taking Mrs. Jackson's feet, washing them and meticulously clipping the toenails, Dr. Johnson talked with Mr. Jackson about the Eskimo people, what daily life was like and asked about the dogsled outside.

Mr. Jackson said the village was waiting for the caribou herd to migrate to stock up on meat. Living primarily on subsistence hunting, the villagers' lives revolve around the seasons and the migrations of the animals.

"In the spring we fish for sheefish and pike," Mr. Jackson said. "We move from the villages to our camps in the wild. It's where we learn to be Eskimos. I didn't get my teaching from schools. I only finished eighth grade. I learned out here. Now the old



2





**Chester Washington**, red shirt, a first grader in Noorvik, Alaska mimics a beating heart while a classmate listens to his in a stethoscope. The class was learning basic first aid from Master Sgt. Jenny Carney, a medical technician with the Massachusetts Air National Guard's 439th Aeromedical Staging Squadron in Springfield, Mass.

**(opposite) Staff Sgt Jena Hayes**, an Air Force Reserve medic with the 442nd Medical Squadron at Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo., entertains a group of first graders in Noorvik, Alaska after teaching them basic first aid.

ways are disappearing, and nobody learns that way anymore.”

As the conversation continued, Dr. Johnson finished his portion of the procedure and Airman Mormino and Sergeant Carney took over the remainder. Mr. Jackson said the villages had been advertising the medical team’s visit for weeks and everyone was eager to meet the team and share with them.

As the team members finished the procedure and began packing their supplies, they asked if there was anything else they could do for the village.

“Come back with your families,” Mr. Jackson said. “We will take them to the camps and teach them to catch sheefish.”

The openness and willingness to share was consistent throughout the villages. Expecting to only talk about medicine and how they could help their patients, team members said they were surprised at the Eskimo people’s willingness to share their lives and homes.

“It’s such an open environment,” said Sergeant Carney. “We learned so much. Like how the elders are admired and respected in the villages and how their lives are changing

with the influx of commercial goods. We’ve even been invited to have dinner with one family, the Pungaliks.”

During that dinner, a feast of caribou, sheefish, dried pike and even muktuk (raw whale blubber), the Pungaliks treated the team like family. They even joked that two of team members were now family as adopted Eskimos.

#### LIKE A FAMILY

Though none of the team members had met previously, they shared the commonality of medical care as a foundation for a relationship built over the three weeks of the exercise.

“We’re really like a family,” said Master Sgt. Jenny Carney, a Reservist medic assigned to the 439th Aeromedical Staging Squadron. “Our personalities complement each other. We laugh and support each other when we’re with a patient. We’re experiencing this amazing mission as if we’ve known each other for years.”

One experience shared among team members had less to do with the mission and location and more to do with the medical community when Col. Kim Neiman, a nurse and travel team lead, spread the ashes of her mother in the Alaskan wilderness as

the team traveled from one village to another.

“My mother was an adventurer,” Colonel Neiman said. “She was a nurse and a mother. After she retired as a nurse, she joined the Peace Corps at 66 and moved to Yemen. She came back after the country’s civil war, joined the disaster preparedness program with the Red Cross and traveled by herself and then became the parish nurse for the church. Life began for her after she retired.”

For the team, the gesture of sharing such a poignant moment was profound.

“When we got to Noorvik we met the Pungalik family and learned that the grandmother was also a nurse,” said Airman Mormino, a Reserve medic from Scott AFB, Ill. “It was fitting and felt like leaving one nurse and meeting another.”

Colonel Neiman said the process of saying goodbye to her mother in the Alaskan wilderness was perfect. For her, the snow, trees and the company of the team made the moment special. She had become a mentor to a new generation of medics and as the team traveled from one village to another, the dogsled served as a perfect platform to link the past with the future. ♀

