

April 5, 2016

The edge of America

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Caught between an ad hoc base camp on the frozen arctic shelf and the promise of warm shelter at the Alaska Army National Guard armory in Barrow, 1st Lt. James Tollefson peered out of the iced-over windshield of the tracked Small-Unit Support Vehicle he was piloting.

Though it was early April, arctic spring conditions served up temperatures of 5 below combined with 35-mph sustained winds and gusts of 50 mph, making for a windchill of 38 below. Whiteout conditions blowing sugary, stinging cold snow masked deep ruts, ditches and snowdrifts. Tollefson was driving practically blind and couldn't see the path through the arctic shelf that would lead him and his passengers to safety.

Life immediately outside the heated confines of the SUSV was foreboding to say the least. He couldn't go back and moving forward seemed, in the moment, a harrowing task. How was the officer going to find his way through the swirling white abyss?

Arctic training, actually

In late March, a platoon from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 297th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade, boarded an Air Force C-17 Globemaster III, stuffing SUSVs in the cargo hold of the bird in the process.

Their destination was Barrow, the country's northern-most town. Their mission was to participate in Alaska Shield 2016, a scenario-based training exercise partnering with local and state agencies, before huddling in and around the Barrow armory for arctic training.

Capt. Ronald Desjardin, HHC, 297th BFSB commander, summed up the value of training hundreds of miles from most of the Soldiers' homes.

"This has truly been arctic training," he explained. "One of the side missions here is we wanted to test our equipment ... It's been awesome to see the equipment function well in this harsh environment. It's worse than we thought it was going to be. It's really, really cold."

The first full day of arctic training saw temperatures dipping to 15 below with 25-mph winds. Faces, the only visible skin of Soldiers, quickly turned cherry red under the unrelenting assault of the world's largest air conditioner.

Soldiers circled around Spc. David Smart, 1st Battalion (Airborne), 143rd Infantry Regiment, who is an

expert in cold-weather and arctic operations due to his attendance at U.S. Army Alaska's Cold Weather Leaders Course at the Northern Warfare Training Center near Fort Greely.

The soft-spoken airborne infantryman said – though he had never been north of the Arctic Circle – the conditions weren't that different than where he grew up in Hooper Bay, a Yupik village in Western Alaska. The comment belied his familiarity with thriving in temperatures many would find oppressive. Smart talked students through packing and unpacking a 10-man tent, which looks more like a parachute than any sort of shelter. It's important to put it away just right, he said, and to bundle the guy lines in a particular arrangement. To do otherwise risks Soldiers clumsily fiddling with the only item that can shield them from subzero temperatures.

Smart showed Soldiers how to install the Space Heater Arctic into the tent, its smoke stack sticking conspicuously out the top of the shelter. The heater runs on just about anything that burns, be it wood or military-grade diesel.

On the move

On the other side of the armory grounds, fellow 1-143rd Soldier Staff Sgt. Paul Norwood taught his students the more glamorous side of arctic operations, namely movement.

Though he resides in Sitka, Norwood is a native of Paris, France. His French lilt hasn't diminished despite years in America. During his classes, he imparted a characteristically Continental European sense of humor, drawing laughs as much for his alien sensibilities as for his wry wit.

The sergeant showed Soldiers how to traverse the arctic with everything they need to survive: skis, snowshoes, and an ahkio sled burdened with the aforementioned tent and oven as well as enough food and water to keep a squad in the field for several days.

Students hooked up to the ahkio like Siberian huskies. At first, their attempts to coordinate the movement of the heavy sled were met with decidedly awkward results, but soon they mastered moving their source of shelter, sustenance and warmth like pros, calling out turn commands to one another in anticipation of obstacles.

After weeks of training at home station and a bitterly cold day of practicum, the Soldiers of HHC were ready to head out onto the arctic shelf to put their skills to the frigid test.

It takes all kinds

Desjardin said brigade leadership task-organized HHC's platoon to operate autonomously during their two-week annual training. As such, the small unit of 48 Army Guardsmen included mechanics, signal Soldiers and medical personnel.

One mechanic, 56-year-old Sgt. Kenneth Foytik, found his way to Barrow by way of a circuitous years-long route. He joined the Air Force in 1978 where he worked as a power-production specialist, essentially an expert of engines who stays on the ground and supports aircraft.

Foytik served for nearly nine years before taking off the blue suit and rejoining civilian life. It was another 21 years before he would look at undertaking the military lifestyle again.

Because he was 50, he was too old for active-duty Air Force service. As it turned out, Foytik found a home in the Army National Guard.

He had to start all over again, attending basic training and advanced individual training for military occupational speciality 91B, wheeled-vehicle mechanic. Nothing in his training prepared him for anything as odd as the SUSV.

The SUSV is a tracked, two-carriage vehicle well-suited for Army service in Alaska. Though it has tracks, it is no tank. What it lacks in armor and firepower, it makes up for in mobility. As long as Foytik and his fellow mechanics kept it in ship shape, it could power through waist-deep snow in the coldest of conditions.

The platoon relied on the SUSV's capability to negotiate drifts to get them to arguably the toughest day of annual training.

Blinding snow

When HHC Soldiers arrived at their training site about 5 kilometers south of Barrow, the sun was shining.

The platoon quickly went about setting up their 10-man tent, just as Smart had trained them. Unsheltered from 35-mph winds, the task proved more difficult than it had at the armory. Still, the platoon managed, motivated no doubt by a desire to get out of the cold.

For training value and because the tent wasn't large enough to shelter everyone, Soldiers dug field-expedient snow shelters.

An hour into their bivouac, the wind shifted direction and picked up a torrent of grainy snow, which got into every crevice of Army equipment. Cached rucks and helmets got coated, inundated with the frozen stuff. Face masks quickly became useless as breath melted caked-on snow. Goggles fogged up and became equally useless.

Still, the Soldiers shoveled on and they soon found refuge in their frozen caves. Sheltering the troops from the withering wind, the improvised caves also offered the added benefit of warm air rising from the ground.

Once the Soldiers gained confidence in their ability to survive such a frigid ordeal, Desjardin ordered them to demolish their now-prized shelters. They were going back to the armory. It wasn't cold enough to cancel tough daytime training, but it was cold enough to preempt a night sleeping under the drive of 50-mph snow.

The value of training

Facing a three-dimensional abyss of swirling white, Tollefson wasn't vanquished in his task of getting his SUSV and passengers back to the armory. He had his training and the equipment necessary to navigate through.

He had his Defense Advanced GPS Receiver loaded with waypoints. He had a radio to call the armory or back to the camp. Most importantly, he had his fellow Soldiers operating the other SUSV he was rolling with.

In time, the officer found a stretch of the path that hadn't been reclaimed by the snow. He and his fellow HHC Soldiers were home free.

"It's been like one unit," Desjardin said of his composite platoon that surmounted a tough day of arctic training. "If this was one 48-person unit, I would take them anywhere. They're phenomenal."

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