



**PRESS RELEASE
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Alaska National Guard brings holiday cheer to Akiachak

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — Santa Claus traded his sleigh and eight magically motivated reindeer for an Alaska Air National Guard C-130 Hercules during a Dec. 3, 2016, visit to Akiachak.

Saint Nick's journey to the Western Alaska village marked 59 years for Operation Santa Claus, an Alaska National Guard community-outreach effort dependent upon a legion of elfin volunteers as well as volunteers from Alaska businesses, non-profit organizations, and many who are supportive of the program.

Though the magic hooves of Donner and Blitzen were temporarily replaced by the propeller blast of the 144th Airlift Squadron Hercules' four turbine engines, Santa and Mrs. Claus still managed to deliver the spirit of the season by way of toys, school supplies and ice cream.

Operation Santa Claus began with a prayer lifted up by Mother Superior Antoinette Johnson of St. Mary's Mission in 1957. Spring floods ruined the fishing season, and an ensuing drought drove out game animals.

What funds the mission had were used to have goods transported in to put food on the table. There was no money left for Christmas toys, leaving Johnson and the sisters desperate to provide gifts for the children at the orphanage.

Johnson wrote a letter, which found its way to members of the Alaska Air National Guard in Anchorage.

Radio, television and newspaper outlets spread the word across the city, spurring many to give generous donations of toys and games.

Johnson's prayers were answered in the form of Santa Claus, elf volunteers and toys delivered on the wings of a 144th AS C-47 Skytrain. The National Guard has kept the tradition of delivering toys and goods to remote villages ever since.

This year's operation was bittersweet for the C-130 crew, because it would be the last such mission for the 144th AS before they divest the Hercules from Alaska service.

"It is a great honor to fly the final C-130 Operation Santa Claus flight for the 144th Airlift Squadron," said Air National Guard Lt. Col. Richard Adams, 176th Operations Group director of operations and aircraft commander for the Akiachak sortie. "It's bittersweet to think this will be the last time (supporting the mission) in the mighty Herc.

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"The Alaska National Guard has a long tradition alongside our community partners of supporting Ops Santa,"

Adams continued. "We look forward to flying Santa with jets, props and rotors long into the future."

The C-130 touched down on the short Akiachak airfield just as the sun peeked over the horizon, pouring golden morning light over the green metal bird but not offering much in the way of heat. The aft ramp dropped, letting in the cold blast of minus 14-degree air pushed by winds of 5 to 10 mph.

Prepared for the cold, bundled-up volunteer elves rapidly dismantled a pallet loaded with goodies and transferred them to trucks waiting on the tarmac.

The Akiachak School gymnasium was nearly filled to capacity with children and parents awaiting the arrival of Kris Kringle.

The youth divided into age groups and queued up at tables scattered around the gym where volunteers handed out backpacks, gift-wrapped toys, sundaes and food. The children asked Airmen, Soldiers and the solitary Marine about their uniforms, what they do, and where they have been.

Yupik drummers and dancers led by Ickey Charles, a Yupit School District teacher, performed a number of traditional and contemporary Yupik songs. The reverberation of the drum skins filled the gym with a staccato rhythm thousands of years old.

The teacher said he was pleased to see Operation Santa Claus make a stop at his community.

"I like it for the benefit of the kids," he said before cracking a wide grin. "I guess we were having fun," Charles said, referring to the adults in attendance as well.

Santa and Mrs. Claus entered to much fanfare. North Pole's first couple made the rounds greeting parents and children before taking their place of honor where they spoke with children who expressed their Christmas wishes.

Reyna Hartz, Yupit School District superintendent, described the atmosphere.

"The feeling here is very happy, very positive," she said. "I think that the community feels loved and appreciated, and I think they recognize ... it's a long way to come, and the fact that you are all here and doing this, we very much appreciate it."

Army National Guard Brig. Gen. Laurie Hummel, adjutant general for the Alaska National Guard, said the Guard depends on Alaska villages as much as or more than they depend on the military.

"As much as we give communities, communities give much more back to us," Hummel explained. "It's important for Alaska National Guardsmen to be part of this enterprise, because it's important for us to remember the people that we serve and the communities that depend on us and our relevance and our readiness."

Hummel said the most memorable moment for her was when an Akiachak chorus asked the service members to gather and sit down before serenading them with the Yupik rendition of Silent Night.

"That was kind of a transcendent moment for me," the general said. "It brought back full circle why it is that we do what we do."

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PHOTOS:

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **Flickr links** include full-resolution, free downloadable images. (Flickr is not generally accessible from .mil computers.) <https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/albums/72157677430062135>

3. **DVIDS** link includes story and selected full-resolution, free downloadable images. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.) <http://dvidshub.net/r/3br2xu>

4. **DIVDS** Video A and B-roll link. <http://dvidshub.net/r/wm5dnk> and <http://dvidshub.net/r/sohtap>



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A team of Alaska National Guardsmen offload gifts, food and school supplies from a 144th Airlift Squadron C-130 Hercules, Dec. 3, 2016, in Akiachak, Alaska. The gifts were distributed to Akiachak residents as part of Operation Santa Claus. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. David Bedard)



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Upon his arrival, children from the village of Akiachak embrace Santa with a warm welcome during Operation Santa Claus, Dec. 3, 2016. This year marked the 60th anniversary in which the Alaska National Guard supported Operation Santa Claus with logistics and air support, delivering holiday cheer and gifts to remote Alaska villages. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Capt. Amanda Plachek)



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Brig. Gen. Laurie Hummel, adjutant general for the Alaska National Guard, hands a gift to an Akiachak child during Operation Santa Claus, Dec. 3, 2016. This year marked the 60th anniversary in which the Alaska National Guard supported Operation Santa Claus with logistics and air support, delivering holiday cheer and gifts to remote Alaska villages. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Capt. Amanda Plachek)