



**PRESS RELEASE
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Alaska National Guard
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Alaska National Guard biathletes compete in Canada, bring home gold

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON — Two Alaska Army National Guardsmen competed in the North American #1 and Calforex #1 Biathlon Cups at the Canmore Nordic Centre Provincial Park in Canmore, Alberta, Dec. 3-4.

Pfc. Travis Cooper, 207th Engineer Utility Detachment, took 1st place in the junior men's 10 km sprint and the 12.5 km mass start. His teammate, Spc. Tahdg Nakada, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation Regiment, placed 15th overall in both the men's 10 km sprint and 15 km mass start.

Nakada, 22, of Anchorage, and Cooper, 20, of Kenai, train year-round and compete on the National Guard Biathlon development team, coached by the Vermont Air National Guard's Staff Sgt. Sarah Lehto and Tech Sgt. Travis Voyer.

The first day of the competition boasted sunny skies with a steady breeze on a course of man-made snow to compensate for a lack of seasonal precipitation. The second day presented quite the opposite for competitors who gathered from across the U.S. and Canada at approximately 4,500 feet elevation in the heart of the Canadian Rocky Mountains.

After two weeks of training on man-made snow, competitors and spectators woke up on day two of the competition to a park covered in a thick blanket of fresh snow. It continued to snow throughout the day with increased and variable winds.

"New fresh snow is going to make the tracks a little bit slower with sharper snow crystals, so the skis are not as slippery on the snow and with the swirling wind, that affects the shooting," explained Voyer. "The Soldier athlete really has to pay attention [to the wind flags] when they come in for each shooting bout. [Wind] could be changing directions even as they are shooting."

Despite the additional challenge of changing weather conditions, Cooper and Nakada were able to negotiate the biathlon course successfully and improve from last year's standings.

"Winning feels really good," declared Cooper, who finished mid-pack at the same cup last year. "It feels like all the hard work I have put in has paid off and I'm really excited to see how far I can go."

Nakada, completing his third year racing in Canmore, hopes to continue to progress throughout the season, focusing on improving his shooting percentage and ski speed.

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-2-

"For the next races, I'm really just going to focus on shooting," explained Nakada, who competed against a

stacked senior field. “[It] was actually really cool to see that even though my shooting wasn’t very good, I wasn’t that far behind some of the guys that are usually a lot further in front of me.”

Biathlon is a winter sport that combines skiing and precision marksmanship. Participants alternate between skiing laps intended to get their heart rate up, and then transition to shooting small targets at 50 meters while attempting to control their breathing.

“To compete in this sport, I think you really have to be physically and mentally strong,” said Cooper, who compares biathlete discipline to that of a service member. “Every race is different and every condition is different; you have to adapt and overcome the elements and really just perform.”

Mental and physical strength are a small part of what it takes to be in the National Guard biathlon program. Voyer said that the National Guard is first and foremost and being an exceptional Airmen or Soldier is paramount.

“If they have good standing with their unit and are all done with their training requirements, then they get to do biathlon with us,” declared Voyer. “It is a privilege to be able to do this sport and travel around the world.”

Nakada was two years into his Alaska National Guard enlistment before learning about the National Guard biathlon program. The top unit physical fitness performer and state Best Warrior Competition winner was approached to first join the Alaska National Guard biathlon team.

“Everyone else [on the National Guard biathlon team] was an athlete first,” explained Nakada, crediting his prior service to bringing a new perspective to the team. “A lot of the civilian guys might be new to the sport too, but they have been skiing competitively since they were young. I have only been training for two and a half years so I am a little bit behind and trying my best to catch up.”

When Cooper joined the National Guard, his goal was to join the biathlon team to pursue his passion for skiing.

“I have skied competitively since I was in 7th grade,” explained Cooper, an accomplished skier who won the 7.5 km classic race at Alaska state high school cross-country ski championships prior to his Guard enlistment. “I do this sport because I like it. I have a lot of fun doing it and it’s something that I am good at, so I think I can make a career out of it.”

Since the early 1980s, the National Guard biathlon has always had at least one representative in the winter Olympics.

With a bright outlook on the future, Cooper, who has been on the National Guard biathlon development team for a year and half, is hoping to secure a return spot on the Junior World Championship team this season.

The competition in Canmore kicked off the biathlon season for both athletes on the National Guard team. Ten days later, they traveled to Mt. Itasca, Minn., to attend the U.S. International Biathlon Union Cup trials and will compete through Dec. 19.

Their coaches, who work with Nakada and Cooper full-time, year-round, believe both competitors have the talent and potential to go far in their athletic careers.

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-3-

“I think the guys are right where they should be as far as starting the season for us,” said Voyer. “Sgt. Lehto and myself, we have pretty high expectations for them, but they are right where they need to be.”

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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.)

Training: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/albums/72157673952166663>

Competition: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/albums/72157674074684933>

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/8xsewb>

4. **DIVDS** Video B-roll link. <http://dvidshub.net/r/upucwq>



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Alaska Guardsmen Spc. Tahdg Nakada, left, a signal support specialist with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation Regiment, and his teammate, Pfc. Travis Cooper, a construction equipment mechanic with the 207th Engineer Utility Detachment, compete in the North American #1 and Calforex #1 Biathlon Cups at the Canmore Nordic Centre Provincial Park in Canmore, Alberta, Dec. 3, 2016. Nakada placed 15th overall in both the men's 10 km sprint and 15 km mass start and Cooper took 1st in the Junior men's 10 km sprint and the 12.5 km mass start during the two-day competition. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Balinda O'Neal Dresel)



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Alaska Guardsman Spc. Tahdg Nakada, a signal support specialist with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation Regiment, competes in the North American #1 and Calforex #1 Biathlon Cups at the Canmore Nordic Centre Provincial Park in Canmore, Alberta, Dec. 3, 2016. Nakada, 22, of Anchorage, placed 15th overall in both the men's 10 km sprint and 15 km mass start during the two-day competition. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Balinda O'Neal Dresel)

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161204-Z-CA180-0030

Alaska Army Guardsman Pfc. Travis Cooper, a construction equipment mechanic with the 207th Engineer Utility Detachment, shoots in the prone position while competing in the junior men's 12.5 km mass start in the North American #1 and Calforex #1 Biathlon Cups at the Canmore Nordic Centre Provincial Park in Canmore, Alberta, Dec. 4, 2016. Cooper, 20, of Kenai, also took first place in the junior men's 10 km sprint the day before. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Balinda O'Neal Dresel)



161204-Z-CA180-0101

Alaska Army Guardsmen Pfc. Travis Cooper, a construction equipment mechanic with the 207th Engineer Utility Detachment, claims his second gold after completing the junior men's 12.5 km mass start in the North American #1 and Calforex #1 Biathlon Cups at the Canmore Nordic Centre Provincial Park in Canmore, Alberta, Dec. 4. Cooper, 20, of Kenai, also took first place in the junior men's 10 km sprint the day before. Cooper trains year-round and competes on the National Guard Biathlon development team. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Balinda O'Neal Dresel)