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Alaska National Guard's exercise Arctic Eagle tests radiological response in Valdez

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska —More than 200 Air and Army National Guard service members travelled by ferry, plane and vehicle to the outlying community of Valdez, Alaska, to participate in a portion of exercise Arctic Eagle, Feb. 20-26, 2018.

Arctic Eagle is a statewide exercise involving national, state and local agencies designed to provide opportunities for 1,100 participants to conduct sustained operations in arctic conditions.

Valdez is located in the southeast region of the state near the head of the Prince William Sound and tucked into the heavily glaciated Chugach Mountain Range. With an average of more than 300 inches of snow per year, this remote community provided optimal conditions to test the National Guard's ability to respond to high-threat radiological scenarios.

Valdez didn't fail to provide real-world trials in the form of snow, low visibility, fog, icy roads, and high winds during the 5-day training exercise. Access to the community also challenged service members as they creatively moved Homeland Response Force equipment and Washington National Guard personnel from Fairchild Air Force Base, Washington, to the remote coastal town. The forefront of this exercise saw cancelled and delayed flights, ground transportation and rerouting of aircraft.

Air-travel movement of resources to Valdez using the C-17 Globemaster III, a cargo transport aircraft belonging to the 249th Airlift Squadron, Alaska Air National Guard, was attempted. Two aircrafts departed Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson to pick up personnel and equipment from Fairchild AFB. However, it was determined that the aircraft was unable to land at Pioneer Field, the local Valdez airport, and plans were changed to bring the equipment and personnel back to Anchorage.

"The winter is a really challenging time of year to land in Valdez," said Maj. Laura Grossman, a pilot with the 176th Wing, Alaska Air National Guard and one of two pilots who flew the C-17s roundtrip from Anchorage to Fairchild. "The runway isn't plowed, and even if we were able to land the runway is too slick and wouldn't allow us to take off."

After landing in Anchorage, more than 60 personnel and equipment were bussed 70 miles to Whittier, Alaska, and loaded onto a ferry for a more than five-hour nautical journey to the Port of Valdez. Upon their arrival, more than 48 hours had elapsed since the C-17 was dispatched to pick up the equipment needed to react to the exercise scenario.

While in Valdez, Air and Army National Guard service members from Alaska, Colorado, Connecticut, Indiana, South Dakota, Utah and Washington participated in numerous arctic training events that continued to address movement and weather difficulties associated with outlying Alaskan communities.

Cold weather training was conducted at the Valdez Civic Center and included presentations on cold weather operations, injuries, toxic chemicals, decontamination and cold water survival.

“Training in an extreme weather environment tests not only your equipment, but your own physical strength,” said 1st Lt. Shawnta DiFalco, commander of the Decontamination Element, 792nd Chemical Company, Washington National Guard. “The Soldiers had to work through freezing wind, snow and ground ice to set up equipment. Without fail there are challenges when using decontamination equipment—the cold weather training we received was unmatched in its ability to challenge our capability to do our jobs in an austere environment.”

The exercise featured a notional scenario that involved a fallen satellite landing in Valdez with radiological contamination of three separate incident sites: on land, sea and near the command post exercise operating area.

During a major or catastrophic Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear and Explosive event, such as the one outlined in Arctic Eagle, a Homeland Response Force must recall and deploy critical command, control and life-saving capabilities within six hours.

“The homeland response force is a regionally aligned Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, high-yield explosive asset established in response to natural, man-made, or terrorist initiated CBRNE disasters,” explained 1st Sgt. Fausto Crespo, assigned to the Washington National Guard and acting as the planning non-commissioned officer for the exercise. “A HRF is crucial in a mission like this in coordinating vast capabilities and manpower—we are trained and adept in working alongside first responders in casualty assistance, search and extraction, decontamination and medical triage.”

Throughout the United States there are 10 HRFs which align with the 10 Federal Emergency Management Agency regions. Alaska is located in the 10th Homeland Response Force region, encompassing Oregon, Idaho, Alaska and headquartered in Washington.

The HRF headquarters element and support platoons participated in the command post exercise. The other elements were scenario based, operating in the field.

Guard members responded to the notional scenario by establishing the Homeland Response Force followed by a HRF deployment of civil support teams to pinpoint the contamination location and to gather material samples for testing. Throughout the community, role players acting as victims of the satellite crash were recovered and cared for by an established medical triage.

Two M1135 Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Reconnaissance Vehicles, also known as Strykers, belonging to the 95th Chemical Company, Washington National Guard, were deployed by the HRF to perform route clearance and identify hazard locations.

“Our mission was to perform initial entry into Valdez in order to locate any areas of contamination using our Stryker vehicles,” explained Capt. Gerald Ratchford, commander of the 95th Chemical Company. “This mounted platform enables us to quickly and safely ensure the area that the personnel will occupy is safe, avoiding inadvertently contaminating our first responders.”

The HRF then dispatched the 103rd CST, Alaska National Guard, and 14th CST, Connecticut National Guard, to collect hazardous samples and document contaminated areas on shore.

Off-shore, a scenario placing hazardous debris on a shipping vessel in the Port of Valdez prompted response by the U.S. Coast Guard Station Valdez in order to recover the radioactive materials and secure the boat and civilians.

“Opportunities to work with other agencies, uniforms and partners is critical to the success in a real event,” said Lt. Col. Bruce Roberts, CBRN Task Force Commander for Arctic Eagle and Utah National Guard member. “This exercise brought together the National Guard, U.S. Army, Coast Guard, local government and agencies and first responders; we all learned valuable lessons that will contribute to interoperability in the future.”

The exercise concluded on Saturday, Feb. 25, on-time, and the community of Valdez concluded the exercise with a celebration for the participants at the Valdez Civic Center, which featured a fresh local seafood lunch and booths selling handmade Alaskan crafts.

“This mission was a total success; the 10th HRF was able to successfully demonstrate our ability to deploy and operate within some of the furthest parts of our interagency, interstate and multi-service environment,” said Crespo. “I always enjoy working alongside folks that are dedicated to executing at the highest caliber, focused on mission accomplishment, and always maintaining a critical eye toward improving our processes.”

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PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **Flickr link** includes an event album with the complete selection of full-resolution, free downloadable images. (May not be accessible from all military computers.)
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/albums/72157690890462821>
3. **DVIDS link** includes story and selected full-resolution photos. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.) <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/267573/alaska-national-guards-exercise-arctic-eagle-tests-radiological-response-valdez>
4. **Video link** includes downloadable b-roll
<https://www.dvidshub.net/video/586365/180224-coast-guard-yacht-boarding>
<https://www.dvidshub.net/video/586593/alaska-connecticut-civil-support-teams-conduct-arctic-eagle-2018-exercise-valdez>
<https://www.dvidshub.net/video/586584/jisc-interviews>
<https://www.dvidshub.net/search/?q=valdez&view=grid>
<https://www.dvidshub.net/video/586522/interview-with-c-17-pilot-laura-grossman-flight>



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Lt. Col. Richard Mohammadi, commander of the 103rd Civil Support Team, Alaska National Guard, briefs a team of Soldiers, Airmen and Coast Guard members prior to a radiological contamination response in support of exercise Arctic Eagle 2018 in Valdez, Alaska, Feb. 23, 2018. The goals of AE18 are for participating forces to operate in a joint, interagency, intergovernmental and multinational environment; assess ability to conduct sustained operations in arctic conditions, and integrate new and emerging capabilities. (U.S. Army photo by 2nd Lt. Marisa Lindsay)



180223-Z-QK839-0026

Members of the decontamination team assigned to the 103rd Civil Support Team, Alaska Army National Guard, prepare to conduct radiological reconnaissance during exercise Arctic Eagle in Valdez, Alaska, Feb. 23, 2018. The goals of AE18 are for participating forces to operate in a joint, interagency, intergovernmental and multinational environment; assess ability to conduct sustained operations in arctic conditions, and integrate new and emerging capabilities. (U.S. Army photo by 2nd Lt. Marisa Lindsay)



180224-Z-QK839-0002

Coast Guard members assigned to the U.S. Coast Guard Station Valdez prepare to board a civilian vessel suspected of carrying radiological material from a satellite crash at the Port of Valdez, Alaska, during exercise Arctic Eagle, Feb. 24, 2018. Arctic Eagle 2018 is a homeland security and emergency response exercise operating throughout the state of Alaska, hosted by the Alaska National Guard. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by 2nd Lt. Marisa Lindsay)



180225-Z-QK839-0008

Participants of Arctic Eagle 2018 enjoy a lunch buffet at the conclusion of the exercise provided by the Valdez City Council at the Valdez Convention Center in Valdez, Alaska, Feb. 25, 2018. The overall objective of exercise Arctic Eagle is to assess ability to conduct sustained operations in Arctic conditions and exercise Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Response Enterprise. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by 2nd Lt. Marisa Lindsay)