

Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe

Commissioner & Adjutant General

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Alaska National Guard

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By Lt. Col. Candis Olmstead

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Alaska National Guard delivers Christmas gifts to children in villages

Napakiak and Tuntutuliak welcome Op Santa its 63rd year

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — The Alaska National Guard has a tradition of serving communities throughout Alaska during the holidays, delivering Christmas gifts and a variety of delights to children during Operation Santa Claus. In its 63rd year, two small Native villages along the Kuskokwim River in Western Alaska were selected for a visit this season.

Santa and his elves visited Tuntutuliak Nov. 25 and Napakiak Dec. 3, traveling in an Army National Guard C-12 Huron twin-engine turbo prop aircraft from here to Bethel, then in an Army Guard UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter to access the small villages, which don't have airfields to accommodate the C-12 landing.

"I do love to travel with my reindeer," said Santa Claus of North Pole. "But they are resting up for Christmas Eve, which gives me an amazing opportunity to fly with the National Guard," he said.

The Salvation Army worked together with the National Guard and other community organizations to coordinate Op Santa and ensure every child, infants through age 18, received a wrapped Christmas gift from Santa Claus. Ice cream sundaes were provided for everyone in the community, and all students received new backpacks with personal items and snacks. Volunteers also handed out beautiful hand-knit hats made with love from a group of volunteers who live in Florida. Everyone in the villages expressed gratitude and enthusiasm to their out-of-town guests, there to spread holiday cheer.

"There's a reason we've been doing this since 1956," said Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe, adjutant general of the Alaska National Guard. "What a great way to show the communities of Alaska that we care about them, and this is likely the first time some have had an opportunity to meet a Soldier or Airman."

After the helicopter arrived in each village, volunteers stepped out onto frozen ground and into the back of a four-wheeler or pickup truck for a ride to the village school. There, they quickly unpacked boxes of gifts, organized items, and finished preparing for the arrival of students. Many adults from the villages attend the event, bringing infants, toddlers and elders to enjoy the festivities.

"Op Santa began after St. Mary's experienced natural disaster and there was a lack of food from subsistence, so extra money could not be spent on gifts for the children," said Saxe. "We've continued this outreach to serve those in remote areas, to hopefully bring the joy of the season, and to build relationships in the communities."

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In 1956, the Air National Guard's 144th Airlift Squadron delivered donated goods to the remote village of St. Mary's in a C-123J Provider. Since then, Air Guard C-130s Hercules, HC-130 King, C-17 Globemaster III, HH-60 Pave Hawk; and Army Guard C-23 Sherpa, UH-60 Black Hawk, and C-12 Huron have transported Santa and Mrs. Claus, elves, gifts and other desirable items to thousands of children throughout rural Alaska to more than 90 villages.

The last time that Op Santa was in Napakiak and Tuntutuliak was in 2000. Both villages have a population of about 350-400 people.

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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.)

Tuntutuliak: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/albums/72157711969645773>

Napakiak: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/albums/72157712066637443>

VIDEO

YouTube link Tuntutuliak:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XqiuoftymM&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1RcVgreZrLE0f35y0hfXSszveS89qMooILT8A7DhfGNL8VsHRZAUlWnD8



Alaska Army National Guard Sgt. Randall Andrew, an infantryman assigned to the National Guard Readiness Center in Bethel, Alaska, gives a child a gift during Operation Santa Claus in Napakiak, Alaska, Dec. 3, 2019. Operation Santa Claus is an annual event hosted by the Alaska National Guard and the Salvation Army. The Alaska National Guard started the event in 1956 and was joined by the Salvation Army more than 40 years ago. This partnership serves as a way for the military to care for isolated villages. Napakiak is a village in western Alaska with a population of around 350 people. Volunteers flew into the village to deliver gifts, school supplies, backpacks, ice cream and an opportunity to take a photo with Santa for the entire community. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Emily Farnsworth)



Sr. Master Sgt. Saroya Porche (center) and State Command Chief Warrant Officer 5 Gregory Beach (right) provide gifts to children during Operation Santa Claus in Napakiak, Alaska, Dec. 3, 2019. Operation Santa Claus is an annual event hosted by the Alaska National Guard and the Salvation Army. The Alaska National Guard started the event in 1956 and was joined by the Salvation Army more than 40 years ago. This partnership serves as a way for the military to care for isolated villages. Napakiak is a village in western Alaska with a population of around 350 people. Volunteers flew into the village to deliver gifts, school supplies, backpacks, ice cream and an opportunity to take a photo with Santa for the entire community. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Emily Farnsworth)



Staff Sgt. Joseph Sallaffie, an Army National Guard member stationed in Bethel, Alaska, gives a gift bag to a young girl during Operation Santa Claus 2019. Members of the Alaska National Guard participate in Operation Santa Claus 2019 in the rural Alaskan village of Napakiak, Dec. 3, 2019. Op Santa is a National Guard community outreach program that provides children in small Native Alaskan communities with Christmas gifts, books, school supplies, ice cream sundaes and an opportunity to meet Santa Claus. Op Santa began in 1956 after natural disaster struck the village of St. Mary's, and has continued every year since, to nearly 100 communities in Alaska. Napakiak is in Western Alaska, southwest of Bethel, along the Kuskokwim River, with a population of about 350. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Lt. Col. Candis Olmstead/Released)



Diann Richardson, director of psychological health for the 176th Wing, Alaska Air National Guard, allows her therapy dog, Bolt, to visit with a young girl in Napakiak, Alaska, Dec. 3, 2019. Members of the Alaska National Guard participate in the annual event, Operation Santa Claus in the rural Alaskan village during its 63rd year. Op Santa is a National Guard community outreach program that provides children in small Native Alaskan communities with Christmas gifts, books, school supplies, ice cream sundaes and an opportunity to meet Santa Claus. Op Santa began in 1956 after natural disaster struck the village of St. Mary's, and has continued every year since, to nearly 100 communities in Alaska. Napakiak is in Western Alaska, southwest of Bethel, along the Kuskokwim River, with a population of about 350. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Lt. Col. Candis Olmstead/Released)



Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe, adjutant general of the Alaska National Guard, 2nd Lt. Ryan Newton, with the Army National Guard, and Rich Owens, owner of a local ice cream shop, serve ice cream during Operation Santa Claus in Napakiak, Alaska, Dec. 3, 2019. Members of the Alaska National Guard, Salvation Army, and community volunteers, participate in the annual event that has occurred in rural Alaskan villages since 1956. Op Santa is a National Guard community outreach program that provides children in small Native Alaskan communities with Christmas gifts, books, school supplies, ice cream sundaes and an opportunity to meet Santa Claus. Op Santa began 63 years ago after natural disaster struck the village of St. Mary's, and has continued every year since, to nearly 100 communities in Alaska. Napakiak is in Western Alaska, southwest of Bethel, along the Kuskokwim River, with a population of about 350. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Lt. Col. Candis Olmstead/Released)