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## **Alaska Army National Guard's 1-297th Infantry returns from Kosovo deployment Amid COVID-19 pandemic, Soldiers back on Alaskan soil**

**JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska** — While the COVID-19 pandemic continues to dominate the news cycle in America and all over the globe, Alaskans were reminded this weekend that the American Soldier has rarely had the luxury of prioritizing self. One of the fundamental oaths of the Soldier's Creed is to always place the mission first. For more than 150 Alaska Army Guardsmen assigned to the 1st Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment, stepping off the aircraft at Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport on Saturday, April 4, closed the book on another completed mission.

It was a luminous spring evening in Anchorage. The golden Alaskan sun flickered through an eerily vacant North Terminal at the airport. More than 10 months had passed since the Soldiers tasted Alaska's fresh mountain air. They were finally home.

Due to pandemic safeguards, customary welcome parties were not inside to greet them. Thunderous cheers were replaced by a warm "welcome home, and great job" by the Alaska Army Guard's top leadership as Soldiers descended down flights of stairs into the terminal.

The Soldiers arrived at a stream of green Army duffel bags flowing into the luggage claim. They eagerly waited to grab their own. A handshake was exchanged for an elbow tap and an embrace for a hand-wave. Nevertheless, the pride of a job well done and the excitement of arriving home still radiated from the faces of the Guardsmen as they parted the exit doors of the airport.

"I couldn't be happier and excited to see my family today, said Sgt. Justin Kompkoff, an infantryman and Anchorage native assigned to Bravo Company, 1-297th IN. "It's surreal. I'm so relieved this deployment is over and I look forward to a relaxing period of leave."

Soldiers local to Anchorage and surrounding areas emptied the terminal and poured into the parking lot to the find their loved ones. Fathers and mothers passionately embraced their children, friends, and family. Loving partners greeted each other with ecstatic affection.

The homecoming was dissimilar to what most U.S. Soldiers experience after deployment. COVID-19 measures caused demobilization to be cut short. Prior to arriving in Alaska, the Soldiers underwent mandatory quarantine for 14 days in El Paso, Texas at the Army's Fort Bliss after returning from Kosovo.

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Many heavy hearts were lifted in Anchorage after reuniting with loved ones and experiencing the comfort of being home, but for some, the journey was not over. Soldiers from outlying areas of Alaska like Bethel, Fairbanks, Valdez and several remote villages departed the airport on commercial buses and were taken to nearby housing, to continue strict COVID-19 isolation measures before departing the following day.

On Sunday, 10 of the Guardsmen flew to Bethel, a coastal, western Alaskan rural hub via an Alaska Air National Guard HC-130 Combat King II aircraft from the 211th Rescue Squadron. An Army Guard UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter with the 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation Regiment then flew the Soldiers to their isolated home villages of Aniak, Chevak, Kasigluk, Kwigillingok, and Tuluksak.

Every returning Soldier has been mandated to follow COVID-19 precautionary measures, which includes an additional 14 days of quarantine in their Alaskan residencies.

The Kosovo mission began in the grueling Texas heat at Fort Bliss during the 1-297th's premobilization. From there, the unit departed on an 8,000 mile flight to Europe, where it would support a peacekeeping mission in Kosovo that has been ongoing since June, 1999.

"With Kosovo's history of ethnic conflict, it's important for the U.S. to have a visible presence to deter hostilities," said Lt. Col. Samuel Scott, 1-297th IN commander.

One of the primary tasks the battalion was responsible for in Kosovo was to monitor the country's administrative border lines and ports of entry to provide freedom of movement and a safe environment for the people of Kosovo. Soldiers worked with Kosovo law enforcement to combat illegal activity like smuggling and sex trafficking.

Unit accomplishments included 56 enlisted Soldiers graduating the Army's Basic Leadership Course required for promotion to non-commissioned officer. Approximately 70 Soldiers were also promoted in Kosovo. Physical fitness standards improved battalion-wide, reaching as high as 100 percent mid-deployment.

Community relations were a vital part of not only securing information, but developing relationships and helping the surrounding municipalities with local projects like building churches and food distribution.

"It was a great first deployment for me, and our guys worked very hard," said Spc. Trae Curtis, an infantryman, North Pole resident, and University of Alaska Anchorage student from Alpha Co., 1-297th. "Working with our NATO partners and building relationships with the people of Kosovo was a truly rewarding experience."

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#### Photos + Story

1. **Flickr link** includes an Exercise Arctic Eagle 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/72157713783282733>

2. **DVIDS link** to press release and photos <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/366704/alaska-army-national-guards-1-297th-infantry-returns-kosovo-deployment>

3. **DVIDS link** to a B-roll package <https://www.dvidshub.net/video/746037/1st-battalion-297th-infantry-regiment-soldiers-return-kosovo>



Alaska National Guard Soldiers assigned to 1st Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment depart Ted Stevens International Airport after returning from a nine-month deployment in Kosovo, Apr 4, 2020. Prior to returning to their home state, the Soldiers were quarantined for 14 days in El Paso Texas, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Seth LaCount/Released)



Alaska Army National Guard Infantryman Spc. Ted Mustain embraces his wife Elizabeth Mustain after returning home from a nine-month deployment to Kosovo at Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport Apr. 4, 2020. Mustain was assigned to 1st Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment in Kosovo and participated in a NATO peacekeeping mission. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Seth LaCount/Released)



Sgt. Daniel Pau, a Soldier assigned to 1st Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment, Alaska Army National Guard kisses his baby boy for the first time at Ted Steven Anchorage International Airport Apr. 4, 2020. Pau had just returned from a nine-month deployment to Kosovo for a NATO peacekeeping mission. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Seth LaCount/Released)