



**PRESS RELEASE
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Christmas came early for one Alaska village

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — Winter has not yet covered the endless Alaskan landscape with its seasonal coat of sugary snow. Despite this, Santa’s helpers have been busy. So busy, in fact, that they were able to celebrate Christmas early in one remote village on a small island in the Bering Sea.

Already, the low mumbles of disdain can be heard in shopping centers at the appearance of Christmas ornamentation competing for shelf space with Halloween costumes. But in Savoonga, Alaska, the children were only too eager to greet Santa and Mrs. Claus as they stepped off a C-130 Hercules from the Alaska Air National Guard, when it landed on the small airstrip at the edge of town, Oct. 16.

However, before the guests of honor arrived in Savoonga, a community’s worth of people came together to manifest the holiday cheer.

“We had support from all over the country,” said April Gettys, executive director of the Operation Santa Claus organization. “We had ladies from all the way in Florida knitting hats and scarves, people sending in donations and gift cards, people giving from all over. It really was a herculean effort.”

The community of volunteers and contributors was comprised of approximately 30 groups and organizations that put in more than 3,000 hours to make the 59th iteration of Operation Santa Claus come to be.

“It really is a partnership,” said Jenni Ragland, service extension and emergency disaster services director of the Alaska Divisional Headquarters of the Salvation Army. “You always feel so good when you’re there doing something good for others.”

The preparation for the mission to Savoonga was a large undertaking, explained Gettys, who chaired the operation for the first time this year.

“It started off slow, but just picked up momentum,” said Gettys. “It was like a little snowball at the top of the hill, and as it rolls down the hill, it gets bigger and bigger, and by the time it gets to the bottom, it’s as big as the town.”

That town, she explained, extended well beyond the community of volunteer elves, many of whom worked long hours outside of their workweek to help garner donations for Santa’s first stop of the year.

“We had people working ten hour shifts in front of different stores in the cold,” she explained, “and it was humbling some of the things you would see. We had people who were living on fixed incomes who when they were leaving the store, felt strongly enough about the effort that they would reach into their own shopping bags and donate some of their food, saying they could get by on what they have. It was really humbling. They say it takes a village to feed a village.”

Once all of the donations were collected, the elves then commenced to wrapping the presents, gathering supplies, food and various pieces of equipment for the trip, and palletized them for the flight. When the morning came, dark and early, Santa and his merry band of helpers boarded the C-130, packed from end to end with people, gifts and food, and taxied out on to the runway on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson. This time, however, it was not Rudolph that led the sleigh; it was the 144th Airlift Squadron.

The plane’s engines roared as it dashed down the runway, her nose rotated up to meet the sky as she launched into the abyss of winter’s morning darkness, banked to the west, and climbed into the heavens. Aboard the plane, the group cheered. After months of selfless work, they were on their way.

After nearly two hours of flight, the sun rising but hidden in the grey void of clouds, the plane descended and the first signs of the island could be seen. Treeless, the hills capped with snow, the waves visible from the air, crashing into the rocky coastline.

The plane touched down on the miniature runway and lurched forward as it braked to come to a short stop and turned to park on the edge of town. Outside the small round windows of the cargo area, children could be seen waving from atop their four wheelers. The townspeople were all there, waiting in anticipation.

As the plane’s rotors spun slower then stopped, the anxious children crept closer, attempting to get a look at Santa.

“Is he in there?” they would ask the emerging passengers. “Are you one of his helpers?”

As the cargo ramp lowered, crewmembers, volunteers and villagers unloaded the pallets from the plane and transported them to the school as the children watched with excited curiosity. Then, without further ado, Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus emerged from the stairs of the plane as the children shouted and reached for them, their faces all lined with smiles. Christmas had arrived two months early.

“My first feeling when we arrived,” said Gettys, “was a feeling of being overwhelmed with love. When we got there, perfect strangers would wrap their arms around you and tell you they love you just because you came to their village.”

From the runway’s side, the procession moved to the school, where the children waited outside of the gymnasium as the elves began setting the stage for the day’s event. Gifts were unpacked and organized, food was put out, and ice cream, brought by Rich Owens from Taste Freez (an “Op Santa staple”) was prepared for eager kids.

After everything was in place, the children were brought into the gym where they sang Christmas carols and took turns getting their photos taken with Santa. Afterwards, they were given gifts at various tables and were treated to ice cream sundaes. The combination of sugar and cheer could be felt as much as seen as the children laughed and flocked from table to table, talking with their visitors, comparing gifts and playing.

After the festivities wound down and the crowd dissipated, Mr. and Mrs. Claus gathered their helpers and loaded back into their four-propeller sleigh, bid one last farewell, and flew home to prepare for the next mission.

“I just have to say,” said Gettys, “that I think our Airmen, Soldiers and elves... I think we got more out of it than the village did, and that says a lot. Just going there and seeing how much they appreciated it, it makes it all worth it. Your eyes just get opened and it helps you realize what really matters in life.”

The next Operation Santa Claus mission is scheduled to go to St. Mary’s, Alaska on Dec. 5. For more information about Operation Santa Claus or to volunteer, interested parties can contact the organization at akopsantaclaus@gmail.com or find them on their Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/AKOpSanta>.

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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. (Flickr is not generally accessible from .mil computers.)
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/176wg/albums/7215765777359064>
3. **DVIDS link** includes story and selected full-resolution photos. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is also generally accessible from .mil computers for individual users.)
<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/179324/christmas-came-early-one-alaska-village#.ViaJUsZUPrA>

Children in Savoonga, Alaska greet Santa Claus as he emerges from a C-130 Hercules aircraft from the 144th Airlift Squadron, Alaska Air National Guard, Oct. 16, during this year's Operation Santa mission. This year marks the 59th year of the program, which serves to bring Christmas to underserved, remote villages across Alaska each year. (U.S. National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Edward Egerton)



Santa and Mrs. Claus meet with children of Savoonga, Alaska, Oct. 16, during Operation Santa Claus. This year marks the 59th year of the program, which serves to bring Christmas to underserved, remote villages across Alaska each year. (U.S. National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Edward Eagerton)



Rich Owens, owner and proprietor of Taste Freeze in Anchorage, serves up ice cream treats for children of Savoonga, Alaska, Oct. 16 during Operation Santa Claus. This year marks the 59th year of the program, which serves to bring Christmas to underserved, remote villages across Alaska each year. (U.S. National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Edward Eagerton)

