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By Tech. Sgt. N. Alicia Halla

**Operation Santa Claus returns to St. Mary's, where the program first began**

**JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska** — There's something indispensable about returning to your roots, like an intrinsic yearning that needs to be filled. And who knows yearning better than children awaiting Christmas?

Operation Santa Claus answered that calling when its volunteers and partners delivered gifts, fresh fruit, school supplies and Santa Claus to more than 250 children in St. Mary's, a community in southwestern Alaska, Dec. 5.

The operation began 59 years ago as a request from St. Mary's Mission for Christmas donations for their orphans after a rough year of subsistence living. The Alaska Air Guard responded, delivering not only gifts and food, but also Saint Nick. Since then, the annual event evolved into the current partnership with the Alaska National Guard supporting Operation Santa Claus alongside more than 30 other organizations such as the Salvation Army and local businesses.

"It was awesome," said Bill Alstrom, the city's mayor, recalling childhood memories of the first operation. "They landed on the river – they were C-123s, and of course they brought Santa Claus."

Almost six decades later, members of the Alaska National Guard arrived in a C-130 "Hercules" aircraft, bringing Santa and his merry band of helpers once more. The elementary school gym filled with smiles, wrapping paper and push-up challenges issued by brazen, energetic youth. Traditional Christmas music played as children met with the Clauses, ate fruit and ice cream and showed off gifts. Thank-yous were exchanged from both patrons and volunteers for the opportunity to serve.

The event ended with a traditional Native dance, which both U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan and Governor Bill Walker joined at the residents' request.

"What a gorgeous site this is," Walker said. "Thank you to the Alaska National Guard who flew us out here today, and the tons of volunteers [that helped] make this happen."

Next year, Operation Santa Claus plans to visit five villages, decided by an application process based on the needs of Alaska's rural communities and the aircraft capabilities of the Alaska National Guard to support them.

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## PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and photos.
2. **Flickr link** includes event album of full-resolution, free downloadable images. (<http://flic.kr/s/aHskqMfbat>)
3. **DVIDS link** includes story and photos. (DVIDS is generally accessible from .mil computers) (<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/184056/operation-santa-claus-returns-st-marys-program-first-began>)



151206-Z-NW557-101

ST. MARY'S, Alaska -- Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus wave as they exit an Alaska Air National Guard C-130 here Dec. 5, 2015. The Clauses were here as part of Operation Santa Claus, a nonprofit organization partnered with the Alaska National Guard to collect toys, school supplies and food staples and deliver them to school children in Alaska's remote communities. This mission was the second and final Op Santa mission of 2015. St. Mary's was the site of the original Operation Santa Claus in 1957. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Capt. John Callahan/ Released)



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ST. MARY'S, Alaska -- U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) gives fresh fruit to a local child here Dec. 5, 2015, as part of Operations Santa Claus. Volunteers and military members from approximately 30 groups and organizations came together to bring holiday cheer to the community of St. Mary's, Alaska. This year marks the 59th year of the program, which serves to bring Christmas to underserved, remote communities across Alaska each year. The volunteers were also joined by Alaska Gov. Bill Walker and U.S. Sen. Dan Sullivan as Operation Santa Claus returned to St. Mary's. (U.S. Air Force photo/Alejandro Pena)



151205-YH522-F-999

ST. MARY'S, Alaska -- Alaska National Guardsmen participate in a pushup challenge from local youth here Dec. 5, 2015, during a visit by Operation Santa Claus. Volunteers and military members from approximately 30 groups and organizations came together to bring holiday cheer to the community of St. Mary's, Alaska, Dec. 5, 2015, during Operation Santa Claus. This year marks the 59th year of the program, which serves to bring Christmas to underserved, remote communities across Alaska each year. The volunteers were also joined by Alaska Gov. Bill Walker and United States Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) as Operation Santa Claus returned to St. Mary's. (U.S. Air Force photo/Alejandro Pena)



151206-Z-NW557-110

ST. MARY'S, Alaska -- Operation Santa Claus is a nonprofit organization partnered with the Alaska National Guard to collect toys, school supplies and food staples and deliver them to school children in Alaska's remote, rural communities. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Capt. John Callahan/ Released)