

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON – Alaska Army National Guard Soldiers conducted airborne and arctic training operations, as well as community engagement events, during an extended drill weekend in western Alaska, January 13-17.

The training events commenced Wednesday morning when an Air National Guard C-130 Hercules aircraft departed Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson for Bethel, carrying 38 infantry airborne Soldiers belonging to B Company, 1st Battalion, 143rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne).

The Soldiers had intended to conduct airborne operations into a drop zone located in the outskirts of Bethel, where their unit is based.

Prior to the jump, with wind speeds reaching 19 knots and climbing, the drop zone safety officer determined it was unsafe to continue the exercise and the airborne operation was canceled.

“Of course, myself and our paratroopers were disappointed, we all wanted to jump,” stated Capt. Walter Hotch-Hill, the B Co., 1-143rd Inf. (ABN) commander. “However, there’s still training value in the preparation and planning that leadership and the Soldiers go through right up to jumping out the door.”

Arctic training and community engagements continued as more than 80 Soldiers, from B Co., 1-143rd Inf. (ABN), 1-297th Reconnaissance and Surveillance Cavalry Squadron and support personnel from the 297th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade, flew into the western community from all over the state.

The National Guard armory in Bethel opened its doors to local residents, offering a barbeque and informative service booths on family and veterans programs.

During the open house, Guardsmen had the opportunity to witness the activation of the Alaska State Defense Force’s newest unit, the 2nd Signal Battalion. The Bethel-based unit will collocate with the AKARNG in the armory.

“Having an Alaska State Defense Force unit here is going to be very viable for western Alaska,” said 1st Sgt. Rodger Morrison with B Co., 1-143rd Inf. (ABN). “It will be good to have a team out here that is well versed with experience and that the community knows well, because they are local.”

At the conclusion of the open house and throughout the evening, northern winds carried arctic temperatures into the region, with wind chill temperatures plummeting to more than 30 below zero.

The rapid drop in temperatures created ideal arctic skills training conditions, where the training is designed to mentally and physically prepare Soldiers to operate safely and effectively in arctic environments.

“Some of our Soldiers had never experienced the cold weather that we had over the training event, especially those traveling from southeast Alaska,” said Hotch-Hill. “We went over proper use of our cold weather gear and established campsites using akhio groups, which has the equipment needed to sustain a ten-person squad in arctic conditions.”

The ahkio group is a 200-pound capacity sled used for transporting equipment in the winter.

Amid training, Guardsmen had the opportunity to support a defense to civil authorities mission by performing check point and stability operations during the Kuskokwim 300 and Bogus Creek 150 sled dog races.

“This was a great opportunity to not only conduct arctic survival skills and training, but engage with the community and let them know that the Alaska National Guard is still a presence in western Alaska,” said Morrison.

Guardsmen were transported by a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter from 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation, and dropped off along the Kuskokwim River near the Bogus Creek checkpoint. They also traveled by snow machine and small unit support vehicles across blankets of ice and snow to the village of Tuluksak, 50 miles from Bethel, to a Kuskokwim 300 checkpoint.

Support included verification of check-in and departure times, identifying the number of dogs in each team and checking racers’ supply inventory, which is required by race regulations. Soldiers also helped with moving straw, feed and dropping dogs at designated areas.

The Guardsmen proved to be an invaluable asset when a Bogus Creek 150 musher, Victoria Hardwick, hit a bump and fell off her sled early Sunday morning. According to race headquarters, a race marshal was able to identify the location of her fled dogs using a global positioning system.

“After a risk analysis, we geared up, loaded her on the back of the snow machine and set off into the middle of the night,” said Sgt. 1st Class Todd Patnode, B Co., 1-143rd Inf. (ABN). “We found the team 15 miles down the creek and because we brought the musher back to her team, she was able to finish race. This reinforced the desire to have some kind of Guard presence assisting in the race in the future.”

From Bethel to Tuluksak, Morrison said they received accolades from everyone they connected with.

“They were glad that the National Guard was here,” explained Morrison. “Our presence was felt and it was appreciated everywhere we went.”

“These Guardsmen right here are the best, they braved the elements with smiles on their faces,” added Morrison. “This type of rural training and engagement is the way forward for the Alaska Army National Guard in terms of getting back to arctic survival and western Alaska.”