



PRESS RELEASE

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Life in Ft. Greely: Alaska's playground and the Army's best-kept secret

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — Stepping off of the airplane after landing on the remote airstrip at Ft. Greely, it is cold, quiet, and windy. The ceiling is low and the sun shines a blur of bright white through the clouds.

Lt. Col. Tim Brower, commander of the Alaska Army National Guard's 49th Missile Defense Battalion, greets visitors with a solid handshake and friendly smile.

"I wish the sky was clear so you could see the mountains," he said with a genuine welcome to the post he calls home.

Brower is on his second tour at Ft. Greely, an Army installation about 100 miles south of Fairbanks and five miles from Delta Junction, a small town of not quite a thousand.

"We love it here," he said, as he described the simple life and slower pace of a small town. "You can get lost at larger bases, but here, you have more opportunities to build relationships, and wherever you go, you know someone."

But the slower pace doesn't translate to the duty day. The 200 Soldiers assigned to the 49th work long, sometimes tedious hours to meet their crucial national security mission. The Missile Defense Battalion operates and secures the Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system in order to destroy intercontinental ballistic missiles with their high-tech interceptors.

The Ground-Based Interceptor (GBI) is a multi-stage, solid fuel booster with an exo-atmospheric kill vehicle—a sensor-propulsion package that uses kinetic energy from a direct hit to the incoming ICBM to destroy it.

Fire direction crews—Soldiers in the 49th MDBn Headquarters and Headquarters Battery—operate the ground-based missile defense system from facilities on the Missile Defense Complex at Ft. Greely.

"Each crew contains five highly trained Soldiers who operate the system, around the clock, year-round" said Brower. "Utilizing sea, land and space-based sensors, crews are able to detect the launch of an ICBM and determine its impact location."

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If determined a threat to the United States, through proper but often-practiced, swift protocols and command orders, crews may launch Ground-Based Interceptors to extinguish the threat of an ICBM launched by aggressors.

“The 49th controls launch capability for 26 missile interceptors at Ft. Greely and four missile interceptors at Vandenburg Air Force Base, California, to defend the United States and other designated areas,” said Staff Sgt. Jason Schlegel, a former military police squad leader for A Company.

They also work in conjunction with crews at their higher headquartered 100th Missile Defense Brigade in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where fire control, battle management, planning, tasking and threat analysis also takes place.

Schlegel was a drill-status Guardsman seeking a full-time employment opportunity with the National Guard when he was selected for a tour at Ft. Greely.

“I fell in love with the military and its lifestyle and its discipline, and I wanted to do that every day,” he said. “I really liked working with the Soldiers up north, in a small unit with fantastic camaraderie.”

Schlegel, who grew up in Anchorage, recently returned after a three-year tour at Ft. Greely, to join his wife who was pursuing college in Anchorage. He had mixed feelings about leaving the mission up north, but for career progression, life cycle management, and family reasons, it was time to leave Ft. Greely, he said.

A small, remote Army base in the middle of nowhere in Alaska, where temperatures are frigid and restaurants are few, Ft. Greely doesn't seem to be where most people would envision “the good life.”

But Brower and his wife Melanie love their life in Ft. Greely. “It's simpler here,” said the busy mom of six young children. “Something about it is just peaceful and less hurried.”

The installation guide describes for new residents and visitors an emphasis on the importance of workplace morale, welfare and recreation, housing, health services, child development, faith-based services and support to the local school system.

Ft. Greely's beautiful new three thousand square-foot Aurora Community Activity Center is warm and welcoming, with a large, towering stone fireplace in the center of the main room; furniture that provides the comfort of your own living room; and the bustle and character of a ski lodge, including a bar and grill. The CAC also has a small bowling alley, an arcade and game room, a dance studio and computer lab. It also has rooms that can be reserved for birthday parties or a group movie night.

The installation housing for military members was surprisingly impressive and quaint. The family homes

look new, their lots are enviable to a city-dweller and according to Schlegel, Alaska is their playground.

“You’re in the back yard of the state and this is a prime opportunity for Soldiers to experience what Alaska has to offer in its entirety,” said Schlegel. “It’s secluded and remote.”

Remote indeed. During a tour of the missile field, with proper security escort and after passing through a vehicle check-point facility, the wide-open space and eerie silence offered a surreal moment of reflection. Surrounded by a few small, practical operational facilities and viewing the expanse of land that houses 26 of our nation’s most critical defense mechanisms, it felt like the scene from a movie—the calm before chaos ensues. One might envision an epic Transformer’s battle between the Autobots and Decepticons in a race to dislodge interceptors for destruction or defense. Or something like that.

But no chaos ensued, and it remained quiet enough to hear snow crunch underfoot while entering the military police weapons storage facility, which houses the arms room, offices and a small workout area.

The relatively empty and quiet facility becomes quite active and begins to fill with gun-bearing, flack-vest wearing Soldiers as A Co., 49th MDBn military police officers prepare for their shift. After the new shift relieves their teammates, the Soldiers who were nearing the end of their 12-hour shift head in to unload ammunition from their M4A1 Carbine assault rifles. Each weapon and every bullet is accounted for in the Arms Room during every shift change. Soldiers enter with the precision of robots, repeating a process they undergo every workday. The MPs rotate a shared shift in the equipment room, or “Armag,” where weapons and ammo are stored and reissued. And they gather to debrief before waiting for their shuttle out of the secured complex.

“We have very long shifts, so it makes us experts on the piece of land that we occupy here; we’ll know right away if something’s out of place or askew,” said Schlegel. “We know the faces of every single contractor out here every day. We would recognize if something was off or if there were any key indicators.”

It seems like the work could be monotonous, tedious perhaps. Such an important mission, such a big responsibility. But how do they keep from getting bored in the vast areas they secure, within the perimeter for which they are accountable, during such long shifts?

The MPs are tasked with the security and defense of the Missile Defense Complex, and they do not take the mission lightly. They are trained to detect and deter threats. They are disciplined and focused.

“We are the primary fighting force that allows the crew members in HHB to accomplish their mission—failure is not an option—we defend the site in support of their mission,” said Shlegel.

The MPs also run drills on a regular basis with different threat scenarios, he said, which can keep work interesting.

When they're not at work, Soldiers of the 49th spend a lot of time together. Those who have families with them also spend time with those who are on post alone. Many of them say it's like a big family.

"You get to know people well, build relationships, not just with Soldiers, but with contractors and other people in the community," said Brower.

"It's very fulfilling to just be there for Soldiers and their families," said Brower. "It's fulfilling to see them thrive, because living in Ft. Greely isn't about how you survive, it's about how you thrive."

This comes from the commander who regularly leads battalion physical readiness training—at oh dark thirty, with the occasional smile, but no mercy.

Although there may be a few drawbacks to living in a small, remote community, it's a small price to pay for the opportunity to support a mission so critical to the nation's defense, according to Brower.

"We are performing a real-world mission—300 of us from the 49th, the 100th and at Vandenburg, working together," said Brower. "300 Soldiers defending 300 million Americans from the threat of ballistic missile attack."

Asked what he wants people to know about Ft. Greely, Brower did not hesitate. "It's the best kept secret in the United States Army."

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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.)
(add link here)
3. **DVIDS link** includes story and selected full-resolution photos, free downloadable images. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.)
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