



## **PRESS RELEASE**

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By Maj. John Callahan, 176th Wing Public Affairs

### **Operation Santa Claus kicks off in Togiak 60th year of Alaska National Guard's community outreach program**

**TOGIAK, Alaska** – In a rare daytime appearance, Santa and about 50 of his elves – including Alaska Governor Bill Walker and First Lady Donna Walker – came early this year to visit Christmas cheer upon the schoolchildren of this remote village in Southwest Alaska.

The early visit was made possible by the Alaska National Guard's Operation Santa Claus, now in its 60th year. Each year since 1956, volunteers have come together to process and package donated Christmas toys, school supplies, books and staple foods.

Most of these "elves" are affiliated with the Alaska Army or Air National Guard; others step forward from local businesses and community groups. Alaska Air National Guard crews then fly the elves and their collected goodies to a selected handful of villages each year. Several Air Force Reservists on annual training from California were also able to participate in the unique Alaskan experience.

Major donors this year included:

- Costco, which donated school backpacks;
- The Anchorage Tastee-Freez restaurant, which donated more than 500 chocolate sundaes;
- The Armed Forces YMCA, which donated 40 train sets;
- Starbucks Coffee, which in addition to providing coffee and pastries for the volunteers, donated a bag of coffee for every family in Togiak;
- The Salvation Army, which donated all of the gifts for children 0-11;
- The Soldiers and Airmen of the JBER community; and
- Major financial donors Specialty Truck & Auto, and the Bristol Bay Native Corporation.

In the festive Togiak School gymnasium, small schoolchildren climbed onto Mr. and Mrs. Santa's laps to receive gifts. Others crowded around the visiting Guard members, peppering them with questions, and challenged their guests to push-ups and "Eskimo stick" contests.

"The children were really excited to learn they were coming," said Sam Gosuk, principal of the Togiak School. "And so were the adults. I really want to thank the people here – not only students, but also teachers and some members of the community – who stayed up late decorating the gym. Everything was very organized."

"It was so amazing," Margie Frost, the school's secretary, said to Gov. Walker as she drove the governor and first lady back to the Guard's waiting C-130 aircraft afterwards. "I have a story I'd like to tell you," she said.

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“In 2000, my dad died near Bethel,” she continued. “He fell through the ice. That was December 23. We got the news on Dec. 24 – Christmas Eve – that he was missing.

“I didn’t think I would ever feel the same about Christmas. But now I do, seeing how happy all the kids are. It is really special. I feel like that Christmas spirit is back.”

Three additional Operation Santa Claus missions are scheduled for 2016. The elves will visit Akiachak Dec. 3; Akiak and Tuluksak Dec. 14, and Grayling Dec. 15. Altogether, Operation Santa Claus 2016 will deliver Christmas cheer to about 1,800 children, said Op Santa Volunteer Coordinator April Gettys.

Operation Santa Claus began in 1956, when floods and a drought ruined the hunting and fishing season for residents in the Western Alaska village of St. Mary’s. With only enough money to pay to have food shipped in and nothing left over for Christmas, the mother superior of the village’s Roman Catholic mission wrote a letter to the Alaska National Guard asking for help. Radio and television stations and Anchorage’s two newspapers spread the word, and within days the Guard was inundated with donations of new and used toys. The mission closed in the late 1980s, but the gift-giving effort continued to grow. Since then, literally tens of thousands of Alaska’s schoolchildren have had their Christmas seasons brightened through Operation Santa Claus.

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#### PHOTOS:

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **Flickr links** 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/sets/72157676602522886/with/30907266022/>  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/albums/72157676635037916>
3. **DVIDS** link includes story and selected full-resolution, free downloadable images. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.) <http://dvidshub.net/r/anolzq>
4. **DIVDS** Video A and B-roll link <http://dvidshub.net/r/aj7a9l> and <http://dvidshub.net/r/4fxovl>



Santa and Mrs. Claus arrive in this tiny Southwest Alaska village on an Alaska Air National Guard C-130 transport plane Nov. 15, 2016. The Clauses were here as part of Operation Santa Claus, an Alaska National Guard-led program that delivers toys, school supplies and other gifts to children in Alaska's remote villages. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Maj. John Callahan.)

**more PHOTOS, next page**



The crewmembers of an Alaska Air National Guard C-130 parked on the airstrip here wave from the cockpit Nov. 15, 2016. The Guardsmen were here as part of Operation Santa Claus, an Alaska National Guard-led program that delivers toys, school supplies and other gifts to children in Alaska's remote villages. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Maj. John Callahan.)



A young Togiak girl beams up at Santa in the school gymnasium here Nov. 15, 2016. The Clauses were here as part of Operation Santa Claus, an Alaska National Guard-led program that delivers toys, school supplies and other gifts to children in Alaska's remote villages. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Maj. John Callahan.)



Operation Santa Claus volunteer "elves" crowd around students in the local school gymnasium in Togiak, Nov. 15, 2016. Now in its 60th year, Operation Santa Claus is an Alaska National Guard-led program that delivers toys, school supplies and other gifts to children in Alaska's remote villages. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Maj. John Callahan.)