



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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By Lt. Col. Candis Olmstead

Alaska National Guard delivers Christmas gifts and treats to children in St. Michael

Community outreach program, Operation Santa Claus going strong in its 61st year

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — The Alaska National Guard has a tradition of serving communities throughout Alaska during the holiday season, delivering Christmas gifts and a variety of delights to the children. In its 61st year, some things have changed over time, but the joyfulness and excitement never does. The island-town of St. Michael was selected for a visit this year, and they expressed gratitude and enthusiasm to their out-of-town guests who showed up to spread holiday cheer.

Op Santa delivered wrapped Christmas gifts for every child, infants through age 18, they provided fruit and served ice cream sundaes, and all of the students received new backpacks. The children and teens walked through a line of tables and filled their backpacks with snacks, stuffed animals, books, socks, toiletries, basketballs, footballs, and beautiful hand-knit hats made with love from a group of volunteers who live in Florida.

Santa and Mrs. Claus visited the town of St. Michael Dec. 5, welcomed by the community, whose population of about 400 is largely Yup'ik Eskimo. Santa took about 30 elves with him, and they were thrilled to catch a ride on one of the Alaska Air National Guard's brand new HC-130J Combat King II aircraft from the 211th Rescue Squadron.

"It was an honor to step in for Rudolph and the other reindeer and fly these folks here in one of our rescue aircraft, still shiny and new," said Lt. Col. Eric Budd, Op Santa pilot and commander of the 211th Rescue Squadron.

After the aircraft arrived in St. Michael, a flurry of activity began as elves stepped out onto crunchy snow and large boxes were off-loaded and transferred to vans and pickup trucks driven by community volunteers. The jolly out-of-town guests were welcomed with hospitality and smiles as they arrived at the all-grades school, feverishly unpacked, organized items and finished preparing for the big event.

The faculty and students had eagerly anticipated their guests and the Christmas event, evident by the many colorful decorations, lights, and an impressive display built by the students to house Santa and Mrs. Claus, including a tree, chairs, décor and lighting.

"We've been looking forward to Op Santa for months," said Anthony A. Andrews School principal, Mr. Jon Wehde. "Our community is so excited for this visit and we really appreciate the generosity and kindness of everyone involved," he said.

Op Santa began in 1956 as the Anchorage community assisted the village of St. Mary's after negative impacts of natural disaster left them with no money to buy Christmas gifts. The Air Guard's 144th Airlift Squadron delivered donated goods to the remote village in a C-123J Provider. Since then, Air Guard C-130s, Army Guard C-23 Sherpa, UH-60 Black Hawk, and other aircraft have transported Santa and Mrs. Claus, elves, gifts and other desirable items to tens of thousands of children throughout rural Alaska.

"The event is important because it began due to the impact of natural disaster and continued as a way to reach rural Alaska for building community relationships, serving those in remote areas, and providing joy and comfort to Alaskans during the holiday season," said Maj. Gen. Laurie Hummel, adjutant general for the Alaska National Guard.

Many Alaskans in rural communities may go most of their lives without personal interaction with service members in the U.S. military, and Op Santa allows Soldiers and Airmen to build connections in a personal and tangible way.

"Engaging Alaskan communities is a priority for the Alaska National Guard and Operation Santa Claus is one way we can show our Alaskan neighbors that we care," said Hummel.

Airmen and Soldiers in the Alaska National Guard worked with The Salvation Army and community volunteers to coordinate and execute the Op Santa mission.

"Op Santa really isn't possible without all of the volunteers who pull it together," said Hummel. "This community outreach program is a time-honored tradition that we hope to continue for many years to come."

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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. (May not be accessible from all military computers.)
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/albums/72157690635667375>
3. **DVIDS link** includes story and selected full-resolution photos. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.) <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/257899/alaska-national-guard-delivers-christmas-gifts-and-treats-children-st-michael>

VIDEO

4. **YouTube link** includes <https://youtu.be/w2pekR04sbc>
5. **DVIDS link** includes <https://www.dvidshub.net/video/571304/alaska-guardsmen-bring-holiday-cheer-st-michael>



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Mr. and Mrs. Class, travelling with Operation Santa Claus, de-board an HC-130J Combat King II from the 211th Rescue Squadron, Alaska Air National Guard, after landing in St. Michael, Alaska, on Dec. 5, 2017. Operation Santa Claus is an Alaska National Guard annual community outreach program that provides Christmas gifts, books, backpacks filled with school supplies, fresh fruit and sundaes to youngsters in rural communities. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by 2nd Lt. Michael Class)



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Upon his arrival, children from the village of St. Michael embrace Santa with a warm welcome during Operation Santa Claus, Dec. 5, 2017. Operation Santa Claus brought in fresh fruit, books, sundaes, and backpacks filled with school supplies for each child in the village, in addition to a present from Santa. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by 2nd Lt. Marisa Lindsay)



051217-Z-QK839-1039

Volunteers with Operation Santa Claus provide entertainment for the children of St. Michael at the Anthony A. Andrews School on Dec. 5, 2017. Operation Santa Claus is an Alaska National Guard annual community outreach program that provides Christmas gifts, books, backpacks filled with school supplies, fresh fruit and sundaes to youngsters in rural communities. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by 2nd Lt. Marisa Lindsay)



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The children of St. Michael visit with Mr. and Mrs. Claus during Operation Santa Claus on Dec. 5, 2017. Operation Santa Claus is an Alaska National Guard annual community outreach program that provides Christmas gifts, books, school supplies, fresh fruit and sundaes to youngsters in rural communities. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by 2nd Lt. Marisa Lindsay)