



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**January 22, 2018**

018-001

*First published November 14, 2017*

By Sean Kimmons  
Army News Service

Link to separate video story by Defense Media Activity-Army: [www.dvidshub.net/video/579374/rural-recruiter?sub\\_id=24117&utm\\_campaign=subscriptions&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=24117&utm\\_content=asset\\_link](http://www.dvidshub.net/video/579374/rural-recruiter?sub_id=24117&utm_campaign=subscriptions&utm_medium=email&utm_source=24117&utm_content=asset_link) By Sgt. Laura Martin

## **Using his own plane, recruiter flies around remote Alaska to fill Army ranks**

**Bethel, Alaska** — As a new recruiter working remote Alaskan villages scattered across an area larger than many U.S. states, Sgt. 1st Class Robert Masterman was on a path to defeat.

An infantryman by trade, Masterman volunteered for the solo mission covering roughly 50,000 square miles in southwest Alaska, where travel between villages is primarily by plane or boat. A typical recruiter may have an area of just 40 miles, he said, with a car and good roads to easily get around.

In the face of those challenges, he only hit half of his first-year target to get eight Army recruits into the Alaska National Guard.

"I straight up failed," he said. "I kind of floundered and I had no idea what I was doing out here by myself."

### **RURAL RECRUITER**

Originally from the backwoods of Maine, the 42-year-old Soldier has always loved the outdoors. His interest in Alaska developed when he was young, and as he grew older, he decided to move to the "Last Frontier" to attend college.

He later joined the Army and landed at Fort Wainwright for his first duty station. Over time, he grew fond of the local way of life and easily made friends. Today, he has two children who are half-native Alaskan.

It didn't matter, he said, that he was a white Irish-American who did not grow up there.

"They accepted me 100 percent," he said. "My heart is filled with the native culture here."

After he took a hiatus to help his family back in Maine, he returned to serve in the Alaska National Guard.

As he worked part-time as a brigade plans NCO, he pursued another passion of his -- flying. He purchased his own single-engine propeller aircraft and used education benefits from the Army to rack up flight hours and obtain a commercial pilot's license.

At the time, the Alaska Guard was looking to put a recruiter back in Bethel, which is about 500 miles east of Anchorage, to reach out to Alaska natives living in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Region.

With a high propensity of families who have served in the military and have a knack for outdoor survival skills, it was thought the area could be a hotbed for quality recruits.

"We've got the arctic experts here. All around us," he said, adding there has been a renewed interest for that expertise as Russia builds up its forces in the Arctic. "The easy part is to teach them to be Soldiers and then they become our arctic warfare specialists."

Since his leadership knew he was familiar with the culture and had his own plane, they asked him if he wanted to work as a full-time recruiter. He accepted the job and fully embraced it.

"I believe in the mission, believe in protecting this country, this state and having the network of National Guard Soldiers out here to protect the communities," he said.

The only recruiter he is aware of who uses his own plane for work, Masterman said he has enjoyed the ride so far in his three years of recruiting. He also has a boat as well as a government-owned snowmobile and truck that he can drive on frozen waterways to reach villages in the winter.

"There's nothing typical about this job," he said. "I think that's the biggest attraction for me to this job, because it's always different and it's always keeping me on my toes."

#### COMMUNITY MEMBER

While on recruiting trips, Masterman travels with a "go box" filled with Army pamphlets, t-shirts, mugs and other swag he hands out to potential recruits. But it's his uniform that attracts people to him, including veterans who chat with him about today's Army.

"If I go out there in civilian clothes, I'll get a 'hello' or a 'hi' here and there," he said. "But if I show up in this uniform, it's a magnet. They know what the uniform means, they know what it represents."

He strives to be a straight shooter when it comes to what recruits can expect in the Army, not only because he is an ambassador for the service, but also since he plans to stay in the area.

"I can't go out and make a bad name for myself," he said. "I want to go out there and be perfectly honest with everybody. I'm not just some person in a uniform and coming out here to talk to you about putting a uniform on. I'm a community member."

Masterman can often be seen at the Bethel Regional High School. There, he helps teach physical education as a substitute teacher, and also helps train JROTC students.

In charge of 45 JROTC students with one other instructor, retired Sgt. 1st Class Amile Summers said the extra help from the recruiter has been huge. Besides training the students, Masterman is also working on a sponsorship for the high school's Raider team, which competes in JROTC competitions around the country.

He even set up a field trip out to a drop zone for students to see Army paratroopers in action.

"It seems small to us but to the kids it's a huge deal," Summers said. "The kids here are very receptive and they appreciate knowing that someone cares enough to be here, especially when you show them that you're not here for just one or two years and you're out of here."

As a former recruiter himself, Summers, now retired, said Masterman has spent more time at the school than he has ever seen a recruiter do before.

"He has shown that he's committed to the community, not just from his recruiting standpoint but from his activity in the school," Summers said.

Masterman's extra efforts at the school don't distract him from his job as a recruiter. Instead, they actually prove to be an advantage. Students at the school, all potential recruits, come up to him and talk to him about the Army. He even helped Summers' son sign up as an infantryman.

Pvt. 2 Amile Summers Jr., who recently graduated from initial entry training, said he and other students were glad to have Masterman on hand so they could pepper him with questions.

"It provides them with the opportunity to speak with somebody who is actually in the Army," the 18-year-old said of having a recruiter on site. "Instead of learning from the instructors, who are retired, they get to know what the Army is like today."

## SECOND CHANCES

Many obstacles still exist when recruiting alone in the vast region, which has poor internet and cell phone service.

Since Yupik, one of Alaska's native languages, is primary spoken in the region, many potential recruits struggle to score well on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test, which is given in English.

Recognizing the arctic survival skills and history of military service among the population here, the Army started a pilot program to give a limited number of overrides to low ASVAB scores in order to help with recruiting efforts.

"You have to prove that you're native Alaskan, grew up here and educated in a rural educational system," Masterman said of the pilot program.

There are also medical issues that may flag a potential recruit due to the lack of extensive medical care in the region. On top of that, many do not have birth certificates, social security cards or even state identification cards, which are required to join the Army, he said.

Before they ship out, Masterman will take a recruit to Anchorage to square them away with all their necessary documents. On average, he said, it can take two months from meeting a recruit to when they are ready for basic combat training.

"Even though they're an applicant and they're not in uniform yet, they're still my Soldier and I take care of them," he said.

In one case, Masterman went above and beyond to help Aaron Olrun, who walked up to his booth at a Fourth of July event last year and asked about the Army.

At the time, Olrun -- now a 23-year-old private first class -- and his wife had adopted a child and he worked as a housekeeper for the Bethel hospital. "I was having trouble with money," he admitted. "I

was surviving off of whatever I could."

While Olrun said he had minor criminal offenses due to his past alcohol addiction -- Alaska's rate of alcohol dependence and abuse is twice the national average, according to the National Alcoholism Center -- he looked to turn a new leaf to support his family.

Like with many other recruits, Masterman took him under his wing. He went on to help him with his paperwork and get a job in the Army as a 92Y, a unit supply specialist.

"That's the job as the NCO. That's not the recruiter necessarily but that's the NCO," the sergeant said. "I want them to understand that there's somebody here who is going to invest in their future as a Soldier."

The second chance Olrun was given, he said, is not something he intends to waste as he plans to use the Army's education benefits to go to college.

"I'm a better person than I was a year ago. I'm a lot more disciplined, more respectful to family and friends," he said. "I can look at my past and see the stupid things I did. I know I'm not going to repeat them."

## BELIEF IN THE PRODUCT

The lackluster recruiting numbers Masterman once saw in his first year are now a thing of the past. His early failure "kicked him in the rear" and he vowed to never let that happen again, he said.

A resurgent Masterman pounded the pavement, and flew many miles with his plane, to get face-to-face with potential recruits. He would sometimes work up to 80 hours a week.

As he met more people and word got out, applicants began to roll in. In his second year, he hit his target within six months. Then last year, he had 16 recruits -- six more than his target. This fiscal year his target is now up to 12.

"I'm not even stressing it anymore," he said, smiling. "I have my feet under me, I got my battle rhythm and I know I'm going to do it."

The Army recently sent in another recruiter to help Masterman with the deluge of applicants. While his fleet of vehicles, including his own plane, helps him get around the region, he can only do so much compared to a typical recruiter in the continental United States.

"I have the opposite problem that most recruiters have," he said. "They have trouble finding people who want to enlist. I'm buried in applicants. It's just difficult for me to get to them and go through the actual enlistment process with them."

What's easy for Masterman is supporting the mission. Earlier in his life, Masterman once worked as a commercial salesman. In his current role, he said he doesn't have to fake the funk when trying to sell the Army.

"I've been in the military for over half my life now, so yes, I believe in the product, what our mission is, what we do, and I believe the benefits the Soldier can get out of this are immeasurable," he said. "I lived all the benefits. It is who I am ... and I dread the day when I have to take the uniform off."

###

## PHOTOS

1. **Video Story:** [www.dvidshub.net/video/579374/rural-recruiter?sub\\_id=24117&utm\\_campaign=subscriptions&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=24117&utm\\_content=asset\\_link](http://www.dvidshub.net/video/579374/rural-recruiter?sub_id=24117&utm_campaign=subscriptions&utm_medium=email&utm_source=24117&utm_content=asset_link)
2. **DVIDS link** includes story and selected full-resolution photos. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.) [www.army.mil/article/196616](http://www.army.mil/article/196616)