

Cool Response: Ready in Wait on the Seward Peninsula

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Photos Courtesy: Alaska State Troopers-Nome Post

While the iron dogs were buzzing through the mid-March Nome Golovin Snowmachine Race, the Alaska State Troopers (AST) and the Nome Alaska Army National Guard Air crew were busy at work. The race served as a perfect opportunity for the agencies to pair up in a collaborative training effort while remaining on standby for any call that came crackling in through the radio. AST and the local Air crew are the two leading search and rescue agencies on the Seward Peninsula. The seamless interaction between them is vital to success of all SARs in the area.

Two troopers geared up and hit the Nome Golovin trail on their sleds while two troopers joined the four-man air crew in a Blackhawk helicopter. In the helicopter, the troopers operated several communication devices in order to determine which provided the best means of communication with the troopers on the ground. They also practiced their “spotting” abilities. During SAR operation, a lack of communication can be detrimental. This portion of the training helps to alleviate communication issues in future real-world scenarios.

The communications/spotting exercise was similar to a combined game of hide-and-seek and hot and cold. One of the troopers would receive information of a “missing” snowmachiner, who was played by another Alaska State Trooper, and attempt to locate him based off of the information passed through the airwaves. Once located and contacted by the ground team, the Blackhawk landed to make contact with the “missing” snowmachiner. This allowed troopers to become more familiar with the AANG procedures for emergency responses utilizing a Blackhawk.

Not too long into the practice runs did the training mission have to be scrapped. A real-world call from a Bering Air helicopter came through the radio. Colten West, a 19 year old snowmachiner from Nome, crashed outside of White Mountain and injured his knee. The Bering Air crew had landed to check on West. They disabled his machine before advising troopers that West needed to be transported from the crash scene. The Blackhawk crew swung into action. Trooper Aileen Witrosky and Sergeant Andrew Merrill assisted the injured rider on to the Blackhawk. West was flown to Nome where Nome Volunteer Ambulance members met and transported him the remaining distance to the local Hospital.

After the successful recovery effort, the Blackhawk headed back out toward the trail. It rendezvoused with Trooper’s Honie Culley and Garrett Frost at the Safety roadhouse where they were conducting trail safety checks and encouraging those who were drinking alcohol to not drive impaired. Troopers persuaded the impaired individuals to ‘buddy up’ with a sober rider for their trip back to Nome.



Alaska State Trooper Garrett Frost, stationed at the Nome Post, gears up for the SAR training. Nome troopers frequently conduct patrols during the winter months on snowmachines. Troopers often contact local snowmachiners to conduct safety checks as well as provide information on any known trail hazards.



Trooper Honie Culley, stationed at the Nome Post, participates in the March 13, 2010 joint-training exercise and three subsequent search and rescue operations that were called in. Training exercises are often held concurrently with large local events to ensure quick response times in case of an actual emergency.

While on the ground, the Blackhawk crew received word of another injured snowmachiner in need of their assistance. Nome resident Louis Green Jr. was being attended to by a Bering Air helicopter pilot and was complaining of back pain. The Blackhawk rapidly dispatched to the scene. The crew picked up the 51-year old from the Bering Air personnel and transported him to Nome where the Ambulance crew transferred him to the hospital.

Before the Blackhawk and troopers were able to return home and call it a day another call blared from the radio. Troopers and the AANG crew launched to assist a 26-year old snowmachiner participating in the 200 mile long race. Nome resident Ross Outwater was on the return portion of the race when he hit something on the trail near Topkok. Nome Volunteer Search and Rescue and Fire department personnel were attending to Outwater on scene as the Blackhawk made its way toward Topkok. The medical responders had Outwater at the Topkok shelter cabin waiting for transport to Nome.

The training mission— and subsequent real-world incidents— were successful. It proved beneficial for not only the troopers and AANG crew, but also for racers in the Nome Golovin race.

The Alaska State Troopers would like to thank the Nome AANG Blackhawk crew, Nome Volunteer Ambulance crew, Nome Volunteer Fire Department and Search and Rescue Crew, Bering Air Pilots, and everyone who assisted with the race and training exercise. Also a special thanks to the VPSOs who assisted with trail safety concerning snowmachiners on the Iditarod trail.

Remember, before embarking on any activity in Alaska’s backcountry ensure you have the proper gear, file a trip plan and travel safely.

