



Troopers Weather the Iditarod Crowd

Article and photos by Megan A. Peters

Even as the temperature hung in the low teens, more than 20,000 people meandered onto Willow Lake to see the dogs and the mushers gear up for the frigid and bitter journey into the unforgiving backcountry of Alaska. The hum of dozens of snowmachines could be heard over the howls and barks of hundreds of Iditarod dogs itching to get on the trail to Nome.

"Someone told me that 70 percent of the people here are from out of state," said Alaska State Trooper Terrance Shanigan. "Can you imagine?"

Trooper Shanigan was just one of the troopers making contact with the public during the event that brings something almost unheard of to Willow, Alaska — traffic.



Traffic in Willow is an uncommon phenomenon. The crowd of more than 20,000 cause traffic to back up for miles along the Parks Highway.

"Out here, if you sit at a stop sign for more than five seconds, something is seriously wrong," said AST Sgt. Jacob Covey. "We've got the Traffic Safety Team out on the roads and they're pretty busy and not getting much down time."

The Bureau of Highway Patrol, the Wasilla Police Department and Palmer Police Department teamed together to provide an upped traffic enforcement in the area. Parking was a nightmare for the gaggle of thousands of Iditarod fans flocking into the small rural town along the Parks Highway.

Traffic wasn't just on the highway. The trails and frozen lakes covered with fresh powder were littered with snowmachiners and skiers. Two Alaska Wildlife Troopers and Two Alaska State Troopers suited up and hit the trails for the occasion. While on the trails, troopers were able to check up on people and ensure there were no safety concerns. Occasionally, someone would comment on an unruly group of individuals or inform troopers of where others were who may need assistance. Two of the

troopers even assisted one stranded person pull his snowmachine out from the deep snow.

Their presence didn't go unnoticed. As Trooper Shanigan milled through the crowd many people thanked him for the strong trooper presence at the event.

"It's just so nice to see you guys out here like this," said one woman bundled in a blue Northface jacket. "Thank you for being here."

Events like the Iditarod restart give troopers the opportunity to meet face-to-face with the public and answer questions regarding enforcement efforts and general concerns. Also, being on hand in a large crowd is paramount to addressing issues before they escalate into a potentially dangerous situation. It is also a chance to connect with the public on a more personal level and let people see the individuals behind the badge.



Trooper Shayne Calt keeps watch from his snowmachine. Calt was one of four troopers supporting enforcement efforts while on a snowmachine.

Trooper Shanigan, a captive fan of the mushers and their dogs, took time to meet with some of the veteran mushers and pass on well wishes.

Musher Mike Williams, out of Akiak, Alaska, pulled out a plastic bag with a stethoscope and other small knick-knacks inside to show Trooper Shanigan. They were the belongings of a doctor who was killed outside of Kotzebue



Musher Mike Williams shows Trooper Shanigan some keepsakes he is taking with him on his trek to Nome. Williams Mushes to raise awareness for the destruction that alcohol brings.

when he was struck by an impaired snowmachiner. The case was investigated by Kotzebue troopers and the snowmachiner was charged with an assortment of crimes. Williams has made the harsh trip to Nome many time in hopes of promoting sobriety. He has lost six brother and countless friends and acquaintances to alcohol-related issues — including the doctor.

As the last mushers headed down the chute, which would eventually lead most of them to Nome, the crowd began the trek to the nearby parking lots and the buses. Troopers with the Bureau of Highway Patrol had to step in to direct traffic and pedestrian crossing. Due to the large Iditarod crowd and the copious amount of people returning from a long weekend of snowmachining in the Talkeetna-area, traffic was backed up past Willow for miles.

BHP Trooper Steve Kevan, with his drill sergeant-esque stance, took command of the situation. Some individuals attempted to dart out into the road in hopes of beating the trucks hauling snowmachines. Trooper Kevan didn't stand for it. Before long, he had the mess organized with traffic flowing for five minutes and pedestrians crossing for one. The Parks Highway was slow going all the way back to Wasilla. Luckily, there weren't any collisions called in to dispatch. Motorists were minding their P's and Q's while making the 10-mile an hour drive back into Alaska's version of suburbia.

Ultimately, troopers had a busy day. The BHP handed out 47 traffic citations. In addition, one DUI arrest and one warrant arrest took place and troopers also assisted a lost person with Alzheimer's .



Trooper Shanigan speaks with a rookie musher from Bethel.