

A Life Line

Alaska Wildlife Troopers Provide Community Service One Life Jacket at a Time

Story and Photos by Lt. DeGraaf

It was a dark and stormy night... well, actually it wasn't. But it was a cold on the blue bird March morning as Captain Rex Leath and a handful of Alaska Wildlife Troopers and a Public Safety Technician pulled into Whittier, Alaska, as the sun peaked over the mountain tops. The town was essentially asleep except for a conspiracy of ravens that were looking for breakfast on various boats moving around the harbor.

The 42' P/V Churchill was loaded with lifejackets and headed for Chenega, a small rural town about 70 miles nautical miles to the south of Whittier. Chenega is situated in a picturesque setting, with spruce covered mountains and weathered beach fronts skirting the typical isolated coastal Alaskan town.

The P/V Churchill and crew arrived at the boat dock of Chenega approximately two hours after departing Whittier. Captain Leath and the rest of the party were greeted by freshly snow-covered streets and a quiet, cloudless sky. There wasn't so much as breeze blowing and the water was so clear that the bottom of the harbor, 20 to 30 beneath the surface, was completely visible with barnacles, starfish and more.



"Everywhere in the village of Chenega is a five-minute walk. So, it didn't take long to walk to the top of town where the school sits," said Captain Leath, Commander of the Northern Detachment. "Roughly 15 students are registered at the Chenega school, almost all them met with us, accompanied by the school staff, when we arrived."

The purpose of the trip was to discuss with the

kids in the community about water safety. A big part of it was handing out life jackets and encouraging kids on how to wear them every time they are on or around the water. Among other topics discussed were how to stay warm when getting lost in the woods or what to do if you fall in the water. The kids had a lot of question about what the troopers had on their belt, too.

"We even had a chance to explain to a second grader why we carry guns. On almost every school visit, we get asked about guns," said Captain Leath. "We pointed out that there are bears sometimes, so you can never be too careful."

The Troopers gave everyone a new lifejacket and led the way back down to the dock for a field trip. The staff and students were welcomed aboard the P/V Churchill. "We introduced them to Eric, our "Professional Boat Driver", and he entertained them by showing them how to work the skiff, the crane and how the electronics work," said Captain Leath. "We are pretty sure the students enjoyed the little field trip since they asked us endless questions and smiled and waved when we pulled out of the local harbor."



Foot note: In many communities across Alaska, the state has provided kiosks at harbors and waterways which have lifejackets for loan. These locations usually have a sign that reads "Kids Don't Float". That slogan, while simple, is the very reason that the Department of Public Safety reaches out and proactively engages in water safety education with citizens in Alaska. Even one person lost to drownings is too many. The Department of Public Safety takes a zero-tolerance approach in this area. If you, or someone you know, is recreating around the water, please wear a life jacket.