

# Small Alaskan community counts on NCO as face of Army National Guard

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More than 400 miles west of Anchorage lies Bethel, Alaska's largest western community. Although only accessible by air and water, approximately 6,000 residents call the city home. This includes the Alaska Army National Guard's fulltime Bethel armory supply sergeant, Staff Sgt. Joseph Sallaffie, an infantryman with B Company, 1st Battalion, 143rd Infantry Airborne Regiment.

Sallaffie, an Alaska Native Yupik Eskimo from Bethel, has worn the Alaska Army National Guard uniform, on and off, for more than four decades. During his career, he has performed a variety of duties, including his current role as supply sergeant and one of five full-time Guardsmen in his hometown.

Sallaffie's Army story began in 1980, when he decided to follow in his older brother's military footsteps. Following high school graduation, he joined the active U.S. Army as an infantry Soldier. Although he appreciated the military community, he separated after his three-year commitment and returned to Bethel.

"Like any teenager, I didn't realize what was good for me at the time," Sallaffie said and laughed as he described his initial stint with the Army. "But I came home to Bethel and it gave me the opportunity to meet my wife, Rachel, start a family and become an Alaska Guardsman."

He enlisted with the Alaska Army National Guard in 1986 and served his state for 10 years as an infantryman who also performed military funeral honors and assisted in recruiting efforts, among other duties. After separating from the National Guard, Sallaffie, his wife, and their four children moved to the small village of Tuluksak to be closer to family.

However, Sallaffie missed the Army community.

"I especially missed the



camaraderie and purpose behind working," Sallaffie said.

In 2007, while employed as a maintenance worker at Tuluksak School, Sallaffie met two recruiters who were visiting students there. The recruiters were then-Sgt. 1st Class Rodger Morrison, who is now Sallaffie's first sergeant, and then-Master Sgt. Richard Hildreth, who is now the senior enlisted advisor for the Alaska National Guard.

"If it wasn't for them coming out to the school and speaking with me, I probably wouldn't be here in the Guard today," Sallaffie said. "I love my job, and I love working and representing the military in my community."

The family moved back to Bethel in 2008, and Sallaffie has been fulltime as the Bethel armory supply sergeant for the past three years. Locals are familiar with the armory, and they know Sallaffie as a face of the Guard in the community.

"Sgt. Sallaffie is so much more than a supply sergeant," Morrison said. "He has a Bethel background, he speaks Yupik, his wife is from Tuluksak, and they are heavily involved within Bethel and nearby villages."

Morrison said Sallaffie is who locals reach out to when they think of or have questions for the Alaska Army National Guard.



“Staff Sgt. Sallaffie’s Bethel presence has been an enormous help to me and our first sergeant,” said Sallaffie’s company commander, Capt. Walter Hotch-Hill, who works on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage. “He takes it upon himself to go above and beyond his regular duties. And he has become that line of communication for us to Bethel, its residents and outlying communities.”

Sallaffie works alongside his wife, who is currently the southwestern regional area family support coordinator for the Alaska National Guard. They enjoy serving the community of Bethel and nearby villages together.

“It was hard at the beginning, juggling military life and my family,” Sallaffie said. “As Rachel and I grew together, we really began to see it as a joint mission to help military members and families, and support the community as Guard representatives.”

The Sallaffies' partnership and efforts are a valuable and important service to the Guard and the local community, Morrison said.

Last summer, after evacuations of more than 70 residents of Crooked Creek and Aniak were ordered, each of the evacuees were accounted for at the Bethel armory. Though most were able to stay in Bethel with family and friends, 45 were sheltered at the armory where the Sallaffies provided cots, blankets and food.

Last month, Sallaffie was the National Guard point of contact after a fire raged through the Kilbuck School building. He secured approval through official channels to offer temporary space in the armory for classes if needed.

"Actions speak louder than words, and Sallaffie helps show the Army Guard's commitment to the residents of rural Alaska, especially during times of need," Morrison said. "He and Rachel are incredible assets to the community and our organization, and as we drive the rural Guard initiative, his presence is vital to what we are trying to achieve."

The Alaska Army National Guard has plans to train and conduct outreach campaigns for this coming year in rural Alaska, as a part of Alaska Governor Bill Walker's rural Guard initiative. For example, next month, the Guard is supporting the Kuskokwim 300 sled dog race in conjunction with cold weather training and holding an Alaska Army National Guard open house at the Bethel armory.

"We see the importance of our work here at the Bethel armory," Sallaffie said. "It has boosted the trust locals have for the Guard, and strengthened valuable relationships."