THE FORGOTTEN RANGER COMPANY

The Story of the "Arctic Rangers" of Company O, 75th Infantry Regiment

by: Suzanne Harrison

After his third tour in Vietnam, by 1970 Major (MAJ) George A. Ferguson was eager for a change of scenery. Alaska seemed the perfect contrast to the jungles he had traversed with units such as the 7th Special Forces Group. But, a month into his assignment at Fort Greely, Alaska, he faced one of the most unique challenges of his career – all due to a chance encounter with a charismatic former commander. At the direction of Major General (MG) James F. Hollingsworth, Ferguson embarked on a mission to stand up a new specialized unit under U.S. Army, Alaska (USARAL).[1] This article highlights the history of Company O, 75th Infantry (Ranger) Regiment, also known as the Arctic Rangers. This obscure special operations unit operated from 4 August 1970 to 29 September 1972 at Fort Richardson, Alaska, at a time when most Infantry Ranger companies were slowly deactivating after their return from Vietnam. While the Arctic Rangers only existed for two years, their tenacity and ingenuity left a lasting impact.

An Early Arctic Proponent

As early as 1960, Army leaders recognized the need for a specialized force capable of operating in the arctic. While G-3 at USARAL, Colonel (COL) Willard Pearson contributed to a presentation with this theme for the 1960 Quartermaster Conference, highlighting Alaska's strategic importance.[2] Pearson understood the Soviet threat from the west and wanted to make sure the U.S. could defend its arctic border. He republished this presentation again in 1961 for a broader

Members of Company O, 75th Infantry (Ranger) Regiment, form for what would be their final company photograph before deactivating in August 1972.

audience in *Military Review* under the title, "Alaska: Gibraltar of the North." In it, he appealed to Army leaders to act swiftly lest the nation face serious consequences:

> Should an enemy secure even a limited beachhead on the bleakest coast of northern Alaska, he could proclaim to the world that U.S. territory had been successfully invaded. Invasion of U.S. soil would adversely influence the uncommitted nations in the early stages of a general war. An invader would gain great psychological and propaganda value from even nuisance raids on U.S. soil.[3]

He went on to recall the "panic and hysteria" following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and noted the Soviet Union's proximity as a viable threat, with only 55 miles of water separating it from Alaska. In the Bering Strait, the U.S. Little Diomede Island was just three miles from Russia's Big Diomede Island.[4] Soviet advances in military readiness had also been top of U.S. leaders' minds since the beginning of the Cold War.[5] Pearson, who later rose to the rank of lieutenant general, wrote frequently throughout the 1960s about the need for the Army to begin taking the Soviet threat along the Alaskan coast seriously and continued to press for leveraging Alaska as an optimal arctic training ground. He noted, "A realistic program started now would ensure the Army's readiness to fight in this strategic northern area."[6]

TOP: Lieutenant General Willard Pearson, shown here as a Brigadier General briefing troops in Vietnam in 1966, advocated for arctic defense in Alaska throughout the 1960s.
BOTTOM: Company O, 75th Infantry (Ranger) Regiment's first full formation in 1970.

Pearson knew that the Army's arctic training for soldiers was limited. Not until 1948 did the Army establish the Army Arctic School at Big Delta, Alaska, later named Fort Greely. The school had taught individuals arctic and subarctic survival skills. Fort Greely assumed full responsibility for individual cold weather training in 1957 as the U.S. Army Cold Weather and Mountain School. In 1963, it implemented unit training as it transitioned to the Northern Warfare Training Center.[7]

In 1968, then-Major General Pearson, the Army's Director of Individual Training, wrote a confidential proposal to the Assistant Chief of Staff for Force Development. Pearson presented "several ideas on improving efficiency of units in Alaska," while leveraging the environment for arctic training.[8] The proposal suggested that the commander of USARAL have the latitude to build a specialized capability adapted to arctic conditions.[9]

Meanwhile, the future of Ranger companies, initially formed for use as Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) units in Vietnam, was also an issue for Army leaders. As American involvement in Vietnam wound down, these leaders discussed whether Rangers were still needed and, if so, how to employ them effectively and efficiently in future operations.

MAJ George A. Ferguson, Company Commander, Company O, 75th Infantry (Ranger) Regiment

MG James F. Hollingsworth

Under the Combat Arms Regimental System, fifteen Ranger companies had been activated under the 75th Infantry Regiment in 1969, thirteen of which operated in Vietnam. Company O was activated on 1 February 1969, and attached to the 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, at Fort Bragg, but was inactivated less than 10 months later on 20 November.[10]

However, after more than a decade of Pearson's advocacy and ongoing senior leader discussions about the future of the Ranger companies, MG Hollingsworth, commander of USARAL and a highly decorated Vietnam veteran, was keen on leveraging the expertise of the LRRPs.[11] Who would lead it was a mystery, until that chance encounter between Hollingsworth and MAJ George Ferguson in mid-1970. On 4 August 1970, Company O was reactivated at Fort Richardson, Alaska.[12]

Right Place, Right Time

Ferguson recalls that his assignment came down to being in the right place at the right time. He had previously worked for Hollingsworth at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and had briefed him regularly. "I asked to be sent to Alaska," Ferguson said. "I was tired of jungle operations." An Infantry Officer, he was assigned as an Operations Officer at Fort Greely, Alaska, for about a month when Hollingsworth took over as commander of USARAL in July 1970. As Hollingsworth was touring the state to meet his troops, Ferguson was once again in the role of briefer at Fort Greely. "After the briefing, he called me in and said, 'Major Ferguson, would you like to be the Ranger company commander for the northern area?' I said, 'Sir, I'm not Ranger qualified.' He said, 'I didn't ask you that, I asked if you wanted to be the commander.' I said, 'Yes, sir.'"[13]

Ferguson was not quite sure what he was getting into. With just a week to move his family about three hundred miles to Fort Richardson, the next two months were very chaotic as he set out to stand up the company. With an authorized strength of about 200 soldiers and officers, his recruitment process defied normal Army personnel assignment procedures by relying on word-of-mouth recommendations. He initially tapped into respected friends and colleagues for candidates. Ferguson recalls receiving permission from Hollingsworth to divert anyone he wanted already in Alaska to serve in the company and that the USARAL commander would intervene, if needed, to make it happen. Ferguson sought out candidates to fill the authorized billets. He later interviewed new Infantry arrivals personally to see if they were a good fit. "Anytime I saw a really good soldier, I'd steal him," Ferguson said. "I made a lot of enemies," but Hollingsworth made good on his promise to support his efforts.[14]

Ferguson only managed to recruit about 180 soldiers, but he was not worried. "I'd rather have 180 good people than 200 average people." Those that later proved not to have the mental, physical, or moral fortitude nor the right attitude or values were reassigned. If they were "sullen, didn't follow directions, cut corners, didn't obey NCOs, or talked bad about NCOs," they would be cut. "It took us about two months to gather enough equipment, find the barracks for us, get our parachutes, (get) people qualified, and in about three months we became operational," Ferguson said.[15]

Ferguson first established the Arctic Ranger School – a three-week course required for all unit personnel that was modeled after the Army's Ranger school curriculum at Fort Benning, Georgia. The Arctic Ranger School taught basic Ranger skills, communication, mountaineering, survival, long-distance patrolling, and weaponry, with extra empha-

PATCH: Tab and Shoulder Sleeve Insignia (SSI) worn by the Arctic Rangers of Company O, 75th Infantry (Ranger) Regiment from 1970 to 1972. **RIGHT:** MAJ George A. Ferguson, Company Commander, conducts a briefing on unit insignia in 1970. Ferguson was tasked with building the Arctic Rangers from soldiers assigned to units under U.S. Army, Alaska.

sis on cold-weather tactics. Soldiers with Ranger qualifications led the training. Soldiers learned how to use snowshoes and skis and incorporated lessons from the native Alaskan Eskimo Scouts on hunting and survival. The Arctic Ranger School was unit-level training and not formally approved by the Department of the Army, but Ferguson wanted to make sure his men were prepared for any situation. Future unit members came with Ranger qualifications.

A Test of their Skills

From September to December 1970, Company O participated in a variety of training exercises designed to test their core abilities. This included the annual USARAL exercise, ACID TEST III. Below is a summary of some of the unit events during that four-month period:

- **23 September** – The Arctic Rangers conducted an airborne assault then linked up with the Eskimo Scouts to get situational awareness and conduct reconnaissance on the enemy role players. At the bottom of the typed operational order, Ferguson hand wrote, "Challenge and Password for link up." The LRRP phrase was, "This is a high mountain," while the Eskimo Scouts would respond, "Not as high as some others."[16]

- **19-21 October** – Field Training Exercise 1-70 consisted of "living in marshalling area in tents South of Claxton Drop Zone, organizing and receiving night aerial resupply, performing reconnaissance of selected targets and patrolling."[17]

- **26 October** – Conducted cold weather and ski training at Independence Mines.[18]

- **2 December** – Convoyed to Fort Greely for winter maneuvers, along the way practicing radio communication and determining feasibility of primary and alternative routes in preparation for winter maneuver ACID TEST III.[19]

- **5-12 December** – The Arctic Rangers integrated into ACID TEST III, which included forces from the 171st Infantry Brigade. The Rangers conducted long and short-range reconnaissance patrols to gather information on enemy movements, played by the Canadian 20th Fusilier Regiment.[20]

TOP: Major George A. Ferguson, third from right in the front row, served as the first commander of the newly formed Arctic Rangers of Company O, 75th Infantry (Ranger) Regiment. **BOTTOM:** MAJ George A. Ferguson, Company Commander, on right, prepares for the first military jump on the Polar Ice Cap in March of 1971. The jump instilled confidence in the Arctic Rangers to assume search and rescue missions as aviation traffic increased over Alaska.

Military Firsts

The operational tempo ramped up considerably in 1971 as the Arctic Rangers continued to support USARAL while seeking out opportunities to push physical and mental boundaries, according to the unit history. "The year was characterized by diversity in training, which saw the Company virtually spanning the length and width of Alaska, in pursuit of Dynamic Arctic Training (formerly known as 'adventure training')." The drills consisted largely of basic and advanced mountaineering skills, river navigation, and arctic winter tactical maneuvers.[21]

Larry Lee, then a private and among the initial group of men recruited by Ferguson, spent 15 months with the Arctic Rangers as an assistant radio operator. He recalled their emphasis on "learning how to survive in sub-zero temperatures," which included skiing and using snowshoes, dealing with extreme cold, finding and purifying water, and keeping equipment, including radios and heaters, operational. He remembered, "One of the major issues in extreme weather is survival. If you can't survive, nothing else matters."[22]

In addition, Company O organized and led airborne courses for USARAL starting in 1971. "Company O planned and carried out the first Basic Airborne Course in the history of USARAL. The course began on 11 January 1971 and was comprised of 64 students." All but four graduated. Four additional airborne courses, including two jumpmaster courses, were conducted that year, with about 200 soldiers earning their jump wings. The airborne school continued into the next year and provided basic airborne and jumpmaster classes for both the unit and conventional force soldiers in Alaska.[23] Lee was among the students in the first airborne course, which graduated on 29 January 1971, just in time to be part of the unit's next adventure.[24]

As Hollingsworth's confidence in Company O grew, he envisioned the Arctic Rangers as the "reactionary force" to lead in Polar Ice Cap rescues in the event aircraft went down in the area. "To prepare for the role, on 4 March 1971, Ferguson and his company parachuted about 130 miles northeast of Point Barrow, Alaska, to conduct a simulated rescue operation. Twenty-one hours later, after a successful exercise, the company was extracted by CH-47 Chinooks.[25] The success of the exercise reached the Army Chief of Staff, General William C. Westmoreland, who sent a congratulatory telegraph to then Major General Hollingsworth. "I am pleased to learn of the successful completion of ACE BAND-POLAR CAP. This type exercise is well suited to your Arctic Ranger company. The

TOP: An unidentified Arctic Ranger waits to load the aircraft for the northernmost airborne drop by U.S. soldiers, more than 100 miles north of Point Barrow, Alaska, onto the polar ice pack in March 1971. **BOTTOM:** Specialist 4 Larry Lee provides a first-hand view while parachuting onto the Polar Ice Cap on 4 March 1971. The jump was a military first. The unit would again jump the Polar Ice Cap in March 1972 for the second and last time.

training received will certainly prove invaluable, should rescue assistance ever be necessary in inaccessible areas of Alaska or on the arctic ice pack" Westmoreland visited Alaska later in 1971 and personally congratulate the company.[26]

Ferguson later recalled that the jump was delayed due to an "ice quake that broke up the ice floor." When they did jump, the soldiers had to be ready for much more than tangled parachute lines. They had to deal with brutal wind chill and the "king of the Ice Cap" – polar bears. At minus 10 degrees Fahrenheit and a wind chill of minus 70, frostbite was also a major concern. On the second day, Ferguson recalled MG Hollingsworth coming out to greet the men and congratulate them on their success. One of the men took off his glove to shake the general's hand, got frost bite, and had to be evacuated. Fortunately, they did not have to worry about polar bears on this jump.[27]

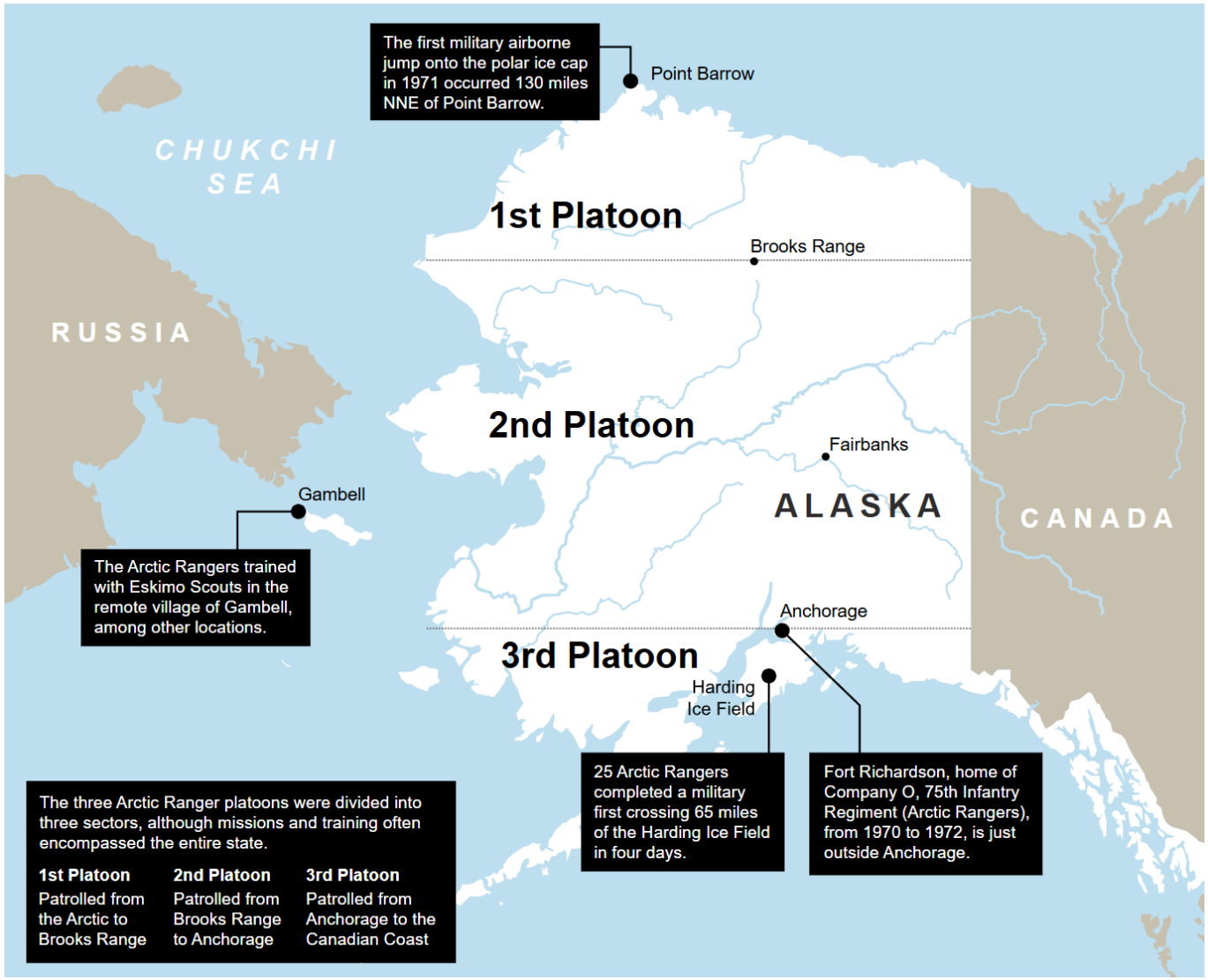
On 29 October 1971, Ferguson relinquished command to Major Edward O. Yaugo, the second and final commander. He considers himself a lucky man to have commanded the Arctic Rangers.[28] That winter, with Yaugo now in command, word about Company O's unique mission made its way to Fort Benning. There, Second Lieutenant (2LT) Charles "Chuck" Coaker, wrote then-USARAL commander, Major General Charles M. Gettys, requesting assignment to the Arctic Rangers. Within weeks, his request was approved and he received orders to report to Company O.[29] Coaker signed into the unit and quickly noticed a unique bond because they all were all doing something different and special. The unit was more diverse than he expected, with a blend of combat-tested Vietnam veterans and newly minted officers and NCOs of varied backgrounds and ethnicities.

At the time of Coaker's arrival, the unit operated in three platoons, each covering a portion Alaska. Coaker received command of 1st Platoon, which operated in the northern area from the Arctic to Brooks Range. Second Platoon covered the area from Brooks Range to Anchorage, and 3rd Platoon had Anchorage to the Canadian Coast. Each platoon had roughly 40 men, divided into self-sufficient five-man teams that could conduct separate reconnaissance missions.

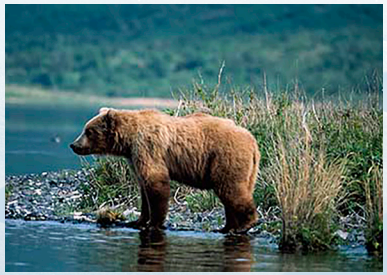
TOP: General William C. Westmoreland, U.S. Army Chief of Staff, meets with members of the Arctic Rangers during a visit to USARAL on 18 August 1971. **BOTTOM:** 2LT Charles "Chuck" Coaker takes a break from routine training with 1st Platoon at Fort Richardson, Alaska, in 1972

MAP OF OPERATIONAL AREAS

The next eight months were spent on relentless training. Coaker's platoon crossed the Harding Icefield, jumped onto the Polar Ice Cap, lived off the land with the Eskimo Scouts, and scaled dangerous glaciers. Coaker said it was thrilling. "If you were a civilian, you would pay thousands of dollars to go on one of these adventures." The adventures did not come without risk, and injuries were common. Coaker recalls a close call near the end of a three-week training exercise, in which his partner was seriously injured. "Mother nature is not very forgiving in Alaska. People very often come out on the short end of the stick."



TOP: A jumpmaster inspects an Arctic Ranger's reserve parachute for a tactical combat jump in 1972.
BOTTOM: 2nd Lt. Charles "Chuck" Coaker guides his MC 1-1 parachute during routine training in 1972.



Alaskan brown bears can exceed 1700 pounds.

SIDEBAR:

A BEAR of a Problem

The Arctic Rangers always had to be on alert for bears during training and missions. While both polar bears and Alaskan brown bears — the two largest species of bears — posed problems, one encounter is ingrained in their memories and recorded in historical accounts.[53]

Michael Dolsen, a specialist who served as a scout observer with the Arctic Rangers, recalls an Alaskan brown bear getting a little too close for comfort one night during the Ember Dawn IV training exercise in August 1972. "We were sleeping in a 10-man tent, and all of a sudden someone hollered 'BEAR,' which woke everyone up. The lights came on, and we discovered the side of the tent was ripped open and low and behold, it was right at my feet, and the head of my team leader. I had a box of candy bars and some cans of Coke there and they were gone. The bear barely missed dragging me and/or my team leader out with one paw swipe."[54]

Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Charles "Chuck" Coaker remembered the bear kept raiding their campsite, causing a nuisance, but after that night, the unit called the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to tranquilize it and remove it from their training site. Once tranquilized, the unit loaded the bear into a CH-47 Chinook for relocation. However, the bear began to awaken during the trip. As the Chinook touched down, the soldiers aboard rushed to push the bear out before it fully awoke. Relieved, they headed back to camp. Training resumed, but not for long. Despite the relocation, the bear found its way back to the campsite.[55]

Accounts in a local newspaper and the official unit history report of the incident vary. The Pioneer, Fort Richardson's weekly newspaper, reported that the bear, nicknamed Ursus, raided the camp in the early morning hours of 11 August 1972. "He ambled through the camp, ripped open the side of a mess tent, and 'chowed down' on a real GI four-course breakfast: five dozen eggs (over easy), twenty gallons of milk, some lettuce, and supply of bacon."[56] The unit history provided further insight. "Shortly after his removal from the camp area the bear was seen again lingering about the camp. It should be noted in his return trip the bear carefully avoided being seen in the vicinity of the mess tent. Rumors state further that the bear was seen side-stepping and stepping over trip wires, obviously attempting to avoid detection."[57]

Partnering with the Eskimo Scouts

Among the highlights were survival training exchanges with the native Alaskan "Eskimo Scouts," with whom they had built an important partnership. Coaker said that the scouts taught them how to survive off the land, hunting, building shelters from ice blocks and snow, and tracking. "It was critical to us because if we had to do our own real mission, we needed those skills and survival techniques."[30]

The official unit history mentioned an exchange in Gambell, Alaska, on the northwest cape of St. Lawrence Island, between 30 March and 8 April 1971. It noted that "not all the assigned members were available for the joint training because of whale and walrus hunting activities." The unit sent 85 soldiers to share knowledge with the Eskimo Scouts on medical treatment, patrolling, and weaponry. In addition to military training, the Arctic Rangers learned about indigenous culture and traditions. According to the unit history, "During the entire stay at Gambell, the Eskimo people were extremely friendly and outgoing. On one occasion, they presented a show of Eskimo dancers and singers for the enjoyment of the Company and attachments."[31] Having had the opportunity to train with the Eskimos when he had commanded the company, Ferguson recounted a more personal experience. On one exchange, he got word that his oldest son, Al, was seriously ill while he was on an exercise in a remote Eskimo village. The Eskimo Chief, upon learning his son was sick, performed a traditional healing ceremony, and gave Ferguson a toy seal. The Chief told him, "When you take this back, your son is going to be well," Ferguson said. "And he was well."[32]

SIDEBAR:

A Brief History of the "Eskimo Scouts"

Eskimo Scouts

Alaska Territorial Guard (ATG)

Called into action during World War II as the Alaska Territorial Guard (ATG), the native Alaskan Eskimo Scouts were an all-volunteer force that kept watch on Alaska's coastline long before Alaska was granted statehood. Comprised mostly of native tribesmen from the remote villages of the northern and western Alaskan territory, the Eskimo Scouts were skilled in arctic survival and proved to be keen observers.[58] Major (MAJ) Marvin "Muktuk" Marston organized the ATG in 1942, traveling throughout the arctic with a native guide — by air, boat, and dog team — to recruit forces. The ATG, an unpaid government-approved militia, was intended to augment the Alaska National Guard during the war while it handled national defense responsibilities.[59]

The ATG was officially disbanded on 31 March 1947, but some former members continued to drill voluntarily. The contribution of the Eskimo Scouts during the war was not forgotten, and some Army and local leaders fought to preserve and reorganize the capability. The Army National Guard sent Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) J.L. Alexander to Alaska in late 1948 to survey the feasibility of forming a unit under the Federal system.[60] Concurrently, in 1949, the Alaska legislature, recognizing the value of the Eskimo Scouts, voted to "establish Territorial national guard units of Eskimo scouts along the coastline facing Russia across the Bering Sea." The legislature noted that the Scouts would be the "eyes and ears of the military."[61]

Many former ATG members joined the new National Guard unit, and Marston, now a lieutenant colonel, continued to organize the villages as the Assistant Adjutant General. Serving in the Alaska National Guard would become a proud tradition for native Alaskan families.[62] However, the build-up was slow. It would take until October 1951 for the Eskimo Scouts to participate in their first field training exercise at Fort Richardson. Even then, Alaskan officials noted that although they were only paid to serve part time, the Eskimo Scouts are expected to "maintain their vigilance virtually on a 24-hour, seven day a week basis."[63]

In honor of their contributions to the nation's defense, Marston and the scouts were personally invited to march in President John F. Kennedy's inauguration parade in 1961. Their communities held fund-raisers so participants would have extra spending money — $15 each (roughly $155 in 2024 dollars) — to supplement the low stipends they would be given. Alaska having achieved statehood on 3 January 1959, the Scouts marched second to last in the parade, in front of Hawaii, the last state admitted to the Union (21 August 1959).[64]

Army Special Operations Forces leveraged the Eskimo Scouts' skills in the early 1960s during numerous exchanges with 7th Special Forces Group before the Vietnam War escalated and Special Forces attention was diverted. While visiting Alaska in 1963 to observe one of the Special Forces Training activities, Major General (MG) William P. Yarborough, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, NC, heralded the Eskimo Scouts' specialized talents and their desire to learn.[65] During the exchanges, Special Forces soldiers taught the Scouts guerilla warfare techniques, squad tactics, map reading, and demolition. The training was reciprocal: "Although they are here to instruct the Eskimo Scout in each of these subjects, the detachments

expect to learn as much as they teach. Techniques of operating and surviving in sub-zero weather are an essential part of the Special Forces trooper's education, and he cannot find a better instructor than the Eskimo."[66]

It was natural in 1970 for the Arctic Rangers to continue to integrate the Eskimo Scouts into their training and missions. Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) George A. Ferguson, Commander of Company O, 75th Infantry (Rangers), recalls that the unit coordinated directly with the National Guard to train in villages such as Gambell and other communities where the scouts lived and worked as part of their National Guard duties. "We worked with them extensively. We jumped into the villages and conducted training and we always picked up some sort of skills we didn't have. We worked closely with them because they would be an integral part of the defense of Alaska. If something happened — if somebody tried to blow up the pipeline or something — we would have them integrated into our unit."[67]

The term "Eskimo" is considered antiquated by today's standards. However, the moniker "Eskimo Scouts" remains in use to honor the legacy of the organization, according to Alaska National Guard officials, not its ethnic makeup. This reflects the Army tradition of its units having special designations, such as the 1st Armored Division's nickname "Old Ironsides" and the 82nd Airborne Division's nickname "All-Americans." Many descendants of the Eskimo Scouts ATG continue to serve in the National Guard.[68] Therefore, well into the 21st Century, the Army is still learning from the indigenous arctic experts whose legacy reaches back more than 80 years.

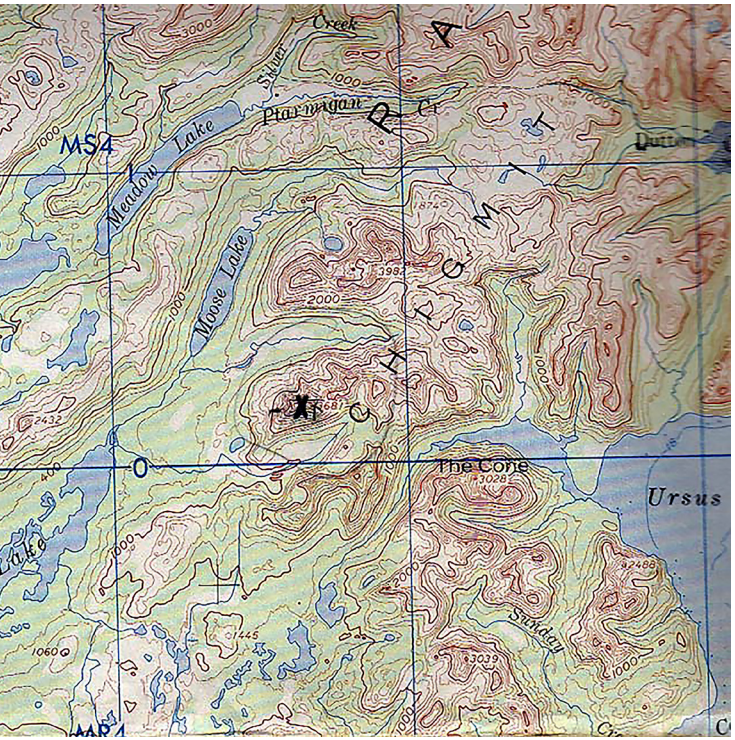
Crossing the Harding Ice Shield

Two exercises in 1972 pushed the unit's limits even further. The Arctic Ranger Company "made its furthest penetration north on operation Polar Cap II, and its first visit to the 'deep south' on Dynamic Arctic Training: Sitka. As in the previous year the company conducted training spanning the rest of Alaska."[33] Although they did not realize it at the time, on the final Polar Cap exercise for the unit on 25 March 1972, the Arctic Rangers left a memento behind. The morning after the jump the Arctic Rangers put together a time capsule containing a black unit beret, the jump manifest, a copy of the Polar Cap II operations order, the unit history, and various news articles.[34]

A few months later, a detachment from Company O, including Coaker, crossed the Harding Ice Shield, another military first, to "test their expertise on ice movement." The detachment of 25 Arctic Rangers set out on 10 July 1972 with two Air Force paramedics and a West Point cadet, crossing 65 miles of the ice shield in four days. On the third and "most eventful day," the Rangers covered 25 miles, including "encounters with ice worms, crossing tracks of a large glacier [Polar] bear, and a helicopter visit" from senior members of USARAL, including the command sergeant major.[35]

The next morning, the group awoke to white-out conditions and postponed their journey home until the evening. As the group descended onto Tustumena Glacier, the weather finally cleared. "Camping that night at a point where they exited the glacier and took to the rapidly descending hills which bordered it, a small celebration was held." The history report noted: "The establishment of the preplanned cache points, radio communication, and on call helicopter, as well as careful selection of members of the party, were necessary for safe and successful completion of the mission, which was the first crossing by the military, the first crossing of this route, and possibly the first complete crossing of one of the largest icefields in the world."[36] Coaker likened the experience to a priceless arctic adventure. "My experience was everything I could have asked for. It was invigorating, very challenging."[37]

TOP: Sergeant (SGT) Daniel L. Shaffer from Waymart, Pennsylvania, conducts a radio transmission from the Polar Ice Cap in 1972. **MIDDLE:** Arctic Rangers mark their camp after jumping onto the Polar Ice Cap for the second time with an American flag in March 1972. The unit also buried a time capsule to commemorate the jump, which would be their last. **BOTTOM:** Arctic Rangers successfully land on the Polar Ice Cap in March 1972.



A Somber Mission

Other Arctic Ranger missions had a more somber tone. In August 1972, Company O conducted a search and recovery of a military plane that had crashed three years earlier. Located in a remote area of Alaska, the search area was known for being hazardous, with high winds and frequent, unpredictable weather changes. Coaker led a 10-man team on a search for a "shiny object" reported by a civilian mail delivery pilot. They hiked 1,500 feet up the mountain, with visibility less than 20 yards. They reached an area scattered with boulders and spotted an engine. Coaker believed it was from a C-54 Skymaster. However, as the weather worsened, the team had to turn back, they abandoned their search, and could not immediately confirm what they had found. The team returned to the site multiple occasions, each time expanding the perimeter and finding more debris.[38] They found the frame of the aircraft and bodies of the crew almost a month later."[39]

It was the first time Coaker, and many on the team, had seen human remains. "It was eye opening for everybody," Coaker said. At that point, they went into "documentation mode" and photographed the scene. He tasked a West Point cadet, training with his platoon, to map the area.[40] The search and recovery operation was precisely the type of mission for which the Arctic Rangers had prepared.

The Eyes and Ears of the North

Although not explicitly stated, the Arctic Rangers had multiple other missions which centered on the threat posed by the USSR to Alaska. They were also charged with protecting the exposed areas of the future Trans-Alaska Pipeline, which was critical to national security. We "patrolled on an irregular basis" and "spent an inordinate amount of time training people to do that." For that, the Rangers earned the nickname, "The Eyes and Ears of the North," according to Ferguson.[41]

Captain Joseph Logan, the unit's Operations Officer, recalled that another mission was to work with the Alaskan National Guard native scouts and conduct long range patrols in the barren arctic.[42] In addition to Ferguson's assessment of the mission, Coaker highlighted the proximity of Russia to Alaska. "We got priority in training because the idea was that we would be facing the Soviet Union… [the Army] wanted people who could go out into the wilderness along the coast and up in the Arctic and see what was going on – making sure we weren't being looked at from the Russian perspective and they weren't infiltrating into Alaska."[43]

However, the mission was short-lived. Despite proving that Company O could prevail in the brutal arctic climate, other conventional units would have to carry that mantle. Its main proponent, MG Hollingsworth, was back in Vietnam by the end of 1971, and the Army was ordering cutbacks to USARAL. With no advocate, the Arctic Rangers were deactivated on 29 September 1972 and its soldiers reassigned to other units at Fort Richardson.[44]

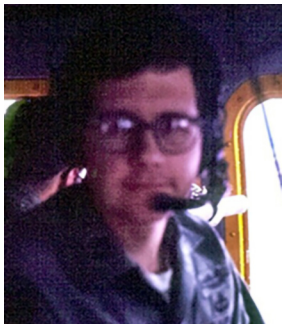
Postscript

Private Larry Lee, who took on a mission to identify and locate all members of the Arctic Rangers, estimates there were 336 men assigned to Company O in its two years.[45] The final roster included just 139 men.[46] Most would be reassigned to fill vacant billets within the 172nd Infantry Brigade with either the 4th Battalion, 23rd Infantry or the 1st Battalion, 60th Infantry.

Coaker, who was reassigned to Company C, 4/23rd Infantry, said it was difficult for some to assimilate

TOP: A team from the Arctic Rangers surveys a crash site in a remote part of Alaska they discovered in August 1972. Search and recovery was among the primary missions for the unit. **BOTTOM:** The X on the map marks the location of the crash site the Arctic Rangers recovered in August 1972.

back into the other units, which lacked the brotherhood that he had experienced while in Company O, which had been like a family. With fewer than 200 personnel, soldiers got to know each other. "There was a special bond – like a sports team that had a successful season.[47]

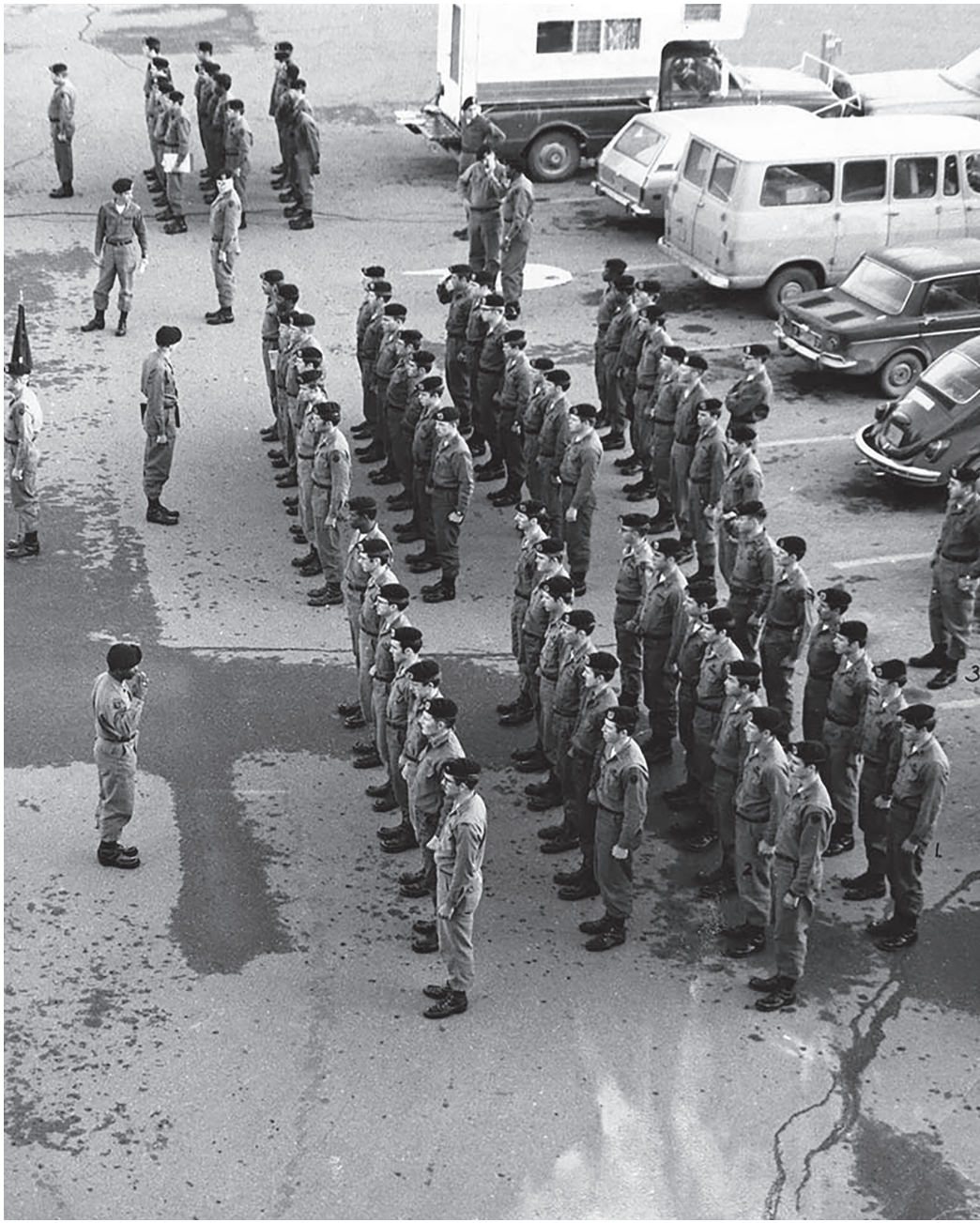


Captain Joseph Logan, the unit's Operations Officer

The Arctic Rangers laid the groundwork for future training and tactics. During its two short years, the unit tested the limits of equipment and personnel. Its members' airborne expertise benefited soldiers across USARAL and demonstrated how vital airborne capabilities were in reaching remote areas of Alaska where none of their predecessors had ever gone. The Arctic Rangers established a military model for arctic search and rescue and incorporated survival skills inculcated from the native Eskimo Scouts such as building shelters, hunting, preparing local game, and natural water purification, that are still used and valued today.

In March 2021, the Army released its Arctic Strategy, with plans to set up an Arctic Support Command.[48] The strategy designated the Northern Warfare Training Center in the Black Rapids Training Area, Alaska, where the Arctic Rangers once trained, to train the next generation of "Arctic Experts.[49] In addition to training individual soldiers to be mentally and physically prepared for the arctic environment, the center assists Army Futures Command in testing equipment designed for the arctic.[50] On 6 June 2022, in support of the Arctic Strategy, the Army reactivated the 11th Airborne Division ("Arctic Angels"), with brigades at Fort Wainwright and Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson. Their role is to conduct operations in the arctic, including defending critical infrastructure and defeating adversaries in extreme cold weather and mountainous areas.[51]

The Arctic Strategy does not mention the Arctic Rangers in its history of the Army in Alaska, but it alludes to lessons that Company O had long ago learned. These included capitalizing on the "knowledge of indigenous populations' to improve Arctic expertise" as they have "thrived in Alaska and Arctic territory for millennia. They know the environment, wildlife, and terrain better than anyone."[52] The Arctic Rangers knew better than most units the truth of that statement, having lived and worked beside them as partners.



Members of Company O, 75th Infantry (Ranger) Regiment, gather for morning formation at Fort Richardson, Alaska.

SIDEBAR:

Keeping the Memory of the Arctic Rangers Alive

Company O, 75th Infantry, left a lasting impression on those who served in it between 1970 and 1972. Larry Lee, who served an assistant radioman, departed the unit on 29 December 1971 without saying goodbye to many of his colleagues. With only five months left on his enlistment and the Army allowing soldiers early outs, he put in for emergency leave to be with his father, who was having surgery. "I thought they were going to let me have a 3 day leave to be home for his surgery but come to find out they were expediting my getting out of the Army. So in five hours, I was out of the Army and heading home. I didn't get to talk to anyone before my flight because almost everyone was working short hours over the Christmas holidays."[69]

Lee stayed in touch with four members of the unit when he left and in the mid-1990s started searching for more. He started with a few sets of official orders, using the information to narrow down home states. As his contacts grew, so did the list. By 1996, he had ten names. Lee discovered a website managed by Arctic Ranger veteran Michael Dolsen, the "de facto unit historian," who was on the unit's final roster. According to Dolsen, the website has been a work in progress, on which he tells users to "come back often to visit and learn about an all but forgotten Vietnam-era Ranger Unit."[70] With Dolsen's help, Lee expanded the list further and members have used the website to share stories, documents, and photos.

The unit was so memorable that Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Charles "Chuck" Coaker, a platoon leader, with Company O, kept a scrapbook of his year with the Arctic Rangers — something he didn't do for the rest of his career. In it, contemporary newspaper clippings from the Army Times, the Anchorage Daily News, and the Fort Richardson Pioneer lauded the Arctic Rangers for their groundbreaking training, including jumping the Polar Ice Cap and crossing the Harding Icefield. He also maintained airborne operations orders, an extensive photograph collection, and training plans.[71] These documents were vital in piecing together the unit's history.

Members of the Arctic Rangers visited USASOC in September 2022 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the unit's deactivation.

Arctic Ranger veterans reunited for the first time on 4 August 2010 in Louisville, Kentucky, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the unit's activation, and they have tried to meet every other year since near a different Army installation. In 2022, the Arctic Rangers recognized the 50th anniversary of the unit's deactivation at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The reunion gave Lee a chance to say a proper farewell, and much more.[72] The stories are not always remembered the same, Ferguson said, but one thing everyone remembered was the people. "We really had a good group of people, and I feel extremely fortunate."[73]

Lee continues researching. "I have probably made thousands of calls which a few were successful, but most weren't, sent out letters, searched Facebook, even searched property in cities that I knew some were from … It was a lot of work, but it was worth it." To date, Lee and the others have verified 163 living Arctic Rangers and 83 deceased. They are still trying to locate 90 other members.[74] The search continues.

Members of the Arctic Rangers signed the poster during their 50th anniversary at Fort Bragg, N.C and a commemorative coin from one of the Arctic Ranger reunions.

TAKEAWAYS

- Starting in the late 1960s, before the establishment of the 75th Ranger Regiment, Ranger companies operated as long-range reconnaissance patrols (LRRPs) in Vietnam. Company O also performed long-range reconnaissance, but in a completely different environment. As priorities changed, most Ranger companies, including Company O, were deactivated by the mid-1970s.

- Alaska's proximity to the Soviet Union during the Cold War concerned military leaders, who sought to protect the vast arctic border and its pipeline through both conventional and unconventional means.

- Company O began as an ad hoc unit, temporarily fielded by personally selected volunteers from USARAL. Eventually, newly minted Rangers would be assigned straight out of Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia.

- Historically, Army Rangers had been activated only during wartime to serve in highly specialized, but temporary, capacities. Following Vietnam, Rangers became permanent fixtures in the Special Operations arsenal.

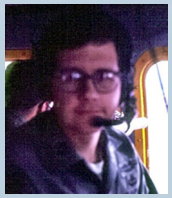
The author would like to thank Mr. Michael Dolsen for providing the USASOC History Office a place to start for this article and for his assistance in connecting the author with veterans of Company O, Arctic Rangers. Thanks also to LTC (Retired) George A. Ferguson, LTC (Retired) Charles "Chuck" Coaker, Mr. Larry Lee, and Mr. Joseph Logan. Without their time and personal accounts, this article would not have been possible.

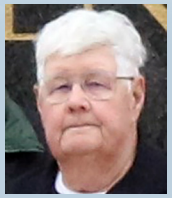
SIDEBAR:

"Arctic Rangers" Legacy Notes

SGT Larry Lee
Assistant Radioman
September 1970 to December 1971

"Our legacy actually still lives on. There are several guys from different units that served in Alaska that have said that we were the first and they look up to us as the pioneer of cold weather exercise. We were the first to do a lot of things. I've heard from a few guys from other units that still talk about us. The Arctic Angels station in Alaska now are learning of the challenges we had to survive in the sub-zero weather."





Captain Joseph Logan
Operations Officer
September 1971-August 1972

"At the time that O Company (Arctic Rangers), 75th Infantry, was active we had two very great leaders in Alaska at that time. MG James Hollingworth the Commanding General and Colonel Rufus Lazzel, the G-3. Both used the Arctic Rangers as the go to unit for small unit action in the state and as an exchange with the Canadian forces. The Rangers conducted two parachute operations on the Polar Ice Cap. I don't think that has been conducted since we did it. The impact on the Army and Alaska came after the unit was deactivated. Those soldiers spread their experience on their next assignment. Some returning to Alaska for other tours, others in units around the world."

2nd LT Charles "Chuck" Coaker
Platoon Leader
January 1972-August 1972

"I think Company O demonstrated that company-sized units, that were well trained and motivated, could achieve a lot in very difficult terrain and weather, like crossing an entire icefield and glacier with minimal support, parachuting onto ice flows, running a parachute school, conducting ground searches for missing aircrews or civilians, etc. I think we set the tone for other units to follow and when we all moved on to other units in the Brigade, that expertise came with us and got passed on to them. This is even more important today, when you see the need for more military force in the state to protect the U.S. interests. Even with a division size unit, small unit operations will be the centerpiece in Arctic Warfare, just due to the nature of the climate and terrain. If you look back, all the things you see troops in Alaska doing today are things we did back in the day."

MAJ George A. Ferguson
Company Commander
August 1970-October 1971

"As commandant of the Northern Warfare Training Center many years after I commanded the Arctic Rangers, I could see that many of the skills we learned in the Ranger company had transferred and been implemented into the training center. We kept a pretty good library of what to do. When the unit was inactivated, those skills were spread throughout Alaska and throughout the Army."

SPC Michael Dolsen
Scout Observer
July 1972-September 1972

"Although my time was short in the unit, it profoundly affected me, even to this day. The Arctic Rangers were a true multi-purpose mission unit, tasked with defense, for sure, but also search and rescue and recon as well. Its legacy is that all served proudly, with honor, and deeply fulfilled the unit's mission to the greatest degree required of it. Both Company Os – the first in Vietnam and the Arctic Rangers – had totally different missions, yet both served and filled their missions fully."

ENDNOTES

1 "Company O, 75th Infantry Arctic Rangers Unit History," 1970-1972, Folder "Co. O Arctic Ranger 75th Inf," Box 1, Entry UD-WW 281, RG 547, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), hereafter "Unit History."

2 Willard Pearson, Quartermaster Conference Report, Natick, Massachusetts, Dec. 1-2, 1960, copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Bragg, NC.

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15 Ferguson Interview.

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23 Unit History, II-1.

24 Lee email.

25 Unit History, II-2.

26 Telegraph from General William C. Westmoreland to Major General James F. Hollingsworth, "Reference Your Message ALS (For Your Eyes Only)," 1971, online at https://emu.usahec.org/alma/multimedia/307864/20184877MNBT989107141F036413I021.pdf.

27 Ferguson Interview.

28 Unit History II-8.

29 LTC (Retired) Charles "Chuck" Coaker, interview with Suzanne Harrison, 30 June 2023 at the USASOC History Office, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Coaker Interview.

30 Coaker Interview.

31 Unit History, II-3

32 Ferguson Interview.

33 Coaker Intervew.

34 Unit History, III-3.

35 Unit History, III-6.

36 Unit History, III-6.

37 Coaker Interview.

38 Coaker Interview.

39 Unit History, III-7.

40 Coaker Interview.

41 Ferguson Interview.

42 Joseph Logan email.

43 Coaker Interview.

44 Unit History, III-8. Official acknowledgment of the unit's existence has largely been lost since the deactivation. What remains is a single box in the National Archives, College Park, MD. Company O, 75th Infantry, 1970-1972, Folder "Co. O Arctic Ranger 75th Inf," Box 1, Entry UD-WW 281, RG 547, NARA, and various documents located in disparate repositories.

45 Email from Larry Lee to Suzanne Harrison, "SUBJECT: Co O 75th Inf. Arctic Ranger," 16 November 2023.

46 Unit History, V-1-2

47 Coaker Interview.

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ENDNOTES: A BEAR of a Problem

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68 Email from J. Vanette Tyson to Suzanne Harrison, SUBJECT: "RE: Alaska Native Eskimo Scouts History Research Query," 20 February 2024.

ENDNOTES: Keeping the Memory of the Arctic Rangers Alive

69 Email from Larry Lee to Suzanne Harrison, "SUBJECT: Co O 75th Inf. Arctic Ranger," 18 July 2023.

70 Michael L. Dolsen quotation from http://www.ocoarcticranger75th.com/.

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72 Lee email, 18 July 2023.

73 LTC (Retired) George A. Ferguson, interview with Suzanne Harrison, 21 February 2023, USASOC History Office, Fort Bragg, NC.

74 Email from Larry lee to Suzanne Harrison, "SUBJECT: Co O 75th Inf. Arctic Ranger," 16 November 2023.