

North To Alaska

By PAC Tod A. Lyons, Coast Guard PADET Kodiak

So, you're considering accepting orders to your next Coast Guard unit in the Last Frontier. You've heard stories about what Alaska is like, but you'd like to know more about it.

Well, it's big! It's vast, it's pretty remote and Coast Guard men and women and their families really need to know what to expect before they decide to take orders here.

There's a joke I've heard since getting assigned to Kodiak in 1997. "What happens when you cut Alaska in half? Answer: Texas becomes the third largest state in the nation.

The distance from Juneau to Kodiak, as the crow flies, is about 700 miles or the equivalent distance in the lower 48 from New York City to Indianapolis, Ind. Kodiak to Anchorage is over 250 miles or a one-hour flight. Even Ketchikan to Sitka is more than 200 miles! You have to travel by airplane or ferry boat to get to most of the Coast Guard units here.

Very few Alaska towns and cities are connected by roads. In fact, the towns of Kodiak, Ketchikan, Petersburg and Sitka are all on islands. Juneau backs right up to mountains and glaciers. If you thought you'd like to pop by Attu for a day, better make it at least two. It takes 5 ½ hours by C-130 airplane to fly from Kodiak to Attu - about 1,225 miles - and there's a one-hour time change. That's the same distance in the continental United States (CONUS) from Philadelphia to Omaha, Neb. "If you look at an atlas of Alaska without referring to the scale of miles, towns here appear a lot closer than they really are," says MCPO Harry Stevens, Command Master Chief of Western Alaska, based in Kodiak. "Co-location of personnel between towns is impossible."

"Weather" or not you're ready for Alaska

You've heard the saying, "If you don't like the weather in New England, wait a minute, it

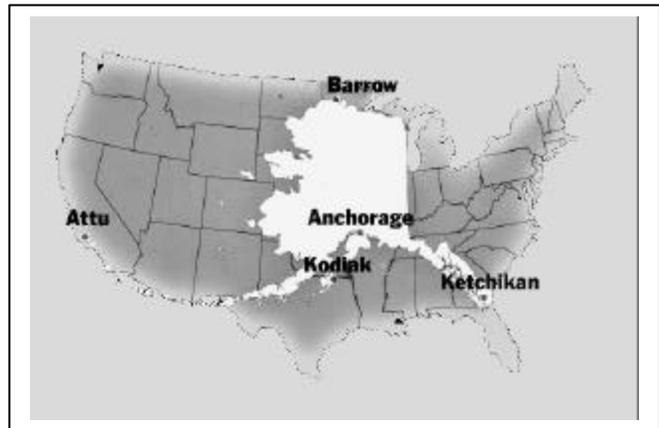
will change on you."

The same can be said for Alaska, and it rains a lot. According to Rich Courtney of the National Weather Service in Kodiak,

between 1970-1999 Kodiak averaged 76.2 inches of rain and snow every year. Ketchikan gets even more rain. Compare that to Seattle, Wash., which receives an average of 37.7 inches of precipitation per year (based on 1972-1998 statistics), and you know it's wet here. Studded tires are a must on any vehicle between October and April, even four-wheel drives. There are some pretty nice days throughout the year, but they are often few and far between.

If you're expecting sunny and 80 degrees, don't! In my experience in Kodiak, summer temperatures only twice reached over 80 degrees. If temperatures even reach 70 degrees, that's a hot day here.

Light and darkness are two other aspects of Alaska assignments that are difficult to get used to. In the middle of the summer in Kodiak, it barely gets dark. We'll have daylight from about 3 a.m. to 1 a.m. The two hours between 1 a.m. and 3 a.m. is equivalent to dusk in most places. In the winter, it's the opposite. As I write this article today, Dec. 9, it didn't get light until about 9:30 a.m. It will get dark at about 4:30 p.m. By the way, it's snowing today and it's supposed to change to rain later.



When placed to scale over a map of the continental United States, it's apparent exactly how big Alaska really is, and the distances it covers. (Graphic Courtesy D17 (dpa))

If you're used to shopping malls and 24-hour-a-day conveniences, most towns in Alaska do not have such places. Anchorage, located on the mainland, is a city of about 250,000 people and it's like any other similar-sized city in CONUS. In Kodiak, we do have a Wal-Mart and a McDonalds, Burger King, Dominos Pizza, KFC and Pizza Hut, a few hotels, several restaurants and some other conveniences. Nothing is open 24-hours, however, except the hospital and Coast Guard operations.

Personnel considering a transfer to Alaska need to review the Coast Guard Personnel Manual, (COMDINST M1000.6) and the Overseas Screening Process. Recently, a committee in Kodiak reviewed the process and made some recommendations. The reason for the review is because in recent years, people getting orders to Alaska were expecting something romantic, or exciting, or unusual, or whatever. When they got here, they found that it can be romantic, and it can be a lot of fun, but it can also be very challenging and difficult to adjust.

Lt. Cmdr. John Eaton, chief of the Administration Office at ISC Kodiak and former chief of the Work Life Branch here, has been in Alaska for three consecutive tours. He was also here for three years in the 1980s. Though there are no local stats available, his experience acknowledges that about two in every 10 people receiving orders to Alaska are not suited for overseas assignment. That's 20 percent. "While I love it here, not everyone likes Alaska," he said. "People think it will be great when they get here in the summer, however, when winter rolls around we can have 20 straight days of rain, and with the daylight hours so short, it can get people down. The kids can't play outside, and if they're not involved in a lot of extra-curricular activities it wears on families pretty fast."

Questions to ask yourself

Several questions should be considered before accepting orders to Alaska. Does your family have any special medical, dental, psychological, physical or educational situations? Are you enrolled in any Special Needs program or is there an active Family Advocacy Program case? Do you have any

financial issues such as indebtedness, credit loss, etc? Have you or family members been treated for alcohol abuse or chemical dependency?

These types of questions are there for a reason. Over the last three years, Air Station Kodiak tracked 20 Early Return of Dependents (ERD) cases according to MCPO Dave Levesque, Command Master Chief of the Air

Coast Guard Units in Alaska

Attu	Loran Station
Anchorage	Marine Safety Office
.....	Recruiting Office
Auke Bay	CGC Liberty
Cordova	Aviation Support Facility
.....	CGC Sweetbrier
Dutch Harbor	Marine Safety Detachment
Homer	CGC Roanoke Island
.....	CGC Sedge
Juneau	17th Coast Guard District
.....	Integrated Support Command Detachment
.....	Station Juneau
.....	Marine Safety Office
Kenai	Marine Safety Detachment
Ketchikan	Electronics Support Unit
.....	Integrated Support Command
.....	Marine Safety Detachment
.....	CGC Acushnet
.....	CGC Anthony Petit
.....	CGC Naushon
.....	Station Ketchikan
Kodiak	Air Station
.....	Communication Station Kodiak
.....	Electronic Support Unit
.....	Integrated Support Command
.....	Loran Station
.....	Marine Safety Detachment
.....	North Pacific Regional Fisheries Training Center
.....	CGC Alex Haley
.....	CGC Firebush
.....	CGC Ironwood
.....	CGC Storis
.....	Public Affairs Detachment Western Alaska
Petersburg	CGC Anacapa
.....	CGC Elderberry
Port Clarence	Loran Station
Seward	CGC Mustang
Shoal Cove	Loran Station
Sitka	Aids to Navigation Team
.....	Air Station Sitka
.....	Marine Safety Detachment
.....	CGC Woodrush
St. Paul	Loran Station
Tok	Loran Station
Valdez	Vessel Traffic System Prince William Snd
.....	Marine Safety Office Prince William Sound

Station. "Of those, 17 were due to marital discord, and three for other reasons, and all of them occurred within the first six months of new personnel reporting on board," he said. Levesque has done three tours in Alaska over his career and he's seen many relationships end, perhaps due to the isolated location. "Newly married, young couples are at risk, period," he said. "Those married right out of boot camp or "A" School have traditionally been the biggest problem. If they're here for a second tour, I don't see it as much."

If you love the outdoors (fishing, hiking, hunting, 4-wheeling, mountain biking, sea kayaking, etc), you'll probably like Alaska. If you're expecting a grocery store open around the clock, or shopping plazas to spend the extra Cost of Living Allowance you receive, think again. A gallon of milk at the local grocery store is more than \$4.00. On the base, we pay \$1.55/gallon for regular unleaded gasoline, and a bag of potato chips is often well over \$3.00/bag. Bananas cost between 50 cents and 99 cents per pound, fresh produce, in general, is very expensive - even at the local commissary. If the Sea-Land shipment can't make it because of weather, you will have slim pickings in all of the grocery stores.

In a letter from the commanding officer of ISC Kodiak to the 17th District Chief of Staff, the cost of living in Alaska is a big concern. "Overseas expenses are high for all grades and rates," the letter

explains. "Many times, family problems surface from those families who acquire large debts before their new assignments. By running a credit check through an outside organization, or a check of CGMA loans, transferring commands could capture those individuals with a high dept/income ratio."

Later in the letter it specifically identifies financial problems with non-rated personnel.

"Married non-rates will have a very difficult financial situation in Kodiak. Unless they get government housing (which is not a guarantee) it will be a problem for them and us."

Thoughts from both sides

I spoke to a variety of people, active duty and dependents, to get their thoughts of being

assigned to Coast Guard units in Alaska. Telecommunications Specialist Chief Michael Crider arrived at Communications

Station Kodiak in June. "It's the best kept secret in the Coast Guard," he said. "I'm an outdoors guy, so I bought a 4-wheeler. I love the hunting and fishing, and the small town atmosphere."

His wife, Kris, is not so enthusiastic. "I'm not real thrilled with the assignment, and I'm feeling awfully cooped up" she said. "The summer wasn't bad because there were things to do, and I could get out. We have a 2 1/2-year-old daughter. There's nothing in Kodiak for children under the age of three."

The Criders transferred in from Astoria, Ore., and live in Coast Guard-owned housing, but have just one vehicle. "We have one vehicle and I don't like to drive in the snow; this is hard for me," Kris says. Kris admitted that if she was working, it might be different. But she made a choice to stay at home with her daughter, and she's pregnant with their second

child. If the Criders wanted to go out for a leisurely drive, it wouldn't take long to cover the 17 miles of paved road in Kodiak, and the

remaining 83 miles of dirt roads can be tough on vehicles.

TCC Crider admits it's difficult for his wife and it's difficult for young Coast Guard men and women on their first assignment out of boot camp or A School. "Single seamen and new petty officers straight out of the shoot have a tough time adapting to this environment," Crider said. "We've had some kids come here

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- SCPO Leslie Frey, ISC Kodiak

that don't even have a driver's license and the COMMSTA is located about five miles from town. If you don't have a car, you're kind of stuck," he said.

Storekeeper Second Class Dawn Shapland, currently on her second tour in Kodiak, has mixed thoughts about her Alaska experience. "I love the job because I get to do all of the different types of duties related to my field; like accounting, property, purchasing; all of what an SK does," she explained. "It helps with servicewide exams because I do the yeoman duties as well." Shapland has seven years Coast Guard service and has already taken the servicewide for SK1.

Shapland has been in Kodiak since March 1996. When she got here she was married with no children. Now, she is separated with a seven-month-old daughter. "I think being in Kodiak, far away from my immediate family and friends and pretty isolated, contributed to the separation," she said. "I didn't choose to come to Kodiak, but got orders here anyhow."

According to Shapland, many young couples assigned to Kodiak have separated or divorced since coming to here. "There's a high divorce rate here. The majority of my friends under age 30 have had a lot of marital problems and there's a high rate of return of dependents," she explained. "I believe it has something to do with the isolation. There's nothing to do; just one dance club and no mall. The majority of

what you can do in a similar sized town in the Lower 48, you can't do here, especially when it gets cold and dark," Shapland said. "I want my daughter to have the experiences of the 'real world.' I want her to go to a zoo and museums and those types of things," she said. "Until I leave, I'll make the best of the assignment." Shapland stays involved with the community but also explains that if you're not outgoing and you don't like to be involved, you may not want to come to Alaska.

Offering some advice to young couples, particularly newlyweds considering an Alaska assignment, she says, "They need to sit down and have a serious talk with their partner. They need to know what they're really getting into. There's not a lot here."

YNCS Leslie Frey says she's very biased about Alaska, particularly after serving 19 of 21 years Coast Guard service at various Alaska commands. "When people ask me about Alaska, I tell them I'm biased. I love it here," she said. "I can't imagine a better place to be for raising a family." Frey has been married 19 years, and like most marriages, there have been some rough spots, but she and her husband worked through them. "You're going to have good days and you're going to have bad days, but it's how you look at it," she said. "It's dark in the winter and you have shorter days, so you sleep more in the winter and stay up longer in the summer when it's light almost around the clock."

"People come here thinking that it's a permanent assignment," Frey explained. "Most tours are only two to three years, then you go someplace else. Yet I've seen people who say they hate it here then they get sent to Miami or southern California and they can't wait to come back."

Being young and single in Alaska has some benefits, but for BM3 Steve Christy, currently assigned to the CGC Firebush, he's ready to move back to the Lower 48. "I like the Firebush, I just don't like being in Kodiak," he said. The



BM3 Steve Christy has enjoyed his time aboard the CGC Firebush, but not necessarily all his time in Kodiak. He is ready to transfer to the Lower 48 after three years OUTCONUS. (Photo by PA2 Keith Alholm)

Firebush is Christy's first assignment out of boot camp. Upon graduation from Lima Company 151 in Sept. 1997, Christy got orders to Alaska. Though Alaska was last on his Dream Sheet, he certainly wasn't expecting orders here. "I was shocked, I never heard of Kodiak and didn't know what to expect," he explained. "No one I spoke to knew anything about it either."

Since coming to Kodiak, Christy has learned a lot going from SA to BM3 and stands duty as BMOW underway, works as a buoy deck seaman and small boat coxswain, among other duties. The Firebush works aids to navigation out as far as Cold Bay, Alaska, in the Aleutian Islands. The weather is hard to get used to, but something Christy has learned to deal with. As for Kodiak; "If you like the outdoors, and your not hyped up to be into a big social scene, then you will do okay here," he explains. "The hunting and fishing is the best I've ever seen, but there is not a lot for young single people to do here, particularly in the winter." Christy has seen young single people get in trouble quickly because of the isolation and the lack of activities available for those under age 21. "We had a seaman on board who was just like me; a high school graduate who

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got his first assignment to Kodiak out of boot camp. He started drinking, and got caught a couple of times, and has since been discharged. He told me he had never touched a drink in his life before he got here. It's hard to get used to the isolation," Christy said.

His advice for people with orders to Alaska: "Don't panic. Try to get used to the isolation. Don't keep yourself locked up in your barracks room. Get out and meet people," he continued. "The golf course here is excellent. There's basketball, softball, football, hunting and fishing."

For ETC Kevin McCarthy, also assigned to COMSTA Kodiak, "The only way of getting me out of Alaska is kicking and screaming," he said. "I have lived, visited, worked, flown, been stuck, stranded or hunted every place in Alaska that has a name attached," he explains. McCarthy, originally from Massachusetts, has done 13 or 14 years in Alaska over a 26-year Coast Guard career.

He's been divorced once and is currently separated from his second wife, and being in Alaska may have contributed to the separation. "Getting separated can happen," he said. "In the divorce I'm going through now, being assigned to Attu didn't help, particularly after a three-year unaccompanied tour in Sitka." McCarthy's wife opted to stay in Tok, Alaska, where they were also assigned at one time.

Even with the divorce, current separation, and raising two children, McCarthy thoroughly



Grizzly Bears are fairly common in Kodiak, like this one seen just outside the doors of COMSTA Kodiak on Dec. 15. (Photo by ETC Kevin McCarthy)

enjoys all that Alaska has to offer. "I like being close to the wildlife and I like fishing and trapping." And so goes his advice to young people getting assigned to Alaska: "An Alaska assignment is what you make of it," he said. "People who fail to apply themselves can be unhappy anywhere - regardless of what is made available to them. I never accepted that a place is bad. It's just a bigger challenge."

McCarthy spends much of his time competing in Alaska State Rifle Championships, trapping, fishing, and hunting. He also volunteered as an EMT for 10 years. "If you ever feel bored and you're starting to get cabin fever, you can get involved in the local community," he said. "A lot of organizations can use good, young help. Hanging around bars isn't going to get them anywhere in town." He continued, "If a person uses his/her liberty time by spending it in the local bar, that's a person who is at the bottom rung of the ladder. They're not going to go very far."

Coast Guard "Family" support

In Kodiak, the command does everything it can to keep active duty personnel and their families happy during their assignment. The ISC has an excellent gymnasium, indoor swimming pool, racquetball courts, sun tanning booth, a bowling alley, auto hobby shop, movie theater, commissar, exchange, large convenience store, and 543 units of owned housing. There are morale boats for the summer fishing season, fishing poles and gear, and a skating rink in the winter. There's also a family pizza parlor with a small video arcade

and you can get a pretty decent meal at the galley for \$3.20 per person, even for your dependents. Intramural sports are popular and Jewel Beach has beach glass and driftwood galore.

The American Bald Eagle is as common as the black crow in the lower 48, and grizzly bears, foxes, rabbits, deer and ground squirrels are seen regularly. Dirt roads from the old Navy base get you up into the hills around base and there are numerous hiking trails. Similar off base outdoor activities await personnel assigned to Sitka, Ketchikan or Juneau.

The most important thing to do before accepting orders to Alaska is to talk with someone, find out what it's really like, explains Levesque. He offers this advice, "Get up with a sponsor, talk to people who have been here before," he stresses. "Understand that it is isolated. Small problems are magnified and can become a real problem. You have to know what to expect. As small as we (Coast Guard) are, plenty of people have been to Alaska before and they can share information."

McCarthy agrees with talking first with someone who knows Alaska and how you really need to listen. "Nine out of 10 times, the real problem is people didn't believe what their sponsors told them," he said. "The attitude of bears in housing is 'Yeah, right...'. The concept of "no malls," to people who have purchased 99 percent of their material goods since childhood in a mall, becomes lost. They don't believe you. If the sponsor is honest and up front about everything Alaska has to offer, people getting orders here will have to believe them. That's just the way it is."