

NEWS FROM THE OFFICE OF

SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI

United States Senate

MURKOWSKI FIGHTS FOR ALASKA TERRITORIAL GUARD RETIREMENT PAY

Friday, January 23, 2009

Mr. President, sometime this week letters will be mailed from the U.S. Army Human Resources Command in St. Louis, MO, to 25 elderly Alaskans. Those letters will tell these 25 elderly Alaskans that the Army has changed its mind--it has changed its mind--about whether their service in the Alaska Territorial Guard during World War II counts toward military retirement. The effect of this abrupt reversal in position is to reduce the monthly retirement payments to each of these 25 elderly Alaskans. These retirement payments will be reduced by an average of \$386 a month. Six will lose more than \$500 a month in retirement pay. These reductions will take effect on February 1.

So in less than 10 days, these individuals who have been receiving these payments--these elderly Alaskans who served us during World War II--will be receiving a letter, maybe before their benefits are cut off, but they will be receiving a letter saying: Sorry, your service doesn't count toward military retirement.

Mr. President, I state again: None of these 25 elderly Alaskans knows this is coming. It will come as a complete surprise to them, possibly, when they receive that letter. Whether they are tuning in to C-SPAN and hear my comments tonight, we don't know.

It is going to take a while for these letters coming out of St. Louis, MO, to reach their destinations because these letters are being sent to some of the remotest parts of our State, of rural Alaska. Four of these letters are destined for the village of Noatak. This is an Inupiat Eskimo village of 489 people in northwest Alaska. I would suggest, Mr. President, that outside of you and I, there is probably nobody in Washington, DC, who could identify Noatak on a map. Four of these letters are destined for the village of Kwigillingok. We call it Kwig because it is so difficult to pronounce. This is a Yupik Eskimo community of 361 people.

All told, these letters are being sent to elders in 15 Alaska Native communities in interior and western Alaska. The poster board that I have behind me indicates some of the elderly gentlemen who may be receiving these letters in the next several weeks.

This decision is tragic. It is tragic because it affects veterans who defended Alaska and who defended the United States from the Japanese during World War II. It is a tragedy because these people were led to believe they would be compensated for their service to our Nation. It is a tragedy because most of the people I am talking about, most of these gentlemen, are Eskimos--among the first people of the United States, members of a class of people to whom the United States Government has broken its promises time and time again. It is a tragedy because they were misled into believing their retirement pay was increasing. It is a further tragedy because this bad news is going to be communicated in a letter signed by a branch chief in the Army Human Resources Command. These people deserve an apology from the Secretary of Defense. They do not need to be receiving this news about this error from a branch chief in the Army Human Resources Command.

It is also a tragedy because some of these people in the Department of Defense chose to implement this decision in the dead of an Alaska winter, when we know that our Native elders in rural Alaska are most vulnerable. Right now, in the village of Kwig and in Noatak and in the other communities, it is dark, it is cold, and resources are scarce. The increase in retirement pay, which was implemented just this last June, was very welcome news to those who were receiving it. It came at a time when the cost of fuel was rising to levels in our rural communities that people simply could not pay.

If you will recall, back home in June and July, in the cities, we were paying \$4.50, \$5 a gallon for our fuel. But out in the villages they were paying \$7, \$8 a gallon, and in some areas even higher than that. Throughout the State, but particularly in rural Alaska last summer, folks were anxious about whether they were going to be able to afford to heat their homes this winter.

Last week, in the Indian Affairs Committee, the Presiding Officer had an opportunity to join us, and I was able to put on the record the plight of some of the Native people in the community of Emmonak who have literally had to choose between buying stove oil to heat their homes or whether they should buy food for their families.

I guess some of the good news we have learned is that none of these letters informing these elders that they will see a reduction in benefits is going to the village of Emmonak, but I would suspect many of the villages to which these letters are going are no better off. You just have to ask the question: How can our government be so insensitive--taking money, taking retirement benefits out of the pockets of our elders, of our seniors, at a time of the year when they are absolutely the most vulnerable?

I hope I have gained the attention of some, and with the indulgence of my colleagues, I would like to fill in a little bit of the background. I will not be talking too long--I know one of our Senators is waiting--but it is an interesting story, and I think he will appreciate it.

The Alaska Territorial Guard was created in June of 1942 in response to increasing Japanese activity and attacks on and around Alaska. At

the time, the U.S. Army was reassigning our Alaska National Guard soldiers away from the State, and so there were no ground troops left to protect Alaska. So Earnest Gruening, who was the territorial governor at the time, called for volunteers to defend our great land up there in the north. Some 6,389 Alaskans answered the call. These volunteers came to be known as the Eskimo Scouts, but they were representative of all of Alaska. They were Inupiat Eskimos, Yupik Eskimos, Aleut people, Athabaskan and Tlingit Indians, and there were Caucasians.

With no pay and very little equipment, these volunteers--these Eskimo Scouts--patrolled 5,400 miles of coastline to fend off a possible Japanese invasion. They shot down Japanese air balloons carrying bombs and eavesdropping radios. They rescued downed airmen, they transported equipment and supplies, they constructed airstrips and support facilities, they manned the field hospital outpost, and they engaged the enemy in combat.

You see the picture behind me of the Eskimo Scout in his snowshoes standing guard, standing ready. These men answered the call of our country and they defended our homeland. The Territorial Guard stood as the first line of defense for the terrain around the Lend-Lease area, the route from America to Russia, and it was this vital lifeline that allowed the United States to supply our Russian ally with essential military aircraft and proved essentially crucial to Russia's defense against Hitler's Germany.

In March of 1947, the Eskimo Scouts were disbanded, but many of them went on to continue to serve our Nation in the Army and the Alaska National Guard. For more than half a century after the Territorial Guard was disbanded, these brave and truly dedicated volunteers received not one ounce of recognition from our Federal Government for the service they had performed. It wasn't until the year 2000 that Senator Stevens succeeded in adding language to the Defense appropriations bill to recognize the Territorial Guard, and that legislation required the Secretary of Defense to treat the Alaska Territorial Guard just like any other soldiers and to require them to issue discharge certificates to those who remain alive.

I was privileged to be at a couple of ceremonies where some of these elders received their official discharge certificates, and it was incredibly moving to be with them when, after decades, their Government finally recognized their service. The Secretary of Veterans Affairs was also directed to treat these people as any other veteran of the Armed Forces of the United States.

I do understand and we are told that the Department of Defense was slow to implement the mandate of this legislation. I can tell you from my own experience in dealing with many of the veterans and their families, the efforts to get these discharge certificates in a timely fashion has been very frustrating--frustrating for the families, frustrating for those who have served, most certainly, and frustrating for those of us who have been trying to make it happen. Some former members of the Territorial Guard are still waiting to get their discharge certificates. We have been assisted by a wonderful volunteer, Bob Goodman, who lives in Anchorage. He helps the former members of the Territorial Guard document their service, and he tells me that unless we can get this turned around, unless we can kind of move through this roadblock, we are going to see more of these fine Americans who will pass on before they get their long-awaited recognition.

I just don't understand. I can't understand why it took nearly 8 years--8 years--for the Defense Department to recognize the Alaska Territorial Guard's service for military retirement benefits. But, as I mentioned, back in June of 2008, they did it. Apparently, that decision did not please some at the Defense Department. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, we learned they made a case that the members of the Territorial Guard are not eligible for retirement benefits. This was all happening over there at the Department under the radar of Secretary Geren here in Washington. The Secretary says there is nothing we can do at this point in time; the retirement benefits have been reduced on the computers of the Defense Finance and Accounting Service and the payments are going to go down effective February 1.

I am not going to stand here and blame the lawyers for telling their clients that the policy of crediting Alaska Territorial Guard service toward retirement pay doesn't comport with the law. But at the same time, the Defense Department hasn't released that legal opinion, so I can't judge--the presiding officer can't judge--whether this conclusion is really compelled by the law. If the conclusion was compelled by the law, I suppose we can't call out the lawyers for saying so. But I do fault their clients, the leaders who knew this was coming. They knew it was coming, but they didn't bother to tell any of the members of the Alaska Congressional Delegation.

I was not notified; you were not notified, Mr. President; our Member in the House of Representatives--nobody came to us late last year and said: Hey, we have a problem. We have a problem, and it requires a legislative fix. Can we work together, can we do something either at the end of the 110th Congress or immediately at the outset of this new Congress?

The senior leaders in the Army and DOD didn't even acknowledge that there was a problem until you and I contacted the Secretary of the Army and asked: Is there a problem? We hear there is stuff floating around. What is going on?

As far as I was concerned, the reason we suspected there was a problem was because the adjutant general of Alaska, after trying to work through this problem at his level and through the chain of command, told us something was coming and it was going to be coming imminently.

Then just last week, Army Secretary Geren confirmed those fears, the fear that it will be real, that the retirement pay will be cut effective February 1. He says there is nothing he can do about it.

This afternoon, the members of the Alaska Congressional Delegation are writing to the administration, asking that he intervene to ensure that those Native elders who are affected by this tragic series of events do not lose this safety net.

Senator Begich and I are also preparing legislation that clarifies that service in the Alaska Territorial Guard is to be regarded as Active-Duty service for purposes of calculating retirement pay. We need to clear up that vagueness in the statutes.

I would just say, as I am able to speak here on the floor of the Senate, to Secretary Gates, if you are within the sound of my voice, I believe you owe an apology to these people. It was just a month ago that the Army Chief of Staff sent a letter of apology to 7,000 surviving families of the global war on terror who received letters addressed to John Doe. The blunder I speak of today affects far fewer people, but it is

certainly no less of a blunder. I think we recognize we have just gone through a transition, moving from one administration to the other. Things happen during a transition period--things just happen. Sometimes policy blunders can occur. These things do happen, and then it falls upon Congress and the administration to come back and fix things.

I pledge to the Alaskans, and I know the Presiding Officer and our colleague in the House, Representative Young--I think we all make the commitment to do everything we can to clean up what we are dealing with here. But I am left to wonder, what kind of a government, what kind of a Cruella, could cut retirement benefits to a group of Eskimos in their eighties, in the dead of an Alaskan winter, and say: Sorry, there is nothing we can do.

It is time for some soul searching at the Pentagon. I am looking for answers. I know you are looking for answers. We are looking for solutions, and there is really very little time left.

I thank the Presiding Officer. Know that we will find positive solutions for those who have served us honorably.