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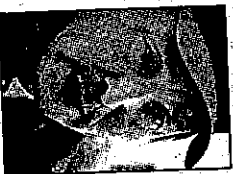
James Hoelscher is Hooper Bay's police chief. His officers' desire to carry firearms and the village leaders' refusal to permit them have caused a rift. Town leaders fear firearms will make the village more dangerous. Police say town leaders are being unreasonable.

Photos by Al Grubb / The Associated Press

# Cops feel cuffed without firearms

## Hooper Bay leaders fear guns would make village more dangerous

By RACHEL D'ORO  
The Associated Press



HOOPER BAY — When Hooper Bay's seven police officers go on patrol, they tend to deal with small-town peacekeeping duties, not the violent crime of their big-city cousins. And that's fortunate, for Hooper Bay is the only known municipality in the United States whose police officers are forbidden from carrying firearms.

The desire of officers to carry arms and the refusal of village leaders to permit them have caused a rift between the two. Town leaders fear firearms will just make the village more dangerous, even in the hands of cops. Police say town leaders are being unreasonable.

"Unpredictable, unexpected things don't happen here often, but they do happen," said Police Chief James Hoelscher, 27, who has lived in Hooper Bay since he was 13 and became a village police officer at 18. "A little Yup'ik Eskimo village is not immune to what can happen in Anchorage or Los Angeles or anywhere else."

Village leaders are unconvinced. Elmer Simon, tribal government administrator, said he would support properly trained officers using guns — but only in emergency situations. Otherwise, he



Hooper Bay, among the last remaining communities in Alaska without running water or a sewer system, is the only known municipal government that forbids its officers from carrying guns.

said, they should keep them locked up.

"A lot of young people wouldn't hesitate — especially if they're under the influence of alcohol — to grab a handgun from the officers and use it against them," Simon said. "Not that we're against handguns. But accidents do happen."

Hooper Bay is a village of 1,100 on the windblown Bering Sea coast, about 515 miles west of Anchorage. It is among the last communities in Alaska without run-

ning water or a sewage system.

The village has existed for more than a century, incorporating as a city in 1966. It has steadily grown in recent years despite high unemployment and few job opportunities. Commercial fishing and subsistence fishing and hunting are the primary means of support. Well over a third of the population is unemployed and receiving water or a sewage system.

See Back Page, GUNS

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### COMPLICA avoid entang

By ADAM NAGOU with ELISABETH I The New York Times

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INSIDE

TIGER CAT SHREDS U.S. IMAGE

military

has in Afghanistan. In an e-mail response to questions about the rumors, Col. ... vis, of the base media office, ... the villagers' assertions that American forces had released the tiger cats, but he did not say whether the Americans thought it important to correct the misconceptions.

"No, we don't use cats, killer cats, al-Qaida cats, mountain cats, tiger cats, pussy cats or any other cats to execute combat operations," he wrote.

In the dusty main streets of the villages around here, there's always a young, brash fellow on the edge of the crowd whose claim to familiarity with the pisho palang trumps everyone else's. He saw one just last night. He killed one recently. Or he can sell you one.

But a ... the crowd: "That wasn't a pisho palang. It was a baby fox."

At times, the alleged American motives for releasing the pisho palang and supposed delivery methods strain common sense.

"We heard that foreigners are releasing them at night from planes to eat people. We heard that usually the tiger cats attack the throat and drink all the blood," said Mohammad Saber, also from Saidkhail.

Air delivery? But wouldn't the fall kill the cats?

"They fly really low," said Koko Gul,

pay more, ...

In Qoochi village north of ... Afraz, 50, tells a rollicking tale, waving his arms, leaping up at times, to illustrate his heroism in bare-handedly wrestling and killing a pisho palang that had attacked a boy three or four months ago.

The tiger cat "attacked like an alcoholic man," he began. "He went for my throat. I grabbed his throat with my left hand and beat him to the ground."

## GUNS: Chief fights to change policy

Continued from A-1

ing public assistance.

And no one can remember a time when police carried guns.

Hooper Bay leaders cite concerns over potential mishaps or misuse of authority, even by professionally trained officers. Hoelscher and two other officers graduated last fall from the University of Alaska Fairbanks' law enforcement academy.

Both The Fraternal Order of Police and the International Association of Chiefs of Police said they were unaware of any other organized municipality in the nation whose officers don't carry guns.

But Hooper Bay police have never carried firearms, old-timers say. And until the current flap, it's never been an issue.

"We're not a big enough village to justify carrying guns," said City Administrator Raphael Murran.

The chief said there's good reason for his officers to carry firearms. In fact, he keeps his own gun locked up at the station and, policy or not, he has taken it on a few potentially risky calls. It's not always possible to wait for armed help from state troopers in Bethel, 150 miles away, he said.

"I'd rather be fired than killed," said the married father of four. "I have a family to go home to."

Police regularly deal with such potential flashpoints as domestic violence and liquor-fueled assaults in Hooper Bay, which bans the sale or importation of alcohol, Hoelscher said. In June, police logged 104 alcohol-related calls and seven domestic violence reports. They made 33 criminal arrests on charges including assault, harassment, eluding police and furnishing alcohol to a minor.

Then there was the choking incident.

In December 2001, police answering an assault call ran into a drunk and combative man

who lunged at an officer and choked him until the officer blacked out, according to court documents. The officer recovered, and the man served time in jail after pleading no contest to assaulting a police officer.

Hoelscher thinks the assault might not have occurred if the officer had been wearing a sidearm, even if it was never drawn.

"It's hard to guess what would have happened if the officer was armed," Hoelscher said. "But if people know you're armed, they might think a little harder."

Or react more aggressively, opponents say.

"Knowing an officer is armed may amplify the situation," said Simon, the tribal administrator. "All areas have to be considered. It's a serious issue."

In May, Hoelscher, five officers and three dispatchers threatened to resign in protest over what they perceive as micromanagement and a lack of support by city officials.

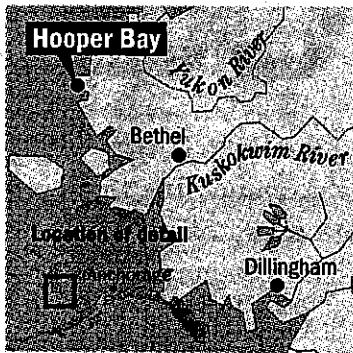
In his May 5 resignation letter, Hoelscher said other council policies and budget cuts undermined the department. He's running the department now on an annual budget of \$330,000, compared with \$490,000 two years ago, when he had 10 officers.

Ten days later, city officials met with police and voted unanimously to reject the resignations, then gave the department a vote of confidence. Guns were not mentioned at the meeting, but Hoelscher and his staff agreed to stay if the city would let police do their jobs.

"It's working out great so far," Hoelscher said. The gun issue, however, "needs to be brought up eventually. But it's a political hot potato."

Hoelscher plans to address the council after he and the two other academy-trained officers are fully certified in early November after field training by Alaska State Troopers this summer.

Mayor David Bunyan said he would support trained police officers' carrying guns at all times.



RON ENGSTROM / Anchorage Daily News



Hooper Bay police officer Harold Bell ... village of 1,100 people on the windb ... among the last communities in Alaska

He praised the current police department for cutting down on crime in a village free of rampant lawlessness, primarily because of the inherent risk of abuse.

"Training is a whole package, a part of that training package," Bunyan said. City Councilman David Green, Hooper Bay police officer, said he opposes the change because of the inherent risk of abuse.

"They would start showing their teeth it," he said. "I could see the officer coming out and doing tricks and the gun charging. Or if they arrest someone, the suspect would take their gun."

Trooper 1st Sgt. Duke Ballard, a trooper veteran, said he has mixed feelings about arming Hooper Bay police.

On one hand, there's the village's safety. But on the other, people are used to

Saidkhail, said caught a pisho some kind of for- he claimed. can came and r \$5,000, but my Rahim said. r a cat? ht now, they're ybe later they'll ounted. rth of Kabul, Gul ing tale, waving at times, to il- in bare-handed g a pisho palang oy three or four cked like an al- un. "He went for is throat with my n to the ground

him in the head again and again. And then he died." Gul Afraz says he buried the body.

He mentions an Afghan magazine with his name in it and a picture of the pisho palang. But it was merely a crudely drawn artist's impression, a Dracula-feline cross with big fangs, terrifying expression and arched back.

In neighboring Dogh Abad village, the boy who was attacked, Rahim Dinn, 8, pulls back a ragged shirt to display scars on his chest and leg. He describes how the cat attacked before his sister, Mina, and Gul Afraz intervened.

In Qoochi village, Afsar Kahn, 11, has scars on his torso from an attack in February.

His cousin Abdul Hadi, 28, killed that cat but was bitten and died a month later, his body racked by trembling, said Hadi's father, Mirza Mo-

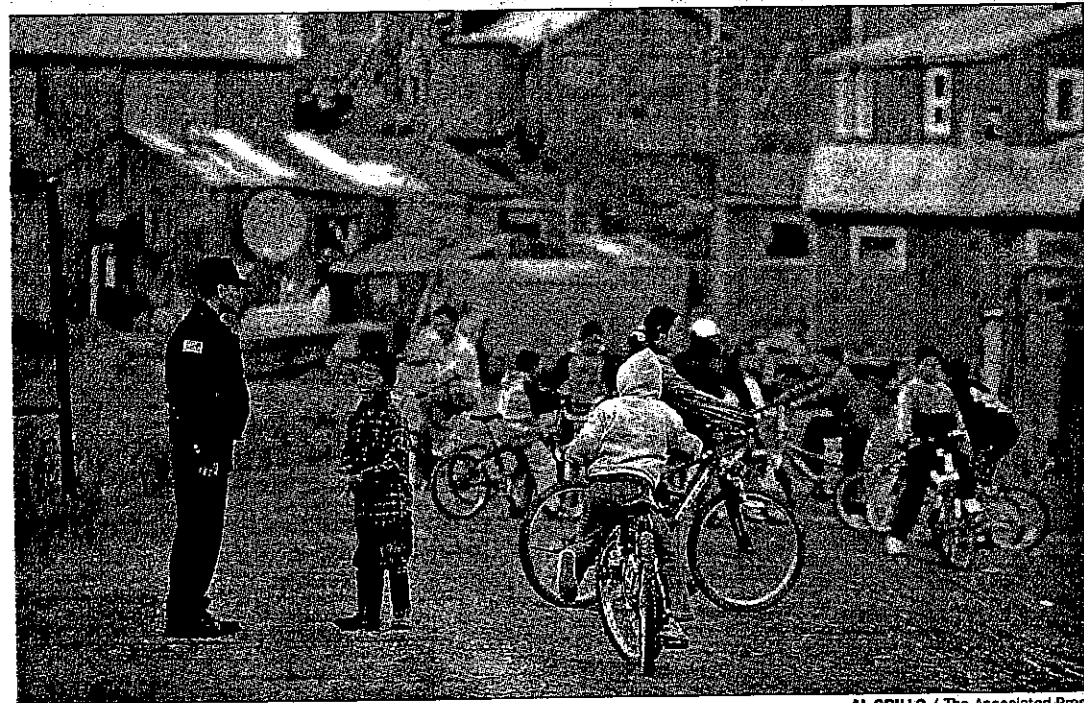
think they brought them for security, the way other people have dogs. Or maybe they just like to keep them."

Some people grumble darkly that the American military could have imposed a curfew in the area but found the pisho palang a more effective tool.

In Charikar, the main town in the area, police major Turyalai, 34, said two dead specimens each had foreign-style white nylon collars around their necks, which proved that they had been kept and trained by humans.

Fellow policeman Ghulam Sarwar said local people were angry and blamed Americans. But he chortled dismissively when asked if police had investigated the matter with U.S. military authorities at Bagram.

"If we went to the Americans, they'd say, 'No, we didn't release them.' And who can tell them, 'Yes, you did do it?'"



AL GRILLO / The Associated Press

Hooper Bay police officer Harold Bell talks to children playing around a barge recently. Hooper Bay is a village of 1,100 people on the windblown Bering Sea coast, about 515 miles west of Anchorage. It is among the last communities in Alaska without running water or a sewage system.

He praised the current police department for cutting down on crime in a village with a history of rampant lawlessness, primarily before residents voted to outlaw alcohol in 1983.

"Training is a whole package, and gun use is part of that training package," Bunyan said.

City Councilman David Green, a former village police officer, said he opposes armed officers because of the inherent risk of abuse.

"They would start showing them off. I guarantee it," he said. "I could see the officer taking it out and doing tricks and the gun accidentally discharging. Or if they arrest somebody I'm afraid he suspect would take their gun."

Trooper 1st Sgt. Duke Ballard, a 23-year state trooper veteran, said he has mixed feelings about forming Hooper Bay police.

On one hand, there's the village's unruly past. But on the other, people are used to guns being

restricted to state troopers, not local police. Then there's the cost of liability insurance, training, ammunition and weapons recertification.

"It's not a simple matter of buying a box of bullets and a gun," Ballard said.

John Olson, a lifelong Hooper Bay resident who manages the village grocery store, said many locals are uncomfortable with the idea because they think it's unnecessary, even dangerous. What if the officer dropped the gun in a scuffle? What if the wrong person got it? What if someone got hurt — or worse?

"In this town, everyone knows everyone, a lot of people are related to each other," Olson said. "If a cop accidentally shot someone, I could see a bunch of relatives going after them."

"I personally don't mind if police carry guns. But I don't see it happening here."