CEC Internal News

Culture

Field Service Engineers Serve Far Afield in Remote Alaska

CEC Posting Date: 2009-Apr-15

Engineers Jeff Ogden and Kelly Cobos of the Optical Field Services team on their adventurous assignment to remote Eskimo villages scattered across the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta of southwestern Alaska.

See more photos of Jeff Odgen's and Kelly Cobos' "business trip" to Alaska in this slide show.

It was 8 o'clock on a February morning in Bethel, Alaska. Out on the horizon, across the frozen tundra, a crescent moon still hung low in the darkness, with neither a tree nor a hill to obstruct it. Two Cisco field service engineers stood outside the offices of UUI-Unicom, a telecommunications provider, waiting for the customer to show up and put them to work.

The windchill conditions had brought the mercury down to a searing minus-47 degrees Fahrenheit, and as the engineers sucked in the bitterly cold air, it felt as if any moisture lurking in their nasal passages was freezing up. They made sure that the extreme-weather gear they had brought with them from the U.S. "lower 48" covered every inch of skin possible, because any exposed area would tingle and ache.

The engineers, Jeff Ogden and Kelly Cobos, part of the Optical Field Services team within U.S./Canada TAC, had accepted an adventurous assignment. They were there to service a far-flung collection of remote Eskimo villages scattered across the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta of southwestern Alaska with no roads between them. These villages, all part of the same Unicom fiber-optic telecommunications ring, contained Cisco optical transport gear in need of inspection and replacement.

In each of 18 sites, a Cisco ONS 15454 Multiservice Provisioning Platform (MSPP) needed to be inspected for a potentially bad capacitor and replaced. This particular type of capacitor had recently caused a failure of a single 15454 MSPP for a different customer.

Such a failure was a rare occurrence for Cisco, given the thousands of such units installed, but the company did not want to take any chances on similar equipment in Alaska, according to Ed McCarthy, Senior Manager, Optical Field Services. A bad capacitor could spark and catch fire, destroy other equipment in a telecommunications facility, and lead to downed phone and Internet services in the network, adds Cobos.

The Decision to Go in February

To wait for spring weather to take care of the matter would have meant flooding and mud, and possibly an even more challenging expedition, and so February was chosen as the least of two evils.

In the villages, there would be 60, 80, or 100 houses plopped down in the middle of nowhere, and that was it. Jeff and I would look at each other and say, 'What do they do?' We still don't know.

Kelly Cobos, field service engineer

This fact was probably of small consolation to Ogden and Cobos as they met their Unicom representatives on that first frigid February day, boarded a bush plane to coastal villages on the Bering Sea, and rode crouched in the back of a sled attached to a snowmobile in order to get to the actual work site.

"It felt like our driver was doing 45 or 50 miles per hour over the frozen ice, given how hard we were getting knocked around in the back of the sled," says Ogden. "I was surprised that I had any teeth left when we were done."

Adds Cobos, "We took off in the sled and hit a bump, and it just so happened that my goggles moved over to one side. It was either let go of the handles to fix my goggles and get thrown out, or try to shield myself as best I could, and that's what I did. But I still got a little patch of windburn or frostbite on my cheekbone near my eye."

At one site visited during their first day in Alaska, Ogden ventured up Ugchirnak Mountain near the village of Tununak on the Bering Sea. Beneath the antenna tower at the top was the equipment room, or "telco hut," containing the unit for inspection. Around the tower was a chain-link fence. The hard-packed snow was piled up so high that Ogden could step right over the 5 or 6 feet of fencing.

"The 100-foot antenna tower looked like an ice sculpture," says Ogden "You've seen icicles forming on the roofs of buildings, and they're vertical. But, at that site, all of the ice looked like it was flowing horizontally because the wind just didn't stop blowing there. It just seemed a really harsh place to be, and yet people were living there."

Thank goodness for Ogden and Cobos, the telco huts at these sites were heated inside so that the engineers could focus in relative comfort on their inspection and replacement work.

Snowmobile Thrills and Chills

Later in the trip, when the weather had warmed up to something approaching zero, the engineers found themselves on snowmobiles making the ascent of Kalskag Hill. Cobos was a passenger in his snowmobile while Ogden tried his hand at operating one of the machines himself. Ogden dumped his snowmobile a couple times in rough patches while learning to get the hang of it on the ungroomed trails.

"I figured out how to shift my weight," says Ogden. "You really have to stand. Similar to when you're in a motorcycle turn, you lean. You have to do it fairly fast; you can't shift your weight fast enough if you remain sitting and you just try to scoot to the left or right. And I saw the local guy up ahead, when it got rough like that, he immediately went to his feet and shifted one way or the other. And so I mimicked what he was doing and that was the trick—I didn't dump it after that."

Cobos and his driver also tipped over and got stuck going up Kalskag Hill.

"When we got stuck," says Cobos, "we jumped off into the thigh-high snow and tried to dig out the snow with our hands, and then leverage as much strength as we had to lift the snowmobile into new snow so that it could get traction there. It was like a tire in the mud where you can't get enough traction."

Life in the "Last Frontier" State

The red arrow points to the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, one of the largest river deltas in the world, located where the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers empty into the Bering Sea.

When Ogden and Cobos weren't getting an adrenaline rush battling the elements as part of a day's work out in the field for Cisco, they had to accommodate to some other forms of culture shock. For one thing, when the weather was not good enough for the two engineers to travel to some of the villages to work, they remained holed up in Bethel without much to keep them stimulated during the downtime.

"There's no movie theater, there's no mini-golf, there's no bowling alley, nothing," says Ogden. "They do have these little social dances on Friday nights and Saturday nights, and that's about the only thing that I was aware of in terms of organized entertainment for the public."

"Snow machining is pretty popular," he adds. "You could hear them racing around at night."

The Eskimo villages seemed to have even less going on in the dead of winter. "In the villages, there would be 60, 80, or 100 houses plopped down in the middle of nowhere, and that was it," says Cobos. "Jeff and I would look at each other and say, 'What do they do?' We still don't know."

Food prices represented another shock. According to Cobos, a gallon of milk was $10, and a 1-liter bottle of Coke was $3.65.

"You felt guilty about eating," adds Ogden. "We stopped at a grocery store, and were going to get some bread and lunch meat and maybe some mayo so that we could make sandwiches to take with us, and they were out of sliced bread and stuff. The stores and restaurants are really tied to those supply planes being able to land and make their deliveries."

Cisco 11, Mother Nature 7

Bad weather prevented the two stalwart engineers from replacing 15454 MSPPs at 7 of the 18 sites, a source of disappointment to them. The weather also made it difficult to get out of Bethel for the flight to Anchorage and back to the continental United States. The engineers are eager to return to get the job done, however.

In all, Ogden and Cobos spent 18 days in Alaska trying to make sure that the optical equipment was in optimal shape up there on the frozen tundra. Says McCarthy of his two engineers, "They're great guys and hard-working guys, and really represent the face of Cisco out to the customers."

"We talk a lot about our badge and our culture," he adds, "and what we do to get the customer right, and then we really do execute it when it comes down to it. We definitely walk the walk."

Yes, walk the walk, and ride the bush plane, drive the snowmobile, bounce along in the back of the sled in subzero temperatures, clamber over snowdrifts, and dig your way into ice-coated equipment towers to keep the world connected.

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