

Sgt. Daniel Max Olick reflects on 37 years, serving as a VPSO in Kwethluk, Alaska – the longest career in the history of the statewide VPSO Program

The Village Public Safety Officer Program began in the late 1970s to provide public safety at the local level, in rural Alaska. VPSOs are funded through the State of Alaska Department of Public Safety, through grants to nonprofit tribal organizations and one municipal government in rural Alaska. The VPSO program began in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta through the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP), a nonprofit tribal consortium of 56 tribes.

Sgt. Daniel Max Olick became an AVCP VPSO on May 4, 1983. He was one of the first VPSOs and holds the record for the longest running career as a VPSO in the State of Alaska and the history of the VPSO Program. He will have served his community, Kwethluk, Alaska, for 37 years, when he retires on Friday, May 15, 2020.

The following documents Max's reflections upon retirement. It includes stories and observations from his childhood friend, Robert Nick; and his direct supervisor and fellow VPSO, Alvin B. Jimmie Sr., AVCP VPSO Coordinator.

"Thought I was invincible..."

Before becoming a VPSO, Max served as a Village Police Officer (VPO), employed by the City of Kwethluk, Alaska. The first person to encourage Max to become a VPSO was Susan Bell, an Alaska State Trooper. "She asked me if I wanted to give it a try," says Max. "She mentioned that they pay was \$6.00 to \$7.00 an hour, and that was 1983, about this time of the year." Max still has his first paystub.

"It's like I was hired yesterday!" says Max. "The years go by so fast. And now I'm right here, ready to retire."

Max went to VPSO training toward the end of 1983 for about three months. "I enjoyed it." he says. "I was 20-something years-old back then. Thought I was invincible, you know."

"When I first started working we had carbon copies..."

A lot has changed since Max went to training in the early 1980s. "When I first started working we had carbon copies, you know. One for the D.A., one for the Troopers, one for my records." explains Max. "But you had to press hard, not to make any kind of mistakes."

Now Max has two laptops: one for AVCP and one for the State of Alaska Department of Public Safety. "I'm one of the people that's trying to keep up with technology: new phones, new computers, new ways of writing reports." says Max. "Other VPSOs, that are very familiar with computers, don't have a problem with that. By the time I got familiar with them... now I'm going to say 'Bye. I'm not going to miss you!'" laughs Max.

"Mushing and drugs and alcohol do not match..."

Growing up in Kwethluk, Max's father had a dog team. Max says, "One time or another... most of the people in the community used to have dogs... but like I said, technology came around. Snow machines came around. Four-wheelers came around. And only a handful have dog teams, here in Kwethluk."

When Max came back home from high school, he says, “I found out we had not even one dog in the yard.” Max’s father had bought a new snow machine and had given the dogs to Max’s uncle. Max took some of the dogs and started raising them. 40 years later, Max has 16 running dogs, and a few pets. “I knew what I was getting into.” he says. “We didn’t do very good at first, but when we caught on, we got quite a few wins on our belt.”

Max encourages the younger generations to keep dog sled teams. “It’s not easy but, if somebody tries hard they can succeed... mushing and drugs and alcohol do not match, you know? They don’t mix.”

Max’s grandson won a race when he was just 14 or 15 years old. “They didn’t want him to race because he was too young,” says Max. “But the Kuskokwim-300 Board decided to let him run, and he won that race – 150-mile race. I was pretty proud of him.” Max’s son-in-law from Tuntutuliak won races four or five times. “That’s good enough for us.” says Max.

“I told my wife 12 kids would be fine...”

Max married when he was 21 or 22 years old. He says, “When I first got married, I told my wife, ‘12 kids would be fine.’ She said ‘No.’ And I went down to nine, and she said, ‘No.’ ‘What about eight?’ She said, ‘No.’ And went down to five... she said, ‘We’ll see.’” Max laughs, “So I got five kids.”

Together, Max and his wife have three girls and two boys. “They’ve got children of their own,” says Max. “We’ve got grandkids – maybe eight of them.”

Max’s mother, Annabell, is originally from Tuntutuliak, Alaska, and the Tundra Villages. She talked about the old villages that no longer exist. Max’s wife’s father is from the Tundra Villages, near Nunapitchuk, Alaska. Her mother is from Akiak, Alaska. Max’s father was from Kwethluk, Alaska, where Max still lives. His father was one of the last reindeer herders.

Max says, “So we’ve got relatives all over, I guess. No matter where you go, you’ll find somebody that you’re related to, you know.”

“He is my iluq.”

Robert Nick is from Nunapitchuk, Alaska. When he was a child, his father would take the whole family on trips to Kwethluk (Max’s hometown) for church holidays and conferences. Robert explains that he has known Max since he was a youngster.

“He’s my iluq,” says Robert. “What iluq means (with men), is they’re cousins. He teases me a lot.”

“I joke with him that he is *finally* retiring!” says Robert. “He was one of the first VPSO in the VPSO program. And he’s trained a lot of his fellow public safety coworkers.”

“He’s a teaser....”

Robert explains: “As iluqs we tease each other with no holds barred. So he [Max] teased me a lot and I’ve teased him a lot. So, when he had been a VPSO for quite of number of years, there was a movement in one... probably two villages... for a federal program – for a Federal Marshals program. And I used to –

me and one of my cousins – we used to tease him, that he’s a ‘United States Marshal.’ So... *laughs*... he doesn’t like that, but we used to tease him a lot. A U.S. Marshal...”

The first search and rescue fiddling fundraiser “occurred in his [Max’s] home village [Kwethluk], trying to raise money for their searches.” says Robert. “Because, at the time, the State did not fund search and rescue... They started having these annual fiddling’s in Kwethluk, and in Bethel, to raise money for search and rescue. The Iluqs, they got him into a predicament there... *laughs*... They made him sing [karaoke]! A lot of the other VPSOs... they work closely together... a lot of friends that used to work as a VPSO.”

Robert remembers: “And one time [in winter], when I went to stop by Kwethluk – I was probably on my way home from either Akiak or Akiakchak – I stopped by to visit him [Max]. I saw his house, just a little ways from the school... His steam bath is right there where you drive up [from the river to the village]. He had a big pile of steam bath wood. And I asked, ‘who’s steam house is that?’, [at the place] where trucks drive up to the village. And they told me, ‘that’s Max Olick’s steam bath.’ And I said, ‘Oh, he’s got a lot of wood!’ (This guy was my Iluq too.) So I teased... (even though Max wasn’t there) I said, ‘Maybe I just drive down some time at night and load up my truck and then go home with some of those logs.’ But somehow word got to Max... (This guy told him I guess.) He said to Max, ‘You know, Nick was teasing that he was going to come down and take some of your wood.’ And Max told him to tell me, if he misses one log, he was going to have the Troopers arrest me! So, I didn’t need to because I had many logs myself, for steam baths, but there are many things that I’ve done with Max, many jokes that we do. He’s going to be missed in Kwethluk.”

“I stuck on this long ...”

Working in his hometown as a VPSO affected Max’s family, especially at first. “When I first got on, it affected my family, and affected me,” says Max, “because I was working in my own community, dealing with my own people. Dealing with relatives and taking all the stuff from them. I didn’t know how to cope with that. I burnt-out a number of times, but whatever we do at work, we don’t bring it home. But she [Max’s wife] is a certified teacher and she talks about her work. She loves her work. But me... sometimes she asks me questions when something bad happens in the community and I usually tell her this and that... but other than that, she knows not to ask any questions about how my days go.”

When Max entered his third decade as a VPSO, his wife started asking him when he planned to retire. He always told her, “I got no idea.” But Max did start thinking about retiring and he started talking about it. “I guess she got tired about me talking about retiring for the last 10 years. She quit asking.” Max laughs.

About three years ago, a liquor store opened in Bethel, Alaska (about 18 miles from Kwethluk). The liquor store has since closed, but when discussion about opening the store for the first time were just beginning, Max’s wife suggested that this might be a good time to retire. “But I didn’t do that.” says Max. “Like, if I quit, how do you put that... If I quit because of that... I run away from that. I wouldn’t do that. I stuck on this long...”

Being a VPSO is kind of like marriage.

Max has a lot of time to reflect on. He remembers the good days, when he was able to help, and the bad days, when he had to be the bearer of very bad news. “Kind of like a roller coaster ride, like marriage: one day you’re on top and the next day you’re down there struggling... that’s how I compare it.” says Max.

Max recalls one of the higher points on the roller coaster: “There was one man who got stranded out there, possibly in November, here in Kwethluk. It was raining, it was snowing, it was wet. The Troopers didn’t give up. We had one guy from here. Luckily we had a chopper, that came and picked up one of the searchers that had knowledge of our backcountry and they found that individual, alive.” If the searcher with the knowledge of the land had not directed the chopper, Max does not think that individual would have survived much longer. Max was there to see the family’s reaction when they brought the man home. “You see how the family reacts, from seeing him alive. That’s something you remember for the rest of your life.” Max explains that in the life of a VPSO, days like this, “make a lot of difference.”

Even when Max and his fellow search and rescue teams recovered a deceased body, ending that search can be a relatively high day on the roller coaster. “If we know that he’s underneath the water and we recover that body and return that body to the family for proper burial, you have a feeling that you’ve done something to help the family to do the last things for their relative or their son.” says Max.

Max believes those good days on the roller coaster give you something. “It makes you want to be a VPSO forever, but forever is not in my book nowadays.”

Search & Rescue

In Max’s career, he has been on countless search and rescue expeditions. Max says, “I have great respect for search and rescue up and down the Yukon and Kuskokwim region. They know how to do that from long years of searching for lost individuals.”

“Being there makes a big difference.” says Max. “If I see someone I’ve been searching with for 30 years, it gives me a boost. It gives me one more mile.”

Max explains: “Every time something happens, like a drowning, here in Kwethluk (knock on wood that we’ll do okay this summer)... that individual that we know – a relative or a best friend’s son or daughter, or the father or mother – that’s one of the tough things you have to take care of, the way it should be taken care of.”

“The victim is somebody you know...”

“The victim is [always] somebody you know, or you know the family pretty close.” says Max. “That’s one of the [reasons for] turnover in this region. We used to have 40 VPSOs in this region. For VPSOs that are working in their own communities, arresting their own relatives – friends, council members – doesn’t matter who it is – it’s pretty tough.”

Max notes that when someone is arrested in a city (he uses Anchorage, Alaska, as an example), in most cases the officer has never met the person they are arresting. “But out in the Bush, if you’re working in your own community, you’re arresting your own relatives, or your best friends, or someone you’ve known all your life.” he says. “It’s the same thing with VPOs and TPOs. They have high turnover in the communities because of that. I don’t know if I can say, you’ve got to get used to that, but...”

“Too tough”

People who knew Max in his youth describe him as ‘gung-ho.’ He was very enthusiastic, even when responding to dangerous calls.

“One thing that pulled me down is taking care of victims of dog mauling or fire.” Says Max. “It’s pretty tough. I try to brush them underneath the rug, but they always come back. I can’t describe how I feel now about that, but it took me a while to get one incident... a couple incidents... three... out of my system.”

Max cannot forget one incident in which two young children died in a housefire. “And I know the father, I know the relatives... and it was pretty hard to tell them that they cannot view the bodies, but to remember them [the children] how you saw them this morning.” Max took care of the children’s bodies. They were buried still holding on to each other.

He recalls that when the medical team came to speak with the family, “they kind of overlook me, you know... They don’t see me... I know.” He was not debriefed by medical teams.

Another haunting day, Max remember trying to take a child’s body from under a house, but a dog would not let him. “That dog, growling at me, preventing me from taking that body out.” Max recalls. “And finally, I had to shoot that dog in order to take that kid (8-year-old) out from underneath the house.”

“These are things I don’t want to take care of no more. Too tough.” says Max. “Like I said, I thought I was tough. But when it comes to those [incidents]... That [handling human remains] is one of the things VPSOs don’t want to handle in their career but they have to. They are first responders, to anything that happens in their village.”

“I try to keep things to myself, but they usually come back.”

VPSOs in the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta, stay in close contact and tease each other relentlessly, even though they are far apart. Only one VPSO is stationed within a given community. It is difficult to process these experiences alone.

When a bad incident happens, “when I sit there and say nothing...” says Max, “my wife will ask me, ‘What happened?’ I usually say nothing unless it needs to be revealed to them.”

Max says he tries to keep things to himself, but they usually come back. Smells of deteriorating bodies can stay with him for four or five days, “Even if you put Vick’s in your nose.” he explains. Those smells can come back to him.

Max’s supervisor, AVCP VPSO Coordinator, Alvin B. Jimmie Sr. is also a lifelong VPSO. “In training it was called crisis intervention stress management.” says Alvin. “That’s what we established in regional trainings every year. That was one of our pushes for success for VPSOs – to give them that opportunity to talk and take out personal feelings: good or bad, sad or happy. And once we started not doing that, that’s when things started dwindling down and VPSOs started to begin having effects with traumatic situations.”

Now VPSOs have access via phone, to professionals trained in discussing these on-the-job experiences. “That’s one avenue we’re utilizing,” says Alvin. “But as a traditional custom to us Natives, it’s not easy.”

Alvin explains: “If I [just] met you, maybe for the first day, I’m not going to open up. It’s going to take time. Each person has timeframes and people are different. And it seems to be this way.”

“Like for instance, with this conversation,” says Alvin, referencing the interview on May 11, 2020. “With this interview we’re having, we weren’t thinking of how much depth we’d go in to. It all comes with kind of cushioning it and having a little understanding, and building that relationship. And once you have the comfort zone, you’re able to share. That’s what I see right now. Max has finally taken things out that were in his mind. If he were just to retire in two weeks, when he [first] said it, it would probably be a lot harder to get himself through the situation. This one-month period: it kind of gives him that part where, ‘Hey! Reality is sinking in.’”

Words of Wisdom for Young or Prospective VPSOs

Although Max is now openly sharing his firsthand experiences, and stresses how tough it was to arrest friends and family, he also says, “I think they [prospective VPSOs] would work okay, working in their home communities, if they’re not working alone. But they’ve got to have good moral character – to be able to arrest relatives, friends, council members...”

“A person that takes things personally – that VPSO is not going to last very long.” says Max. “If they make it enjoyable, that is how their job is going to be. If they’re miserable and afraid to do things they’re supposed to be doing, they’re not going to do very good. They got to enjoy what they’re doing. If they make their job miserable, they’re not going to last very long. If I call you a whole bunch of names and you cannot take it, then you cannot be one.”

Alvin agrees wholeheartedly with Max. Alvin adds: “If you take things personally, or if you take things too seriously, it’s going to get you in the long run in your attitude. You’ve got to have the right attitude to be in this field. And if you have a short temper, you won’t last long... You’ve got to be open – open minded – and accept anything that comes, good or bad.”

During VPSO regional trainings, Max told young VPSOs a story about a call concerning a dead body on the other side of the river. VPOs responded to the call and immediately called the Alaska State Troopers. The Troopers told the VPOs to make a perimeter and notify the priest. “They sent out four TPOs/VPOs to work around that body.” says Max. “While they were doing that, one individual yelled: ‘He’s getting up! He’s alive!’ And they looked at that individual, and that individual that they reported dead, was hidden and watching them doing a perimeter in that area. And they had to go across [the river] to tell the priest, ‘Hey, that guy’s alive! You’ve got to go back to the family and tell them.’” Max laughs. “That priest was kind of pissed off, you know. Later on, we were told that family was kind of upset about that too. But the moral of the story is: you go over to the body, check whether he has a pulse, *then* call the Trooper or the priest for them.”

In telling this story later, a man once fell to the floor with laughter. He was laughing so hard he could not get up. “It’s not all gory.” says Max. “Like I said, being a VPSO is kind of like a roller coaster ride, like your marriage. Some days its good. Some days it’s not so good.”

When asked who will be taking over for Max, he says, “I’ve got no idea. I don’t know about that.” But he did mention that he believes there is VPSO housing available in Kwethluk, and it just need a little work. “My son was a VPSO for a number of years.” says Max. His son is now a correctional officer. “My dad used to be a... not police officer... but he used to help out when I was a youngster. But I always wanted to be one.”

Max remembers a critical moment when he was still an acting VPO. “The guy that I was arresting asked me, what are you charging me with.” Max says he told the man he was arresting, “I don’t know, but I’m going to find out!” Max immediately went to look up the statute for disorderly conduct. That was a critical moment in Max’s path toward becoming a VPSO.

“Sidearms, in my opinion, are not for me...”

Max did not carry a gun, in more than 40-years as a public safety officer, even when responding to gun calls. He has mixed feelings about VPSOs carrying guns.

“If you want to carry a gun, there’s Bethel P.D., there’s Troopers, municipal police... you can do that.” explains Max. “But the VPSO program has been on for about 40-some-years and the people in this region know that we don’t carry sidearms. That’s a big help right there.”

“This issue has been talked about so many times, and I’ve got mixed feeling on this.” says Max. “Like I said, if I shoot someone, here in Kwethluk, that’s a person I know. And I don’t think I can live with that. I don’t think I’d want to work in another village after that. I think I’d quit. That’s too much. But we’ve been lucky. I know that even VPOs and TPOs have been aimed at and thinking that they’re going to die. That’s part of our job, like it or not. It’s all in the line of duty. We knew what we were getting into – even though VPSOs are not recognized by the State of Alaska as police officers – hell that’s okay. We don’t need to carry a firearm. And people know that in this region. There’d be more deaths in this region – in my opinion, this is my opinion – killed by VPSOs or vice versa.”

However, Max recognizes that his own preference might change under different circumstances. He does believe that some VPSOs should carry firearms, especially if they are working in a rowdy community that has a problem with guns. It depends on the VPSO. For some public safety officers, it is a comfort to know they can protect themselves.

Max believes the issue of guns is up to the VPSO and the community. “I asked local governments here, before, about sidearms. They don’t want to see any of their boys carrying sidearms, working in the village. Sidearms, in my opinion, are not for me,” Max laughs, “unless I was working in Anchorage or Homer.”

“In our language there’s no word for retirement...”

“In our language there’s no word for retirement. The only time you retire is when you can’t continue doing what you’re doing.” says Max. “Like my great Uppa. When he can’t check his blackfish traps no more, his sons take over.”

Max also notes that there is no word for retirement in search and rescue. The regional search and rescue groups that the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta communities rely so heavily upon, are made up of volunteers. Knowledge of the landscape and techniques are highly valuable resources. “We depend on

our Elders. There are unwritten rules we follow on search and rescue.” Max explains. For example, Max does not like to see children in the boats during a search. “If that guy with the kids in the boat, pull up the body, it’s something that you wouldn’t want the kids to see.” he says.

Max is going to continue helping search and rescue teams in this region, “whenever I can. Unless I can’t do it no more.” he says. Max also laughs about growing older and says that nowadays, he and his cousin sit around talking about which medicines work best for them. He jokes that someday: “I’ll use my wheelchair to go down to the boat and just roll over and just sit here and pretend.”

“I didn’t see one tear coming down your eyes”

For ten years, Rick Robert’s was Max’s oversite Trooper. “I got great admiration for him and I learned a lot from him.” says Max. “We took care of things that people don’t want to handle. Like dead bodies... people that commit suicide. And sometime, about two or three months ago... he wrote something I wouldn’t have thought of. He wrote something like, ‘I worked with you for 10 years, and I didn’t see one tear coming down your eyes when you’re working with some individuals that have passed on.’” This little statement took Max by surprise, and the tears have started coming.

After more than 40 years of working in public safety, and all the sacrifices Max has made, Max is beginning to feel the toll of his extraordinary life.

Tears are surprising Max now. “Crying or sobbing a little bit... I cannot figure that out.” he says. “I’m trying to figure out why am I doing this [having tears]? But it’s part of my job, I guess. One bigger thing is helping people, you know. That’s what it’s all about: helping your community make a better life for them.... a safer place for them. That’s what I look at.”

“I think I’m going to miss being a VPSO. Like I said, I don’t regret my life.” says Max. “I am going to remember the good things and try not to remember the bad things that happened. I am glad that my wife can’t wait for me to retire.” Max and his wife jokingly wondering if Max is going to sit in front of the TV most of the time? Max’s wife tells him, “No. You have things to do!” Max says the one thing he really doesn’t want to do is wash dishes. “Sometimes I’ll wash one, my dish... but that is one thing that I’m not going to do!”

Max promises to visit Alvin more often in Bethel now. Max teases, “Especially during supper time.”

Even in retirement, Max will stay busy. He has a list of things to do in order to get ready for fishcamp this summer. He also has his dogs to take care of, and he’s looking forward to some moose hunting. “Instead of sitting home, watching cartoons with my grandson, I’ll be out there!” laughs Max. He has a little boy staying with him right now, and Max jokes, “He’s got more control of that remote than I do.”

It’s difficult to let go...

Robert explains that, “When you have done something for a long time, it’s difficult to let go.” Robert says, “I used to attend a lot of meetings, myself, with various village organizations in the region. When I came home to start running my father’s store, I resigned from 19 boards in one day.” Robert also remained on 8 commissions and boards. He says, “I did not realize I was on 27 boards and commissions... Whenever I hear a meeting on the radio, I get excited, because I attended those meetings for all of my adult life. So I’m sure when searching is occurring around his [Max’s] village, I’m

sure that he'll be there advising all the younger folks, in strategy and techniques... I'm sure he'll be doing a lot of mentoring too. The Troopers, they train the VPSOs in the academy in Sitka. He'll probably be utilized as a consultant. In the region, they train at Yuut Elitnaurviat – they train VPOs and public safety officers there – and sometimes in King Salmon. He could be utilized on a consultant basis for those trainings.”

Letter from the AVCP Executive Board

May 14, 2020

Dear Sgt. Daniel Max Olick Sr.,

Re: Retirement

On behalf of the Executive Board and the 56 member tribes of the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP), I would like to thank you for serving as the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) in Kwethluk, Alaska, since May 4, 1983 – a remarkable 37 years. You have held the longest career as a VPSO in the history of the State of Alaska VPSO program.

As your community's VPSO, your role is to provide law enforcement, fire protection, search and rescue, probation and parole monitoring and general public safety. You have worked long hours to improve the public safety in your community.

Thank you for protecting your community. Thank you for encouraging your fellow VPSOs to work together to find solutions. Your sharp humor and good-natured enthusiasm (even in the face of danger) set the standard for VPSOs in our region. Your passion, understanding, experience, and knowledge are invaluable to the wellbeing of our region.

Our organization and your community are better today because of your many years of dedication and service.

Quyatekaarput kevgiullci.

Sincerely,

ASSOCIATION OF VILLAGE COUNCIL PRESIDENTS



Thaddeus Tikiun Jr.
Executive Board Chairperson
cc: AVCP Member Tribes