



Photo by Scott T. Sturkol

(From left) Firefighters Lucas Erickson, Todd Swansby, Ryan Wilke, Arthur Gerpoltz, Forrest Lefler, Jacob White, Jacob Ross, Craig Schendel, and Hunter Young are shown Oct. 3 after receiving the Department of the Army Civilian Award for Humanitarian Service. All were recognized for supporting flood-relief efforts in local communities in 2018.

Fort McCoy firefighters receive humanitarian awards for 2018 flood response in local communities

BY SCOTT T. STURKOL
Public Affairs Staff

Eight current and one former firefighter with the Directorate of Emergency Services Fire Department received the Department of the Army Civilian Award for Humanitarian Service on Oct. 3 for their work during an emergency flood response in local communities in 2018.

Garrison Commander Col. Hui Chae Kim presented the awards at Fire Station 1 in build-

ing 1680. Recognized were: Lucas Erickson, Arthur Gerpoltz, Forrest Lefler, Jacob Ross, Craig Schendel, Todd Swansby, Jacob White, Ryan Wilke, and Hunter Young.

"This was an honor for me," Kim said. "Thank you to all of you for what you do."

In late August 2018, some areas near Fort McCoy received nearly a foot of rain in less than 24 hours. That rain, in turn, caused massive flash flooding that overwhelmed several small communities near Fort McCoy.

As soon as the rain stopped, a call was made

to DES Fire Department for mutual-aid support from the Sparta (Wis.) Fire Department. They responded with the personnel, boats, and vehicles to areas near Sparta, Melvina, and Leon.

The award citation describes each firefighter's contribution as "exceptional service and performance of duty."

Each firefighter "responded with the fire and emergency response staff through treacherous and hazardous conditions in response to torrential flash flooding in Melvina, Leon,

and Sparta," the citation states. Their "navigation of dangerous flash flood waters facilitated multiple rescues during recovery boat operations. The mutual aid recovery efforts for Monroe County resulted in 57 persons and 27 pets saved."

"The biggest challenge in this environment is the fast-moving water," Swansby said in 2018 after the response effort. "These kinds of floods are the most dangerous. ... I was just glad to be able to get those folks out safely."

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File photo by Directorate of Emergency Services Fire Department

Firefighters with the Directorate of Emergency Services Fire Department drive a boat in a flooded neighborhood Aug. 29, 2018, in Sparta, Wis.

HUMANITARIAN

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“The positive result from this is that no one got hurt,” Swansby said. “We got everyone as well as their pets out safely. ... I’d also like to add the volunteer fire departments played a huge role in all that was done. Those (folks) deserve so much credit for all they have done — they were incredible.”

According to Army Human Resources Command, the Civilian Award for Humanitarian Service is both an honorary and public service award presented by the Army to individuals who have distinguished themselves by meritorious direct “hands-on” participation in an act or operation of a humanitarian nature directed toward an individual or groups of individuals.

Ross, who now works for the Minneapolis-Saint Paul Airport Fire Department, came back to attend the ceremony. He appreciated the recognition and the team he worked with to do the flood response.

“It was amazing to see what these guys did and how well they worked together,” Ross said. “The professionalism here is second to none. I was just proud to be a part of it.”

Wilke, like the other firefighters, was surprised of the recognition when they heard about it. He said to all of them the response was them doing what they’re supposed to do.

“It’s what we do. It’s what we train to do,” Wilke said. “When the call comes you just go.”

Lefler said that for himself, it wouldn’t have mattered to him if he was recognized. He said it was more about the others and what they accomplished.

“I can’t say enough about how good they are,” Lefler said.



Photo by Scott T. Sturkol

Residents of Leon, Wis., react to a flood Aug. 28, 2018, in the downtown area of the city. Leon was one of several communities that Fort McCoy firefighters responded to when calls for evacuations were made because of the flooding.

Fort McCoy firefighters train year-round to be ready

STORY & PHOTOS BY SCOTT T. STURKOL

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In recent years on post and in surrounding communities, Fort McCoy firefighters have saved lives using their emergency-medical skills to crises.

For example, in 2018, Fort McCoy firefighters responded to floods in local communities that saved lives. And early in 2019, firefighters with the department's dive team responded to a call of children falling through ice where they provided key support to local emergency services.

To be ready for any emergency or situation, Directorate of Emergency Services Fire Department personnel train year-round to maintain certifications and skills.

In February, about a dozen firefighters with the Directorate of Emergency Services Fire Department took their turns getting in a suit, strapping on an air tank and full face mask, and diving into the depths of Big Sandy Lake under the ice on Fort McCoy's South Post for diver training.

The divers covered depths of up to 15 feet or more and completed several types of rescue scenarios under the guidance of fellow firefighters and from instructor Jeff Zilliox with the Marineland Dive Center of Onalaska, Wis.

Divers took turns going in and out of the same hole that was cut in the ice. Each diver was tethered with a connecting line that included a communications connection. Divers were under water for 15 to 20 minutes on average, completing lost diver and search scenarios. Zilliox said the underwater scenarios help them learn what it's like in case they have to be involved in a real-world emergency.

Such a call came in Jan. 6 to go to Perch Lake in Sparta, Wis., where children fell through the ice, including one who went under the ice. During that emergency, Fort McCoy responded with seven firefighters who were on duty.

"Three additional firefighters responded from home to assist the dive team," said Fort McCoy Fire Chief Tim Jorgensen. "Firefighters initially put on their Stern suits and searched with pike poles. While they were searching, they also deployed a remotely operated vehicle into the water and used it to assist in the search. We then put a diver into the water who was able to locate the victim."

"We try to train the same way every time, so no matter what the conditions are, we are used to training with the equipment and can respond to an emergency quickly," said Zilliox, saying it's a "train like you fight" approach that works well for diver training.

Since 2014, Fort McCoy firefighters have also increased training in technical rescue. One of the first training classes in technical rescue that firefighters learn is the Rope Rescue I course, said Assistant Fire Chief Jeremy Olivier.

"This is a very important foundation course because everything learned in Rope Rescue is applied in other technical rescue courses," Olivier said. "It involves using ropes and rappelling in high- and low-angle environments."

According to the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA), the training includes understanding, directing, and operating simple rope-lowering systems. It also includes safely ascending and descending a fixed-rope system in a high-angle environment and understanding and operating a rope-rescue system intended to move a load horizontally in a safe and controlled manner.

"These are skills we teach all of our personnel," Olivier said.

In August 2019, Deputy Chief Brady Brever said the Fort McCoy Fire Department supported driver-operator certification training that not only included a Fort McCoy firefighter as a student but also helped 19 Army Reserve Soldiers receive their certifications on fire trucks.

"They attended three classes resulting in certifications in fire apparatus engineer, mobile water supply apparatus driver-



A Fort McCoy firefighter practices diving under ice Feb. 6 at Big Sandy Lake on South Post at Fort McCoy.



An installation firefighter learns rappelling at the highest post rappelling tower during ropes training in 2018.

operator, and aircraft rescue firefighting apparatus engineer," Brever said. "The classes were taught by the University of Illinois Fire Service Institute and funded through the 416th Theater Engineer Command."

As Olivier said about the ropes training, it can also apply to all the training Fort McCoy firefighters complete. "Each piece of training builds on all previous training and continues to build more skills," he said.

A well-trained department of personnel means readiness is high, Brever said. The Fort McCoy Fire Department's dedication to maintain accredited status is proof.

The department is accredited by the Commission on Fire Accreditation International. This means the department is one of 62 Department of Defense agencies and one of only six Army installations to achieve Internationally Accredited (See **YEAR-ROUND**, Insert Page 4)



A firefighter completes an inspection March 8 on one of the Directorate of Emergency Services Fire Department trucks at Fire Station 1 at Fort McCoy.

YEAR-ROUND

Agency status with the Commission on Fire Accreditation International and the Center for Public Safety Excellence.

The process for this accreditation is voluntary and provides agencies with improvement models to assess their service delivery and performance internally, according to accreditation requirements. Agencies then work with a team of peers from other agencies to evaluate their completed self-assessments.

"We have also been able to use the Commission on Fire Accreditation International's process as a proactive mechanism to plan for the future of this agency and locate areas where we can improve on the quality of the services we provide," Brever said following a past reaccreditation process.

As demonstrated with emergency-response calls in the past year, the fire department supports not only Fort McCoy but the

surrounding communities through mutual aid and automatic aid agreements in Monroe and La Crosse counties and through the Wisconsin Mutual Aid Box-Alarm System.

These agreements lay out how Fort McCoy can provide or request aid for a variety of emergencies, such as structural fires, underwater rescue, auto accidents, and ambulance calls.

And through training and readiness, the

department's firefighters will continue to remain ready for any response they are called to do, Jorgensen said.

See more fire department training coverage by visiting www.dvidshub.net/news/278162/firefighters-learn-rope-rappelling-skills-during-technical-rescue-training-fort-mccoy, and www.dvidshub.net/news/310963/rescue-training-fort-mccoy-firefighters-learn-practice-diving-under-ice.

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Photo by Spc. Nicole Baker/Exercise News Day

Maintaining readiness

(Left) Fort McCoy firefighters refold a water hose during routine training Aug. 12 at Station 1 on the cantonment area on post.

(Right) Firefighter Brian Butzler holds a fire hose for a demonstration at Station 1 on Aug. 12.

Fort McCoy's team of firefighters at both stations train daily to maintain readiness.



Photo by Master Sgt. Michel Sauret/Army Reserve Command