

# Ex-military train with California Conservation Corps near Auburn for firefighting

Portal from military to civilian life provided at Placer Center near Auburn

By Gus Thomson, Journal Staff Writer 5/10/12



Michael Kirby/Auburn Journal

PLACER COUNTY - Hot, dusty and dry conditions greet firefighting trainees as they work to carve out a practice fire line Wednesday at the California Conservation Corps location near Auburn. The military veterans are seeking jobs with the U.S. Forest Service.

AUBURN CA - For some, it will mean going from firefights to firefighting in a matter of months.

Fifty military veterans are completing initial firefighter training from the California Conservation Corps and the U.S. Forest Service this week at the corps' Placer Center, seven miles east of Auburn.

The joint training partnership is intended to ease the veterans' transition from military service to the civilian workforce.

Following classroom instruction, hands-on training took place at the Christian Valley Road center, where the veterans experienced cutting fire lines out of the earth, laying hose, mop-up fire

operations and a night-time drill.

The training is designed to simulate what firefighters might likely encounter in the coming fire season, External Affairs Director Martha Diepenbrock said Wednesday.

Born and raised in Auburn and out of the Army since late January, 23-year-old program participant Jason Howerton described the training, with potential employers like the Forest Service and U.S. Bureau of Land Management looking on, as a "fantastic opportunity."

A medic during his four years in the Army, Howerton said that he wanted to intermingle the skills he learned in the military with a job in the private sector.

After putting out more than 50 applications for jobs, Howerton said that he learned about the program just starting in Auburn and signed on for one of the 50 positions.

"This is like a proving ground," Howerton said.

The chosen trainees came from San Bernardino, San Diego and Lake Tahoe as well as Christian Valley.

Former soldier Jim Moody, a Forest Service instructor, said trainees have seen service in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as in the U.S. and other points around the world.

"I was in course-development for training and a lot of this has to do with knowing what caliber of people we have," Moody said. "But they've exceeded all expectations. They're all very eager to learn, which makes our job pretty easy."

The Forest Service has found room for veterans at a time when jobs are tight. During the last round of hiring for apprentice firefighters, 40 of the 48 were veterans, Moody said.

Participants are between the ages of 19 and 27 and will work on U.S. Forest Service projects in the coming months that can lead to jobs as apprenticeships. The Forest Service's apprenticeship program provides education, training and work experience for up to four years, after which the apprentice reaches journey-level status as a wildland firefighter.

The program also receives funding from the Speaker's Office of the California State Assembly.

"These soldiers, who are willing to risk their lives for our country, deserve to have every opportunity to find a quality, decent job that lets them provide for their family, and this program does exactly that," Speaker John Perez said in a statement.

The veterans will work to complete 500 hours over the next four to six months on projects that include clearing defensible space in the Tahoe National Forest.