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CAREER CHANGE

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A crew member practices with a drip torch Wednesday at a California Conservation Corps center in Auburn as military vets are trained to battle wildfires. The crews also constructed fire lines with chain saws and hand tools, and learned how to mop up after fires. When training is complete, they'll clear brush and other fire hazards in their home counties this summer.

Vets learn to tame wildfires in Placer training program

By Timothy Sandoval
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Traditionally, there has been a friendly rivalry between different branches of the military.

But it was more like cooperative teamwork Wednesday when more than 50 veterans from the Army, Navy, National Guard and Marines learned together how to prevent and extinguish wildfires at the California Conservation Corps' Placer Center in Auburn.

On the third day of a four-day training program, the vets learned how to lay down hose when they battle a fire, clean up after fires to ensure they will not reignite and use flares and other firefighting equipment.

"It's a good program because not only do you get to spend more time with veterans, you also get to spend more time with different types of veterans," said Jacob Delaney, 21, who served in the Iraq War. "All around you start to realize the different jobs and the different branches that everyone comes from, and their experiences will help you in the long run."

The four crews of veterans came from San Bernardino, San Diego, Placer County and South Lake Tahoe. They all arrived at the Placer Center on Friday and have been living in tents on the training area's lawn.

The program is a partnership between the CCC and the U.S. Forest Service. After the training, the veterans will return to their counties and clear brush and other fire hazards in forest areas near population centers for the summer. Many of the participants hope to get an apprenticeship with the Forest Service to train as wildland firefighters.

The Forest Service spends $2 million on the veterans program, and another $680,000

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VIDEO: Watch veterans get hands-on forestry and firefighting training with California Conservation Corps.

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Firefighter trainees race up a hill Wednesday in Auburn. The California Conservation Corps and the U.S. Forest Service partnered to offer the training.

Veterans: Drill called 'a real adrenaline rush'

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comes from the state.

This is the first year that veterans in the program did more hands-on training in the field than in the classroom, said Michelle Carbonaro, a U.S. Forest Service instructor.

"It's more than I expected," said Jason Howerton, 23, who served in the Army as a medic for four years. "It's very similar to the military in a lot of ways, as far as the way it is broken down and the way that discipline is instilled."

The 11 veterans in the Placer crew ran up a hill Wednesday and yelled instructions to each other while they fled an imaginary fire in a safety drill. When they got to a "safe area," the veterans needed to pull a tarp "shelter" over themselves, which in an actual wildfire would be made of aluminum foil and silicon that would reflect radiant heat.

Instructors yelled at the veterans to hurry and tried to grab the shelters out of their hands to simulate wind. A few who took too long to cover themselves were told they were dead and had to sit out.

"It's a real adrenaline rush," said Delaney, the Iraq War veteran. "Your heart starts to race, and you start getting hotter. Getting into the shelter is hot and miserable. But that is your only lifeline, inside that shelter."

"We try to make it a worst-case scenario," said Jim Moody, a Forest Service firefighter and instructor for the Placer crew. "A lot of things can come down to it. The guy who is a few seconds ahead could be the one that lives."

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