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(S.D.)-Veterans Fire Corps Programs In Black Hills

By: Chris Fankhauser Posted at: 08/30/2013 09:50 AM

(Custer)-For the past two summers, the Black Hills National Forest has had veterans working side by side with firefighters and other forest employees as part of the Veterans Fire Corps program.

This summer, both Mystic and Hell Canyon Ranger Districts hosted these veteran teams. Each team has a project leader and 5 members.

This unique program, specifically for men and women who have served in the armed forces, is designed to prepare veterans for positions as wildland firefighters. The program is geared toward training veterans to protect public lands from the threat of wildfire. The program is operated as a partnership with the Student Conservation Association.

Tim Gurnett, from Omaha, Neb. is a Project Leader for the Arapaho National Forest in Colorado. He worked as a Project Leader on Hell Canyon Ranger District on the Black Hills National Forest last summer. Gurnett served in the Navy for five years and is now a member of the Naval Reserve. He is in his third year with the program and likes everything about it. Gurnett said it is refreshing to be with people that have similar experiences and similar issues.

"I love this kind of work and it is good to be around fellow veterans. It is good to talk together and work together and gives us something to be proud of again." Gurnett is a senior at the University of Nebraska and is working on a double major in Environmental Studies and Criminal Justice. He hopes to land a Law Enforcement position with a land management agency such as the U.S. Forest Service.

One of Gurnett's team members from last summer is now a Project Leader on the Big Horn National Forest in Buffalo, Wyo. Mike Madalena, from Williamson, NY served in the Marine Corps for four years and completed two combat tours; one in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. Madalena is passionate about the program and feels one of the best parts of the Veterans Fire Corps is that it is therapeutic. "It's about saving lives, really helping each other out and talking things out. Veterans that leave the service and get into this program can fill the void of team camaraderie and get structure and organization back in their lives." Madalena is enrolled in Finger Lakes Community College pursuing degrees in Natural Resource Conservation and Law Enforcement. He hopes to become an Alaskan Wildlife trooper.

The Veterans Fire Corps program is a win-win for veterans as well as the U.S. Forest Service. It gives veterans an opportunity to learn a new skill and see if firefighting is something they want to do as a follow-on career. It gives the Forest additional personnel resources to fight fire and reduce hazardous fuels.

While partnering with the Black Hills National Forest, the team was able to work on various projects. Dave Ruhl, an engine captain for the Mystic Ranger District, was also the liaison for the Veterans Fire team on his District this year. "Even though we didn't have many big fires this summer, the team was able to do a variety of things such as improving egress routes in sub-divisions, pile cut and chunk logs from mountain pine beetle treated areas, assist archaeologists with culvert work from an old civilian conservation corps project, and many had the opportunity to shadow various technicians where they had interest." Ruhl says the program is good because it

gives veterans exposure with the U.S. Forest Service before taking a job to see if it is a good fit for them.

Alleyn Friedrich, from Mobile, Ala. was the project leader for the Mystic Ranger District this summer. Friedrich is a Marine Corps veteran with 2 deployments in four years in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). "I got a lot out of it this year, we had a good team and Dave (Ruhl) was always willing to help us with what we needed. It was a good experience and I'm glad I did it," said Friedrich. Friedrich is between schools right now but wants to get a degree in Criminal Justice and Fire Science.

One of Friedrich's team members was looking for an adventure and saw the Veterans Fire Corps as an opportunity to get paid while participating in an internship. "This is not just a program, and then it's over," said Juan Rangel, a Navy veteran from Houston, Tex. "We worked outdoors, learned a lot about fire, did some hiking and got training and certifications that will help us get jobs. They (Forest officials) even provided training for us on resume building and how to apply for jobs." Rangel is enrolled in the University of Phoenix pursuing a degree in Environmental Science.

David Herbert is considering employment with the U.S. Forest Service after he finishes his degree in Land Use with emphasis on Environment and Resources from Metropolitan State University in Denver, Colo. Herbert is from Morrison, Colo. He is a Navy veteran of eight years. "The Veteran Fire Corps program fits well with my degree. We responded to a few fires, I did preservation work at a historical site, worked with fuels management technicians to reduce fire danger in populated areas and worked on an old Civilian Conservation Corps project. It was a good opportunity for me to get my foot in the door to learn and hopefully improve my chances of being hired by the U.S. Forest Service in Colorado," said Herbert.

The Veterans Fire Corps program is in its third year, nationally, and is becoming more popular among veterans. Most are finding out about the program through word-of-mouth, Veterans Affairs (VA) officials, forest officials, school counselors and more. Preston Keough, an Army veteran from Columbia, Mo., now a member of the Missouri Army National Guard learned about the internship program through a school counselor. "I was able to get involved because I talked to my counselor about an internship opportunity. I am very interested in fire and my counselor suggested I contact the SCA to let them know I was interested," said Keough. "I wanted to work for the Forest Service to see if it was something I would pursue as a career and the Veterans Fire Corps program gave me that opportunity." Keough recommends this program for other veterans looking for an internship that provides a real-world, hands on learning experience in the forest.

Todd Pechota, Fire Staff Officer for the Black Hills National Forest is a strong proponent of the Veterans Fire Corps program. "The program is a great way for the Forest to provide training and experience which may lead to career opportunities for our veterans. The teams increase our capability to fight fire, reduce hazardous fuels and complete work in other resource areas."

Veterans wishing to learn more about the Veterans Fire Corps program can go to <http://www.veteransfirecorps.org>. Additional information on internship opportunities can be found by contacting the Student Conservation Association (SCA) or by going to their website at <http://www.thesca.org>.

For more information on the Black Hills National Forest, visit www.fs.usda.gov/blackhills