Press Release

Release Nr:  2201-05

January 28, 2022

Fort Drum Public Affairs

Fort Drum firefighters conduct ice rescue training

FORT DRUM, N.Y. -- Fort Drum firefighters endured below-zero temperatures and bone-chilling water this week while conducting ice rescue training on post.

“Ice rescue is one of our mission skill sets, so that requires us to train on it at least once a year to stay proficient,” said Fort Drum Fire Capt. Jeffrey Hambsch, training captain.

Days before going into the frigid waters, firefighters acclimated to wearing the rescue suits in the Monti Physical Fitness Center pool.

“We like using the pool here because it is more of a controlled environment – a learning environment – where it’s easier to talk to each other and go over instructions,” Hambsch said.

But really, he said, there is not much difference once they go onto the ice to conduct the rescue. The suits – gloves, boots, top, bottom and hood – have a neoprene insulation to keep the body warm, as if they were still in the heated pool. Only the occasional splash on their neck or bare face reminds them how cold it actually is outside.

Before going in the water, the firefighter will do some squats to “burp” their suits, which removes excess air.

“When they curl up into a ball like that, it’s to release some of the air inside the suit so they have more mobility,” Hambsch said. “When there’s a buildup of air inside, it’s much harder to control your movement, so learning how to ‘burp’ the suit is one of the first things they do.”

Fort Drum Fire and Emergency Services has added at least a dozen firefighters in the past year who are new to ice rescue training, unless they acquired it at a volunteer fire department.

“For a lot of them, this is their first time in the water with this type of ice rescue suit,” Hambsch said. “These suits are made to keep you buoyant, so part of the training is making sure you can keep your body under control and your feet under you while rescuing the victim.”

The firefighters practiced tossing the rope-rescue throw bag – a device used to pull a victim to safety. Hambsch said that the line of flags hanging across the pool simulated the sort of obstacle they might find outside, such as tree branches. They also practice a side-arm throwing technique, similar to skipping a rock.

“It’s pretty easy to throw underhand, like a softball, when you have no obstacles in the way,” he said. “But a lot of times, you have trees at the edge of the river banks and so you want to avoid having the rope get tangled up in the branches.”

Typically, the training is conducted at Remington Pond, but Hambsch scouted out a new location this year so it would be unfamiliar to the firefighters. He also incorporated a coyote decoy and mannequin to simulate a scenario where someone’s pet falls through the ice and the owner goes in to retrieve it.

Although the training is mandatory for the department, Hambsch said that ice rescues are rare for fire departments in this area. In the past several years, a team has only been dispatched twice – rescuing a dog on post and a deer in the Black River near Fort Drum.

“This is one of those high-risk, low-frequency type scenarios,” he said. “But we still train every year to knock the cobwebs off and stay proficient in our skills.”

“The training also allows our officers and incident commanders to see who feels really comfortable in the water,” Hambsch added. “So if there ever is an incident, they know everybody’s strengths and who will be getting into the suits to go into the ice. You don’t wait until an incident occurs to figure that out.”

Firefighter Tim Karg has trained in ice rescue training here and with the Theresa Fire Department, where he has served for the past 15 years.

“You have to be ready and trained for any scenario,” he said. “Because even if you only make one rescue in your career then that training every year is worth it. I think that because this is something we see less frequently than a fire or car accident, it’s even more important that we get this training.”

Karg was part of a team of nine fire personnel responding to the training scenarios Jan. 26. He said that those with experience coached and worked alongside the firefighters who were seeing it for the first time.

“Like any training event, we picked up on things afterward we might have done differently, but overall I thought we did a good job,” he said. “For the new guys who have never experienced this before, they performed well for the first time.”

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Photo Captions

Rescue Training 1: Firefighters from the Fort Drum Fire and Emergency Services navigate through bone-chilling waters to reach a victim during annual ice rescue training Jan. 26 on post. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

Rescue Training 2: Fort Drum firefighters acclimate to ice rescue suits at the Monti Physical Fitness Center and practice rescue drills Jan. 21, before going out to the icy waters outside a week later for their annual training. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

Rescue Training 3: Firefighters from the Fort Drum Fire and Emergency Services navigate through bone-chilling waters to reach a victim during annual ice rescue training Jan. 26 on post. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)