

U.S. Army Firefighters

By Sergeant First Class Leroy A. Ward

U.S. Army firefighters make up only a small section of the Corps of Engineers. About 242 active duty military firefighters and 573 in the Reserve Components represent both table of organization and equipment (TOE) and table of distribution and allowance (TDA) assignments.

In today's Army, there are seven active duty TOE fire-fighting detachments, consisting of two to six soldiers, and 25 Army Reserve and National Guard TOE fire-fighting units, consisting of six to 30 soldiers. Many soldiers and leaders are unaware of the existence of these detachments and the services they provide. This article gives a brief overview of the organization, training, and role of Army military occupational specialty (MOS) 51M firefighters and fire-fighting units.

Missions

Arrmy firefighters provide fire-fighting services, including fire protection and fire prevention, to theaters of operation. During deployments, firefighters are task organized—usually as general support (GS)—to the joint task force, who in turn makes them GS to the supported unit. Although they are GS due to their uniqueness, these fire-fighting teams require mess, maintenance, logistical, and administrative assistance from the supported unit. Firefighters have three primary missions:

Aircraft Crash/Rescue Fire Fighting

This is firefighters' most demanding mission and involves aircraft or ground vehicles that are burning or have crashed. Firefighters must be familiar with basic safety procedures of all U.S. aircraft. Although the emphasis is geared toward rotary-wing aviation assets, firefighters must also be familiar with fixed-wing aircraft.

Structural Fire Fighting

This mission encompasses burning of static objects, such as tents, houses, barns, and other buildings. Fire-fighting teams require skilled technical training so they can quickly execute fire-fighting "battle drills." These include connecting fire trucks to hydrants, venting buildings, and searching for victims in smoke-filled buildings.

Fire Prevention

This task includes taking active and passive measures to prevent fires from occurring. Active measures, which include

building inspections, generally are left to sergeants and above. Passive measures are encouraged by all firefighters through public relations and safety programs.

Responsibilities

Firefighters support two general types of units or customers. The first is U.S. Army or Air Force aviation assets. Most aircraft use a more flammable fuel than ground vehicles and require additional attention during fueling and defueling operations. Attack aircraft are twice as dangerous, since onboard fuel has the capability of detonating ordnance on the aircraft.

The second type of customer is units that live in a large collection of tents or base camps. The tendency to erect tents close together and the propensity of canvas and wood to burn creates a risk to occupying soldiers. Army firefighters work with unit or installation safety offices to provide and enforce fire-prevention guidelines for these temporary shelters.

Army firefighters are not limited to these customers during combat operations. Other tasks may include providing aid to host-nation fire departments and protecting



U.S. Army firefighters enter a smoke-filled building.

ammunition storage points; petroleum, oil and lubricant (packaged and bulk) storage points; motor pools; and internment/dislocated-civilian camps.

Types of Units

Army firefighters are organized into two types of detachments: headquarters (LA) and fire-fighting (LB). These detachments may be task organized based on the size of the area to be covered, the number of vehicles or aircraft that require protection, and the availability of other military firefighters (Air Force or Navy).

LA Detachment

This detachment serves as the command-and-control function for three to five other detachments. The four-soldier team consists of an MOS 21B fire marshal (a first lieutenant), an MOS 51M40 fire chief (a sergeant first class), an MOS 51M30 fire inspector (a staff sergeant), and an MOS 63B10 mechanic. Equipment for the LA detachment includes two HMMWVs and assorted radios for establishing a base station. Missions are to—

- Plan fire-fighting programs and area fire protection.
- Exercise command and control during rescue and fire-fighting operations.
- Conduct fire-prevention operations, to include determining building classification and conducting installation-level inspections.
- Develop plans for handling hazardous-material emergencies.
- Conduct initial fire-ground investigations.
- Conduct fire department unit maintenance operations for technical fire-fighting equipment not provided during deployment from local support maintenance activities.



Firefighters extinguish a burning fuel spill.



Firefighters inspect their self-contained breathing apparatus gear.

LB Detachment

The core of the fire-fighting team, these detachments consist of an MOS 51M30 team chief (a staff sergeant), an MOS 51M20 crash rescue sergeant, two MOS 51M10 crash rescue specialists, and three MOS 51M10 driver/operators. LB detachments operate the fire-fighting equipment, which includes a fire truck, a water truck, self-contained breathing apparatus, a hydraulic jaws set, and crash kits. They provide 24-hour fire protection and personnel rescue support, administer timely and adequate first aid, and implement a fire prevention program(s) for—

- Life-support areas.
- Intermediate staging bases.
- Forward-operating bases.
- Petroleum, oil, and lubricant tank farms and distribution sites; open and closed warehouse facilities; or general depots.
- Enemy prisoner of war and civilian internment camps.

MOS Training

Army firefighters begin their military careers with basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. When they graduate, they are transferred to Louis F. Garland Fire Academy, Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas, which is the home of fire-protection training for the entire Department of Defense. Here, firefighters attend advanced individual training (AIT) for the 51M MOS. Operated by the Air Force, this joint service school has 125 multiservice and civilian instructors. Training provided by the academy complies with the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards. Soldiers, airmen, marines, and sailors train together for 13 weeks on individual and crew drills. Trainees must maintain the TRADOC academic standard of 70 percent but also must

pass several physically demanding tasks, as well as standardized written and performance evaluations, to graduate. After completing AIT, soldiers are NFPA certified at the *Firefighter II*, *Airport Firefighter*, and *Hazardous Materials* operational levels.

Career progression for firefighters is unique. They are trained and nationally certified as firefighters in MOS 51M through the grade of E7. When they are promoted to master sergeant/E8, they leave this MOS and change to MOS 51Z general engineering supervisor, where they are involved with other engineer specialties not normally associated with fire fighting.

Certifications

Department of Defense manual 6055.6-M, *Fire and Emergency Services Certification Program*, is a component of a national certification system for firefighters and others in the fire-protection career field (fire fighting and rescue, fire-department management, training, inspections, etc.). The Firefighter Certification System is accredited by the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC). The certification program is mandatory for all Department of Defense firefighters—military, civilian, and contractors. Certification requirements are governed by the applicable NFPA standards. These standards prescribe precisely what must be done for certification at each level.

Certification may be obtained by completing correspondence courses (called career-development courses) combined with performance tests, resident training schools (such as state and local fire academies and the Louis F. Garland Fire Academy) accredited by IFSAC or the National Professional Qualifications Board, and other training that is *proven* to be equivalent to that required by the NFPA. The Air Force Civil Engineer Support Agency, Contingency Support Directorate, Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida, manages and administers this program.

Military firefighters depend on federal and state training facilities to provide instruction on various skills. The two major training resources to test fire-fighting skills are a *smokehouse* and a *burn pit*. A smokehouse is a building vented with ducts to produce a blanket of smoke within the building. Soldiers are required to enter the building and rescue any personnel found inside. A burn pit is a concrete bowl with a special drain system in which objects can be set afire. Firefighters use a combination of water and foam to extinguish burning vehicles and aircraft. The special drain system in the bottom of the pit separates the water and foam so each can be recycled. Performing these two training events is equivalent to a combat arms unit live-fire exercise.

Army fire-fighting units maximize the use of these training facilities for their soldiers, who rarely attend specialty training such as Airborne or Air Assault School. Some



Wearing protective gear, firefighters inspect a burned-out helicopter.

colleges offer an associate degree in fire science, which is an excellent resource for building a competent fire-fighting unit. Although this training is expensive, soldiers benefit from being trained by subject-matter experts and receiving hands-on training with live-fire burnings.

Summary

Soldiers and leaders face several challenges concerning firefighters in TO&E units. Leaders must balance military requirements and fire-fighting certification requirements. It is difficult to schedule qualification ranges or mandatory classes while soldiers are working day-on/day-off rotations. Career soldiers must maintain all required engineering skills. Staff sergeants must work hard to retain their engineer-specific skills, such as construction and bridging, to complete the Basic and Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Courses.

The presence of military fire-fighting detachments in theaters of operation is not commonly known or understood, but firefighters play a critical role there. In addition to their primary missions, firefighters provide benefits to all soldiers, since they also receive lifesaving training. Commanders must take active steps to include these detachments in their companies and battalions and help make the theater safer for all personnel.



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