

A School for Firefighters

The military has war games, municipal firefighters have their training towers, but what can wildland firefighters do to get ready for fire season? For Los Padres National Forest firefighters, they go to Fort Hunter Liggett for fire school. This US Army Reserve Command post, located in Monterey County, is the largest post in the country. “The partnership between the military base and forest is very beneficial” says Monterey Crew 1 Superintendent, Doug Aversano whose backyard is on the base. Stationed at Fort Hunter Liggett allows them to take advantage of the three week long school as often as they like. Here, firefighters from all over the forest can practice with live fire and different firing techniques to better prepare themselves for a forest fire. This is also the time that firefighters can practice being captains or assume other roles they would not normally be assigned. This helps them gain the experience needed to move up in the organization.

When arriving at fire school, the engines and crews have a morning briefing, just as in a real fire scenario, to go over any hazards that might be in the area, make assignments and advise firefighters of any other safety issues such as rattlesnakes and poison oak. One hazard everyone is advised of when training at the base is discarded live ammunition. Crew 1 Captain Dan O’Keefe says “when the fire hits those rounds, it’s like fireworks going off, but it’s just one more hazard the crews need to be aware of.” His crew is an elite group of firefighters that use hand tools, like shovels and chainsaws to fight a wildland fire and at fire school, they do just that. They cut a fire line through the grass and brush to protect oak trees; they practice cutting line directly on the fires edge and when the flames get too hot, they move to indirect attack; and they use different firing devices such as drip torches, flare guns and fusees to start a fire that will run into the wildfire and take away its fuel. They operate like a well-oiled machine. Twenty people flow out of two crew carriers and are lined up, with packs on their backs and tools in their hands within one minute. Captain O’Keefe says “it’s like synchronized swimming; everyone knows what they need to do and where they need to be.” This school helps them with their crew dynamics and getting their flow “just right.”

However, hand crews are not the only resources that take advantage of fire school. Engines use this time to practice mobile attacks where the engine follows the flames and two people walk along side with hoses to extinguish the fire. They also practice different firing techniques in order to use fire to fight fire. When an engine cannot physically get to the fire, the crew people can become a hand crew and fight fire with tools, so they practice this as well.

Fire school is really the time to practice skills so that they are better prepared for fire season and to give people opportunities to learn new skills so they are better equipped to handle a larger fire or more difficult situations. This school also helps to protect the forest. The area burned on the base during fire school is a buffer between the base and the forest and would be burned with or without fire school. The blackened buffer is used to help prevent any fires started on the base from running into the forest.

With a few fires already fought this season and fire school wrapping up, the firefighters of Los Padres National Forest are ready for what, based on current conditions, could be one of the busiest fire seasons in a decade.



Monterey Crew 1 cuts a fire line in preparation for a practice fire.



Santa Lucia Engine 35 practices a mobile attack.



Tyler Serafine of Santa Lucia Engine 35 uses a drip torch to set a practice fire.