

CITIZEN SOLDIER



oyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage. These are certainly all words you could use to describe a firefighter. Now think about the words perseverance, loyalty and gallantry. These could certainly be used to describe a soldier.

Interestingly, the first set of words are the seven core values of the U.S. Army, and the second set includes three of the eight points of the Maltese Cross, the universal symbol of the fire service. Legend has it that each of the eight points of the cross represents eight characteristics of chivalry—another defining

trait of both firefighters and soldiers.

You certainly don't have to look too far to draw more compelling similarities between these two groups of special citizens who protect our country and our communities. Firefighters and military personnel share common values while performing uncommon feats for our fellow man. It's all about protecting and serving.

With this in mind, it's easy to see how we can—and should—connect military personnel and firefighters when discussing recruitment in the fire service. In fact, it's my belief that the need to connect these two groups has never been

FIREFIGHTER



Not only are returning military personnel ideal recruits, we have an obligation to embrace them into the fire service family

By Tiger Schmittendorf

A Bit of History

- The National Guard is the oldest component of the U.S. Armed Forces, getting its roots in the Massachusetts Militia in 1636.
- Benjamin Franklin established the first volunteer fire company in Philadelphia 100 years later.

Citizen/Soldier/Firefighter Don Keuck—a firefighter with the Doyle Hose Company #1 Volunteer Fire Company in Cheektowaga, N.Y., and a sergeant with the New York National Guard—deploys to Afghanistan in May.

PHOTO TIGER SCHMITTENDORF

more important. Not only are we the same people, we're *looking* for the same people.

CREATING A JOINT RECRUITMENT EFFORT

Through a chance meeting more than a year ago, I connected with two National Guardsmen who have helped me on the road toward solidifying the citizen-soldier-firefighter connection. After sharing my idea with recruiters Sergeant First Class Chris Park and Staff Sergeant Peter Bessey, together we set out to unite the National Guard with the volunteer fire service in Erie County, N.Y.

We conducted a photo shoot right there on the spot, taking advantage of the fact that a Firefighter 1 recruit class and a class of ROTC students from Canisius College in Buffalo were training at our county's main fire academy in Cheektowaga, N.Y., at the same time. Using an armored Humvee and a ladder truck as backdrops, I took dozens of photos of SFC Park and Lt. Gregory Burow from the Getzville (N.Y.) Volunteer Fire Company. Applying a little imagination and some Photoshop skills, I created a campaign poster with the theme of "Whichever Challenge You Choose: Serve Your Country. Serve Your Community."

Thus a joint recruitment project was born between these two entities that share the public trust. We next created a brochure aimed at existing Guardsmen and returning veterans relocating from their tours abroad to towns and villages across our county. We were invited to accompany the Guard's local Recruitment Command to public events, and were offered access to the soldiers during their weekend training and at other special events. In short, when they go recruiting, we go with them. It's a great partnership and we've already experienced mutual success in cross-recruiting.

And let's face it, no one recruits better than the U.S. military. Why wouldn't the fire service take advantage of the models, marketing themes and best practices they employ? Our organizations are so similar that if

you simply crossed out the name of the military branch and inserted your fire department's name where appropriate, you could have a recruitment campaign that would be an instant hit with prospective candidates.

Nonetheless, what started out as just a good idea for finding viable candidates for the volunteer fire service has turned into a passion—and a sense of duty.

REACHING OUT TO VETERANS

In addition to the benefit such joint recruitment efforts can bring to the volunteer fire service, it's important that we recognize how much the fire service can be of aid to returning veterans—and how much help is needed.

Many returning veterans report that they struggle to adjust to civilian life and speak of missing the adrenaline rush, camaraderie and teamwork when they return from active duty. They often lack a sense of purpose, a sense of being valued.

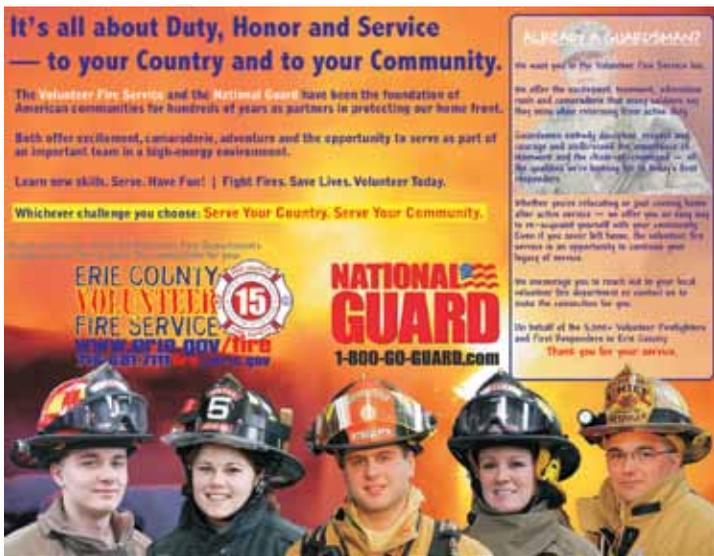
What can the fire service offer in return? All the things that a soldier misses about active service and more: the brotherhood, and a sense of belonging and family. Getting involved with their local volunteer fire department offers service men and women the chance to get reacquainted with their community in a very positive way.

Additionally, the need to create positive opportunities for returning veterans is likely even more critical than most people realize. An article in the March 2011 edition of *JEMS* titled "Heroes to Hometowns" (p. 64) highlights the roots of serious threats that have infiltrated our armed forces—PTSD and traumatic brain injury (TBI). According to author Dean Pedrotti, regardless of their military branch, service members face multiple stressors, including "a general sense of loss, which can occur in many ways. For example, it might be grief over the loss of a fellow service member, the feeling of helplessness following a significant injury (e.g., an amputee) or the prolonged absence from friends, family and normal social circles."

The article goes on to explain that top non-combat issues include the length and number of deployments, and separation from family. Recent research shows that these factors affect a service member's mental health status: "It has been found that suicide risk increases markedly after the third deployment or after a deployment lasting 15 months or more."

According to the Wounded Warrior Project, one in five veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from PTSD or major depression. An awareness campaign promoted by Services for the Underserved aims at highlighting a deadly crisis creeping across our nation. One of their posters states: "The war in Iraq didn't end his life. He did." It also states that, "On average we lose 18 veterans to suicide every day."

I don't know about you, but I don't need any more statistics to motivate me to connect our armed forces with our firefighting forces. Like Pedrotti's *JEMS*



To unite the National Guard with the volunteer fire service in Erie County, N.Y., we created a joint recruitment effort that included creating a brochure aimed at existing Guardsmen and returning veterans relocating from their tours abroad to towns and villages across our county.



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article suggests, we can do simple things like inviting veterans to our fire stations for dinner or volunteering for Wounded Warriors.

INITIAL EFFORTS

This newfound passion caused me to create a new series of posters to reach out to returning veterans to reinforce our shared values and the valuable qualities we mutually possess. I created the website www.SoldierFirefighter.com to concentrate on these connections and to highlight the services and opportunities available to those who have served.

Additionally, my good friend and soldier-firefighter Dan Frontera started a Veterans Arts Program and co-created "Paws & Patriots," which connects veterans in need of a companion with dogs in need of a good home through our local SPCA.

Another local effort, Western New York Heroes, connects veterans with available services that can help ease the shock of going from "decorated to desperate" that so many returning soldiers face. The program was started by wounded-in-combat veteran Chris Kreiger. Chris is the brother of Matt Kreiger, a fellow firefighter on military leave from my fire department who was shot in the head in combat in Afghanistan. Matt is an Army Staff Sergeant and a member of the elite Third Group Special Forces Green Berets. The bullet lodged in his brain, but he is recovering well. I admired Matt when he joined our volunteer fire company, and I admire him even more now for his resilience and service to our country.

MAKE THE CONNECTION

While Guardsmen, Reservists and other returning veterans might very well be the ideal recruits we've wanted to enlist in the ranks of the volunteer fire service, it's my firm belief that we have both an opportunity and a greater obligation to embrace these soldiers, sailors, Air Force members, Marines and Coasties into our fire department family. The fire service in general—and especially the volunteer fire service—offers these soldiers a step-down and reintegration process that is otherwise missing in their lives. We offer them the opportunity to continue their legacy of service. They've honorably served our nation, and we have a duty to welcome them home. And I'm convinced we can save lives by doing so. ☺

Tiger Schmittendorf serves the Erie County Department of Emergency Services as deputy fire coordinator, overseeing training for 97 fire departments and 5,000 first responders. He is an author, emergency manager and frequent presenter on the subjects of leadership, safety, incident command, and recruitment and retention issues. Schmittendorf is a nationally certified fire instructor and has been a firefighter since 1980. Connect with him on www.FirefighterNation.com or visit his blog at www.tigerschmittendorf.com.

Resources

U.S. Army, Soldier Life: www.goarmy.com/soldier-life/being-a-soldier/living-the-army-values.html

JEMS March 2011 issue, Heroes to Hometowns (p. 64): www.jems.com/article/ptsd/heroes-hometowns

WNYHeroes: www.WNYHeroes.org

Wounded Warrior Project: www.WoundedWarriorProject.org

Services for the Underserved: www.aftertheparade.com

Veterans Arts Program: www.buffalonews.com/city/article37025.ace

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