

New Zealand Defence Force fire fighters hard at work in the flames and heat of the Carr Fire in northern California.



ARMY FIREFIGHTERS SAY LONG, HOT DAYS WORTH IT

by Luz Baguioro, Public Affairs Manager – Joint Forces New Zealand

They work up to 15 hours each day, in temperatures as high as 43 degrees Celsius, but the chance to help fire-ravaged communities halfway around the globe makes it all worth it, New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) firefighters helping battle wildfires in North America say.

Nine NZDF firefighters – eight from 2ER New Zealand Army and one from the Royal New Zealand Air Force – are part of New Zealand contingents sent to help battle

the massive fires in the United States and Canada.

“Our day starts at 5:30am and we would be working at the fire line up to 11 hours and not get back to camp until 8:30pm,” Army Sergeant Alex Walker, who is leading the three-member NZDF team in the United States, said.

“It’s difficult, challenging work and the tasks vary each day. Sometimes it is holding a fire line, at times it is patrolling the perimeter of the fire.”

Cal Fire, California’s firefighting agency, appointed the NZDF firefighters deployed in early August to the United States as task force leaders. Each of them are managing between 60 and 100 firefighters trying to suppress the Carr Fire in Northern California, which burned about 230,000 acres, destroyed nearly 1100 homes and killed eight people.

Although the days may be long and hot, Sergeant Walker said the gratitude shown by the locals was more than enough reward.

“When we stop at the petrol station, people ask us where we are from and they are amazed when we tell them that we’re from New Zealand,” he said. “They shake our hands and could not thank us enough for coming halfway around the world to help.”

The Kiwi firefighters said it was impossible to buy anything outside the camps because the locals won’t let them pay.

“Our warm thanks for the help which you and your team are currently providing. Those responding to our needs in this way are pure gems,” Mr John Donaghy, the former Canadian High Commissioner to New Zealand, said in a letter to Brigadier John Boswell, the Land Component Commander.

The NZDF deployed six other firefighters to help combat the wildfires raging across British Columbia in Canada.

Army Sergeant Michael Scott, who is heading the NZDF team in Canada, said the fires they were dealing with were bigger and more dangerous than they had encountered in New Zealand.

“Cedars are massive and when they burn they are like giant chimneys, which can be quite dangerous,” Corporal Tony Morris, a Senior Firefighter from the Royal New Zealand Air Force, said.

“It has been full-on and pretty tiring. But it’s been very rewarding. We’ve all learnt a great deal and it’s all worth it,” said Corporal Morris, who is helping battle wildfires at Revelstoke, a city in southeastern British Columbia.

Although there is not much difference in the way firefighters in Canada and the United States operate, the New Zealand firefighters had to be briefed on how to deal with bears and other wild animals.

“There are bears, wolves and cougars in the areas where we are operating and we were told that if we encounter them we should make as much noise as possible and make ourselves look as big as we can and back away,” Sergeant Scott said.

“We work in pairs and we have whistles on our shirts, but fortunately we have not had to use them yet.”

