



Governor Awards Medal of Valor to Seven CAL FIRE Employees

By Rosa Hernandez, special assistant to the director, Sacramento Headquarters

On December 9, 2008, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger recognized the extraordinary bravery and heroism of 42 State employees by awarding them the Governor's Medal of Valor. Seven CAL FIRE employees received the Medal of Valor, the highest honor California bestows upon its public servants.

"Everyday our firefighters come to work knowing that today they may be asked to risk their life to save another," said Chief Del Walters, Director of CAL FIRE. "Today we honor those, who with incredible bravery risked it all," Walters said at the event.

CAL FIRE Medal of Valor Awardees:

On May 18, 2008, Deputy State Fire Marshal John Guhl observed a vehicle erratically driving next to a fifteen-foot rock-faced cliff embankment. He was successful in stopping the disoriented, male driver from injuring himself and others with his vehicle. Fire Marshal Guhl of Sacramento received the Silver Medal of Valor.

On May 31, 2007, Captain Wesley D. Grim responded to a house fire that was fully engulfed with heavy smoke and flames coming out of the windows. Informed that an infant was trapped in the back bedroom and several attempts to rescue the infant had failed due to the intense heat and smoke, Captain Grim decided to make one last attempt and entered through the bedroom window. Searching through the smoke filled room, he found the infant in the far corner. Re-tracing his way back to the window, Captain Grim handed the infant to a police officer who immediately transferred the infant to the hospital. Captain Grim of Visalia received the Gold Medal of Valor.

On October 21, 2007, Captain Carl Schwettmann, Jr., assisting with medical treatment of a CAL FIRE engine crew suffering from severe burns from the Harris Fire, was informed that a firefighter was missing and presumed dead. Captain Schwettmann drove through intense heat and smoke to find the missing firefighter and was able to quickly find the

missing firefighter who had suffered 2nd degree burns over his entire body. Captain Schwettmann called for a helicopter to transport the severely injured firefighter to the hospital. The rescued firefighter made a full recovery and was able to return to duty. Captain Schwettmann of El Cajon received the Gold Medal of Valor.

On December 28, 2007, Captain Eric A. Ayers responded to an emergency dispatch where a passenger vehicle had lost control due to ice, which traveled down a 30-foot embankment and landed in four feet of water in the Susan River. Captain Ayers arrived at the scene, slid down the snow-covered embankment, and entered the icy water. Swimming to the vehicle, he found a woman suspended upside down by her seatbelt with her head under water. Captain Ayers, using his knife, cut the seatbelt loose, freed the woman from the vehicle and assisted her back to the riverbank. Captain Ayers of Susanville received the Gold Medal of Valor.

On February 2, 2008, Fire Apparatus Engineer James Allen and Firefighter Franklin Johnson were dispatched to a well-established, residential structure fire. After hearing reports that a child was inside the home, Allen and Johnson entered the home in search of a 12-year old boy. They found the boy, picked him up and got him safely outside where he was transported to the hospital. Engineer Allen and Firefighter Johnson of Mariposa received the Gold Medal of Valor.

On May 13, 2008, Forestry Equipment Manager Corey Call noticed a vehicle drifting into the opposite bound traffic lane. Call immediately made a U-turn and found the vehicle had crossed over the center divide and crashed into a group of trees. Call, crawling through a broken window into the smoke-filled car, made several attempts to pull the driver out of the car. Unfortunately, the limited space and damage to the car made it difficult to pull the women out. Forestry Equipment Manager Call of St. Helena received the Gold Medal of Valor.

What Makes a Hero?

By Leah Sandberg, fire prevention specialist, Lassen-Modoc Unit

What makes a hero? One definition is "someone who goes above and beyond what's expected of them, beyond their duty in order to help those in need, usually at significant risk to their own life."

What makes Eric Ayers a hero? – Exactly that. The morning of December 28, 2007, arrived with temperatures in the 20s. Old Mother Nature had tucked the town of Susanville in the night before with a thin blanket of snow that softened the landscape and trimmed the rivers and streams with ice. Bonnie Hull was on her way to work at the doctor's office that morning when her Honda SUV hit a patch of black ice. The vehicle lost traction and slid to the right towards a ditch. Beginning to panic, she used her brakes and cut the steering wheel to the left to avoid the ditch, which caused the vehicle to spin. She took her hands from the wheel and let God take control. "Whatever happens, happens," she thought "and there's nothing I can do about it at this point."

Her SUV stopped spinning when it hit a tree where it flipped onto its roof and slid down a 30 foot bank and into the icy Susan River. The water quickly entered the vehicle. Like an intruder, it pressed against the windows, cracking the glass trying to get in. Seeking the path of least resistance, it reached its icy fingers into whatever opening it could find to enter the vehicle. Bonnie tried to unhook her seatbelt only to find it locked into place. She began to feel frightened for the first time. She tried desperately to keep her head above the rapidly rising water.



Eric Ayers receiving Medal of Valor from Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger

She saw her purse floating nearby and grabbed her cell phone. She dialed 9-1-1 and got the operator: a voice to reassure her and a chance at hope. The operator stayed on the line with her, telling her help was on the way. The water was cold and Bonnie's arms began to tire as she tried to hold herself up and out of the water. She had to drop the phone in order to gain better purchase and her fear soon returned as the lifeline she had with the operator was lost.

Soon the water was up to Bonnie's neck and she knew it would be only a moment before it was over her head. She wondered if this was the end; if this was her time to die. She thought about how it would feel to drown. She imagined that even if she did drown, the cold water might give the rescuers a chance to revive her. She felt a soul rending loneliness she had never felt before. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and felt the water close in around her head.

At that moment, she felt a hand lift her head out of the water. A man appeared behind her. He told her his name was Eric and he was there to help her. He told her to relax, they would be okay and he wouldn't leave her. She felt her spirit shift from despair to peace.

Fire Captain Eric Ayers had been conducting routine business for the Lassen-Modoc-Plumas Unit of CAL FIRE in Susanville at the time of the incident. At 8:56 a.m. he heard an emergency dispatch come across the radio of his utility vehicle. The call was for a single vehicle into the river two blocks away. He had no rescue equipment and no flotation device, yet the thought of not responding did not cross his mind. He notified the Emergency Command Center that he was heading to the call, and within one minute he was on scene.

Before any other emergency response resources arrived, Eric slid down the bank and dove into the freezing water. He swam to the vehicle and entered through a rear door. Once inside, he crawled to the driver's seat, reached out and held Bonnie's head out of the water. He wondered if he would be able to



Bonnie Hull posing with her rescuer Eric Ayers

get her out. He wondered if he would be able to save her life or if he would have to watch her die because time was running out. And then he remembered the knife he had in his pocket. He told Bonnie he was going to shift hands: he would hold her head out of the water with his left hand so he could reach for the knife with his right. He reassured her they were going to be okay. Eric cut her seat belt free and helped her into the back seat and out the back door. He helped her across the icy river, up the muddy bank and into the waiting ambulance where they were both treated for mild hypothermia.

Eric received the Veteran's Firefighter Award in Susanville on November 19, 2008, for his bravery, and he was presented with the Governor's Gold Medal of Valor Award in Sacramento on December 9, 2008. Though Eric is one to downplay his actions, he was a hero that frozen day in December. He went above and beyond what was expected of him to help someone in need, risking his own life in the process. He was not equipped for this type of call. He had no protection from the near freezing water. He had no ropes or flotation devices, and being first on scene, had no assistance from other responders. His first thought was to save a life. Without his quick actions, Bonnie Hull would likely have drowned. In the eyes of the CAL FIRE Lassen-Modoc-Plumas Unit and the eyes of Bonnie Hull, that makes Eric Ayers a hero.