

West Hawaii Today

Learning the ropes

Firefighters hone rescue skills

by Chelsea Jensen

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cjensen@westhawaii.com

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Training never ends for Hawaii Fire Department firefighters.

"If we're not practicing all the time, it's very easy to forget the techniques and skills needed for safety during a rescue," said Sean Sommers, a captain at the Kailua Fire Station. "We can master the basic skills in training before it comes up in an emergency, so we don't have to take a lot of time trying to figure out what to do."

Sixteen firefighters assigned to the Kailua and Waiakea stations practiced rappelling, securing and retrieving patients using a litter Thursday morning on the large rock wall just south of Henry Street and mauka of Queen Kaahumanu Highway.

"This is the first time we've had a CMC instructor come to the island and train us as a group. In the past we've sent a few men over to train in California, but this offers better training," Sommers said. "Training together as a team gives a lot more of the guys the opportunity to see different rope-rescue techniques and refine the skills that they practice in the station together."

CMC Rescue School offers training courses to firefighters around the United States on proper rappelling and rescue techniques that can make a rescue more successful and efficient. The school, based out of Santa Barbara, Calif., was founded by rescue equipment producer California Mountain Co. in 1978. The company provides equipment and training.

"Every fire department has to deal with these types of rescues. A lot of the techniques that are used are the same no matter where you go," said Leroy Harbach, an instructor with CMC Rescue School. "This is a way that we can train firefighters at a lower height where they can get comfortable with the equipment, gear and techniques used in a rescue."

Big Island firefighters use rope rescue systems to bring patients to safety in such situations as car accidents in the island's gulches, people stranded in lava tubes and stranded hikers, among others. Sommers said the biggest risk in rope rescues is the chance of shredding or cutting safety lines or slippage of improperly tied knots.

However, rope rescues rarely happen on the Big Island, he said. "In the 15 years that I've been with the department we've only had to set up a system to haul a patient to safety three times," Sommers said.



Firefighters practice basket-and-rope rescue techniques as part of the Rope Rescue Technician Seminar on Thursday. - Photo By Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today

Instructors Bruce Parker and Harbach talked local firefighters through a series of training exercises on the 40-foot rock wall. Firefighters practiced



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Firefighters use an A-frame to practice rescue techniques on Thursday. - Photo By Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today

picking patients off a rocky ledge and rappelling to the ground safely and using ropes to lift and lower a litter, which is a type of stretcher.

Once the basic techniques of rope rescue were mastered, firefighters practiced using artificial high anchor points to make lifting patients in a litter quicker and safer as ropes used to control the lifting and lowering of the stretcher were extended out from jagged or uneven edges.

Thirteen of the 16 firefighters who participated in the course are training to become rescue specialists with the Hawaii Fire Department. To be eligible to become a rescue specialist, applicants must have been firefighters or emergency medical technicians with the fire department for at least three years and must undergo a physical and an agility test, as well as an interview, Sommers said.

"It's a good foundation to enhance what we came out with from recruit training," said Scott Shiroma, who is temporarily assigned with the Waiakea station and training to become a rescue specialist. "But, you never know where the rescue's going to be, so the more we practice on different surfaces and terrain the better it is in a real situation."



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Firefighters use an A-frame to practice rescue techniques on Thursday. - Photo By Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today