Seabee reservists help build search-dog training area in Santa Paula

TROY HARVEY/SPECIAL TO THE STAR Canine trainer Emily Fisk and her dog Skye give a search-and-rescue demonstration at the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation in Santa Paula on Friday.

Posted: Aug. 12, 2016

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TROY HARVEY/SPECIAL TO THE STAR People tour the industrial park mock-up at the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation in Santa Paula during Friday’s Navy Distinguished Visitors Day. Seabee reservists are helping build the facility.
TROY HARVEY/SPECIAL TO THE STAR Senior Chief Petty Officer Tim Cooper speaks during Friday's tour of the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation. Seabee reservists are helping build the facility.

TROY HARVEY/SPECIAL TO THE STAR A simulated plane crash is part of the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation training center in Santa Paula.

By Claudia Boyd-Barrett, Special to The Star

It's been a long summer of hard work for dozens of Navy reservists who are helping construct the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation's training center in Santa Paula.

But on Friday, those reservists — all members of Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 25 participating in a volunteer training program organized by the Department of Defense — took a break to show off the results of their labor to a handful of visiting superiors.

It isn't a typical construction project. The Seabee reservists have built a tilted house that looks like it's about to fall down. They've created an enormous concrete-covered trench, and they've carefully arranged large chunks of concrete slabs, pipes and other broken construction materials into a giant pile of rubble.

"It's a huge help," said Emily Fisk, one of three canine trainers with the foundation.

The nonprofit group trains dogs to search for human survivors after disasters such as earthquakes, tornadoes and floods. The dogs and their trainers need access to simulated disaster environments that replicate what they might deal with in real life: collapsed buildings, industrial hazards and transportation wreckage.

Creating that kind of disaster infrastructure is what the Seabee reservists have been working on this summer and for the past three years. They've also helped with general construction and landscaping.

The reservists — about 150 total this year — arrive from across the country and spend two to three weeks working. They're participants in the U.S. military's Innovative Readiness Training program, which sends service members to work on civilian projects.
In addition to helping the foundation, the reservists are learning construction skills they can use in the military, said Cmdr. Steve Kelley with the 1st Naval Construction Regiment at Naval Base Ventura County Port Hueneme.

"It's incredibly valuable," said Kelley, who spent the day at the Santa Paula site. "Some of the people that come here don't work in the construction trades, so over the course of the year, their only experience working with tools and with their hands will come from this ... program."

He said the reservists go home feeling like they've learned a lot, and they've become believers in the Search Dog Foundation.

"It's really a win-win," he said.

The foundation acquired the 125-acre property in 2008 and houses and trains about 10 rescue dogs at the site, although that number is expected to grow. The organization in June moved its administrative headquarters from Ojai to the Santa Paula location.

Debra Tosch, the foundation's executive director, said construction continues on other buildings, including a welcome center, which should be finished next year.

Plans include creating a collapsed freeway and building a replica of a hotel in Haiti that was wrecked during the 2010 earthquake there.

"Every single prop that they are building has very specific training needs in mind," Tosch said. "This is a never-ending project because you have to constantly keep things changed up, because we can't have the dogs and handlers memorizing everything."

Steve Jones, a reservist equipment operator, called his experience "incredible."

"You just know that you're really a part of something," he said. "What we're doing now, who knows? Maybe in three years, if we have a national disaster, they send the dogs out there to help, and because of what we have done I feel like I'm actually helping, too."