

# FIRE WATCH

## WILDFIRES ARE A NEW THREAT IN WESTERN WASHINGTON

Wildfires have become a part of the Western United States landscape with fire season beginning earlier and ending later each year. Here in Washington State, we tend to think of wildfires as a problem confined to the eastern side of the state. In 2020, we learned firsthand that wildfires happen on the west side and in our neighborhoods.



On September 7th, Western Washington was under a red flag warning, meaning any wildland fire that started would be expected to rapidly grow. It was hot, dry, and windy – fire weather. Questions were coming in from concerned residents about smoke in the air. At the time, much of that smoke was coming from fires in Eastern Washington; but that would all change. That afternoon we saw brush fires ignite in and around our

service area. Several fires burned along both sides of State Route 167 just south of the City of Pacific. Fire crews from South King County and North Pierce County were working non-stop, extinguishing fires that evening and into the next day. VRFA firefighters responded to 10 brush fires and two residential fires in the Algona, Auburn, and Pacific communities on September 7th and 8th.

The Sumner Grade Fire along Highway 410 in Sumner, our neighbors to the south, was sparked on September 7th. The fire quickly grew and would burn for days - requiring a State mobilization. VRFA firefighters were not part of the State mobilization, but assisted through mutual aid agreements. The Sumner Grade Fire forced local authorities to issue evacuation orders and warnings, something we aren't familiar with here in Western Washington. The fire damaged and destroyed homes and showed us that our communities in Western Washington are vulnerable to wildfires.

In addition to tackling these fires in our region, 16 of 20 VRFA red card firefighters were deployed eight times to fires in Eastern Washington, Oregon, and California from July to October. "They spent a total of 198 days away from their families to help other communities," said Battalion Chief Rick Olson. The longest lasting deployment was



15 days at the LNU Lightning Complex Fire in Northern California.

What steps can you take to help prevent wildfires and keep your home safe? Clean up any combustibles in and around your yard. Cut back bushes and trees, especially those close to your home. Keep your grass trimmed and watered. During red flag warnings and extended periods of hot, dry weather, use extra caution with smoking materials, activities that may generate sparks, outdoor cooking. Make sure you don't have any chains hanging from your vehicle or trailer. Sparks from the chains hitting the pavement can set off a brush fire in dry vegetation along the side of the road.

For more information on how you can keep your home safe and help prevent wildfires, look for our annual Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) Project of the Week campaign on social media in the spring, or visit [www.vrfa.org](http://www.vrfa.org).

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# VRFA BIDS FAREWELL TO THREE

During the second half of 2020, the VRFA has bid farewell to three employees, each with over 20 years served to the Algona, Auburn, and Pacific communities.



**JANEEN RUGE**

**Captain Janeen Ruge** retired in June, after a twenty-one-year career. Ruge was hired in January of 1999 by the Auburn Fire Department as their first female firefighter and was well known for forging a path for others to follow and passing along a wealth of knowledge.

Ruge, who advanced to the rank of Captain and Acting Battalion Chief for the Valley Regional Fire Authority, says she has just been doing her job, but those who have worked with her and learned from her tell a different story.

“From the first day I started in this career, Janeen has been looking out for me. I know it wasn’t always easy for Janeen to be the first female hired, but her perseverance helped so many other females who have followed. Janeen has a passion for helping others and has made a difference in the fire service. Her generosity and positive attitude have impacted many. I feel privileged to have followed and worked alongside Janeen,” said Captain Melina Kuzaro.

A significant focus of Ruge’s career has been mentoring and training new firefighters and acting captains. It is estimated she assisted with training over 40 employees through her service on the Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee (JATC). Ruge developed many components of written and practical tests used to evaluate new firefighters’ progress and served as an apprentice evaluator.

Ruge was on the Technical Rescue Team, with technician certifications in swift water rescue, hazardous materials, structural collapse, and rope rescue. She was a Technical Safety Officer and served as an instructor for confined space rescue and rope rescue courses.

Delivering babies and calming frightened patients were some of the most poignant moments of the job, but Janeen’s favorite memories come from working with her fellow crew members.

“The legacy I hope to have left for my crew is to always do the right thing, be good at your job, be comfortable with yourself, and always proud of who you are,” said Ruge.



**NORM GOLDEN**

**Captain Norm Golden** left the VRFA in November, after 28 years. He resigned to accept a position as Deputy Chief of Operations for the Tukwila Fire Department.

Golden was hired on October 1, 1992, by the City of Auburn Fire Department. Over the years, he worked in many leadership roles, including Officer in Charge of the Medical Services Division, Station Facilities Manager, CPR/AED Competency-Based Training Instructor, and Shift Fire Investigation Specialist. He was promoted to Captain in 1999 and Fire Marshal in 2012. He returned to field operations as a Captain in 2017.

His career featured several awards, including Fire Officer of the Year in 2003 and 2016, a Medal of Commendation, and five Meritorious Unit Citations.

VRFA Deputy Chief Brad Thompson, who worked alongside Golden for many years, commented, “Without question, Norm is one of the most compassionate firefighters I have ever met. His legacy, to me, is how he took care of his crew members and the citizens he served.”

In addition to his on-shift work, Golden represented his fellow firefighters in the Valley Professional Firefighters Union, Local 1352. He held several positions, including President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Shift Steward.



**LARS MICKELSON**

**Firefighter/EMT and Technical Rescue Specialist Lars Mickelson**

retired from the Valley Regional Fire Authority in December. His career in the fire service spanned twenty years, serving first with Mountain View Fire and Rescue, and then VRFA. Before becoming a firefighter, Mickelson worked in several capacities in the emergency medical field.

His first exposure to emergency medicine was serving as a combat medic for the US Army Reserves. After that, Mickelson worked for King County Ambulance as an EMT and Overlake Hospital as an Emergency Room Technician.

In addition to his firefighting duties, Mickelson served eight years as a Technical Rescue Specialist for the VRFA and obtained certifications in dive and swift water rescue, as well as high and low angle rescue. He played a part in several emergency rescues, working alongside his Technical Rescue Team (TRT) members.

Although he is retiring from the fire service, Mickelson will not be getting much rest or relaxation, as he will be working full time in a family-owned business.

“As excited as I am about moving on to a new career and the next chapter of my life, I am saddened to think of all that I am leaving. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been part of the fire service family, surrounded by such professional people. I am thankful for the experiences I have had, the memories I will take with me, and most of all, for the great relationships and friendships forged throughout my career,” said Mickelson.

“Lars is one of those low-maintenance, high-performance people that are the driving force in any successful organization. He was always quick to take on responsibility and slow to acknowledge his contributions. He will be missed, but we wish him great success in his new and exciting endeavors,” said Fire Chief Brent Swearingen.

## PROMOTIONS | *Operations*



**JORDAN GUSTAFSON**

On November 1, 2020, **Firefighter Jordan Gustafson** received a promotion to the rank of Captain. Jordan hired on with the Valley Regional Fire Authority in 2011. During his time as a firefighter, Gustafson served as the Public Information & Education Specialist for D-Shift and was on the wildland firefighting team.



**JERRY MONTIEL**

On December 16, 2020, **Firefighter Jerry Montiel** received a promotion to the rank of Captain. Jerry began his career with the Valley Regional Fire Authority in July of 2012. From March of 2017 until March of 2020, he served as a Training Officer (TO) for the South King County Fire Training Consortium. During his time as a TO, Jerry worked to provide quality training on fire engine pumping operations to the entirety of Zone 3.

## FIRE CHIEF'S MESSAGE



**BRENT D. SWEARINGEN**

In each of these newsletters, we try to present public safety topics of immediate interest to the public, ongoing reminders of safety tips, and a recap of the activities in the VRFA.

This month we highlighted numerous achievements by VRFA members. Some are moving on to other opportunities, either through retirement or taking positions in other organizations. We also congratulate two recently promoted captains: Jordan Gustafson and Jerry Montiel. While announcing promotions is a fairly common occurrence, the process that firefighters go through to compete for these promotions is anything but common.

For a firefighter to test for the captain's position, she or he must have successfully completed a rigorous multi-year apprenticeship program and then served at least one year as a senior firefighter. In addition to demonstrating on-the-job skills, they must also have a minimum of an Associate's degree from an accredited college or at least 90 quarter credits towards a college degree to qualify for entrance into the captain's exam.

As for the testing process, the first section is a written exam with questions taken from texts on firefighting, supervisory skills, building construction, incident management, and VRFA policies and procedures. The top passing scores from this exam will move on to the next series of tests.

After the written test, successful candidates enter the assessment center portion of the testing process. These are multiple

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performance-based tests that are overseen and graded by chief officers from area departments. These exercises always include a tactical portion in which the candidate manages a complex incident, such as a commercial or high-rise fire. Additional exercises test for leadership skills that a competent captain must possess, such as problem-solving, communication - both oral and written, critical thinking, and supervisory skills. Chief officers from the VRFA have no role in grading the exercises to eliminate any potential conflicts of interest.

Each portion of the assessment exercises must be passed with a minimum of 70% for the candidate to then be placed on a ranked list of firefighters eligible for promotion to captain.

The last step in the promotional process is a competitive resume review and interview with the fire chief and executive staff personnel. By civil service rules, the fire chief is free to choose any of the top three candidates to fill a promotional vacancy.

Even after all this testing and vetting, the promoted candidate must successfully complete a year of supervised probation before being confirmed as a VRFA captain.

This rigorous and stressful process is repeated every two years to establish a new promotional list.

I highlight this process for two reasons: First, I hope that you can share the appreciation and pride that I have in the men and women who step forward and put themselves through this difficult process - often multiple times. A captain wearing bugles on his or her lapels signifies that they have demonstrated the knowledge and skill to deserve the privilege of leading VRFA firefighters. Second, while we are asking that you prepare for unforeseen emergencies, we are here diligently preparing to do our part as well.

## HEART ATTACK SIGNS AND WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU CALL 911

February is American Heart Month. We encourage everyone to practice good heart health by consulting their physician and making lifestyle choices that support heart health. But what if you do experience a cardiac emergency? Heart attacks are far more common in this country than some people may realize. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) states that every 40 seconds, someone in this country has a heart attack. In addition to talking to your doctor about what steps you can take to reduce your chance of a heart attack, your best defense is to be able to recognize when one may be happening.

What are the symptoms of a heart attack? A common sign is chest pain that is either sharp or dull and often described as unyielding "pressure" in the center of the chest. Additional symptoms may include shortness of breath,



general weakness, nausea, and pain in the jaw, back, neck, or shoulders.

If you notice the symptoms of a heart attack in yourself or someone else, **call 9-1-1 immediately**. The sooner you get to an emergency room, the sooner you can get treatment to reduce the amount of damage to the heart muscle.

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When you call 911 for heart attack symptoms, a call taker dispatches a Basic Life Support (BLS) unit with 2-3 emergency medical technicians (EMT's) and one Advanced Life Support (ALS) unit with two King County paramedics. Upon arrival, EMTs and paramedics assess your vital signs and ask you questions regarding your health history and symptoms. For this reason,

having a list of medications and your medical history available is very helpful. The medics will analyze the electrical activity in your heart using a portable EKG device to determine any problems and next steps for medical treatment.

If further medical care is the best course of action, you will be taken to the nearest hospital with a catheter lab, like the one at Multicare Auburn Medical Center. At the hospital, a specialized team of doctors and nurses will take over medical care and treatment.

While thinking about having a heart attack is frightening, remember that the sooner emergency treatment begins, the better the chances of survival and recovery. Learning the signs and calling 911 immediately will dramatically improve your chances.



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# THE VRFA GIVES BACK



## Fill the Boot fundraiser

While we all know that 2020 was challenging, through it all, the Valley Regional Fire Authority (VRFA) and IAFF Local 1352 continued to put their time and energy into giving back to the community.

Continuing a 60-year relationship with the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA), the VRFA and Local 1352 held a virtual Fill the Boot fundraiser. Although donations were down from past years, we gave what we had to the MDA to help young people and their families struggling with this disease.



## Toys for Kids toy drive

The annual Toys for Kids toy drive also looked a little different in 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to collect toys and

money in person. The VRFA and IAFF Local 1352 have been giving out toys to needy children who live within the cities of Auburn, Algona, and Pacific for over 30 years. We were not going to let the pandemic deter efforts to continue the tradition. Local 1352 set up a Go Fund Me account to collect funds virtually. They used those funds to purchase toys for the children at the Fred Meyer in north Auburn. Several local businesses generously contributed, as did many community members and VRFA staff. Once again, the VRFA partnered with the Auburn Food Bank to register families for the toy distribution. Due to social distancing restrictions, the distribution also looked a little different this year. After many venues had turned them down, Emerald Downs graciously stepped up and allowed the use of their stable area to hand out the toys. Along with members of Local 1352, fire explorers, Hop n Drops, and local businesses, volunteers handed out gifts to over 800 children this year.

The VRFA and Local 1352 would like to thank everyone who helped make Toys for Kids a success. The long-standing event would not be possible without the help and support of businesses and the community served by the Valley Regional Fire Authority. Special thanks to Firefighters John Monsebroten, John Stivers, and Cory Wallace for coordinating this event under challenging circumstances.

[WWW.VRFA.ORG](http://WWW.VRFA.ORG)

Black and white photos by Andrew Huth Photography



## VRFA Services

The VRFA provides CPR and First Aid classes, complimentary blood pressure checks, fire station tours, custom-fit bicycle helmets, custom-fit life jackets, smoke alarms, child car seat inspections and more.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

call **253-288-5800** or  
go to **www.vrfa.org**

## VRFA Administration

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Fire Chief/Administrator

**Brad Thompson**

Deputy Chief of Operations

**Dave Larberg**

Deputy Chief of Technical Services

**Mark Horaski**

Chief Financial Officer

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The VRFA is committed to our mission:  
**WE SERVE THE WHOLE COMMUNITY**