

NEU MOV Awardees

Today, we would like to introduce two CAL FIRE employees to the Nevada County Board of Supervisors and recognize their achievement in being awarded the State of California's highest honor for life saving events, the California Gold Medal of Valor

Both employees work in the Nevada Yuba Placer Unit and are assigned in Nevada County. These selfless acts are an example of the commitment and duty to others that is exemplified in all CAL FIRE employees. It is our honor to recognize these two gentlemen here today.

Heavy Fire Equipment Operator (HFEO) Joe Kennedy:

On November 8th, 2018, CAL FIRE NEU heavy fire equipment operator Joe Kennedy arrived in Paradise, CA. during the early hours of the devastating Camp Fire to find the fire well established along the Pentz Road corridor with hundreds of residents, patients and employees of the Feather River Hospital trying to flee the area. Engine 2390 became stuck in traffic along with dozens of other vehicles on Pearson Road near Dry Creek. The Engine Captain ordered air support, but conditions were too extreme. Then over the radio came the request. "Can we get a dozer to move cars on Pearson Road?" Kennedy was nearby in Dozer 2342. Since all roads were impassable with traffic, he drove his dozer through back yards to get to Pearson Road.

Near Feather River Hospital, he encountered a California Highway Patrol officer and nurses trying to escape the fire on foot. The visibility was extremely limited, and the CHP officer waved his flashlight to get HFEO Kennedy's attention. Kennedy stopped the dozer and the nurses immediately got into the dozer to escape the flames. Kennedy explained that he didn't have room for the 2 of them inside the dozer and secured them in the fire engine directly behind him. Traffic was at a standstill on Pearson Road throughout the Dry Creek drainage. Which was burning under strong winds with the flames consuming brush, timber, structures, and vehicles. Vehicles 3 abreast were all trying to move West on Skyway out of town. The vehicles on Pearson Road that were nearest the ravine were catching fire as the fire burned intensely in the drainage.

It would not be long before the cars in the middle and right side also caught fire. People had bailed out of the burning cars and taken refuge in cars further from the flames. Kennedy used the dozer to push burning cars off the road, opening a path for the remaining vehicles. His actions cleared the pathway and through almost zero visibility, allowed the trapped vehicles to escape the flames. These actions undoubtedly saved lives and Joe stayed the course with this operation until all cars were safely west of the blowup. Joe Kennedy went above and beyond the Call of Duty at great risk to his own life.

For his selfless and heroic efforts, Joe was awarded the highest honor given to California Emergency Responders.

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Fire Captain Eric Ayers

In 2021, CAL FIRE Captain Eric Ayers came upon the scene of a serious vehicle accident on Hwy 49 in Nevada County while off duty. Arriving moments after the accident occurred, he found a victim trapped inside the vehicle which was on fire. Eric took immediate action, enlisting the help of his daughter to gather fire extinguishers from stopped vehicles while he proceeded to gain access to the burning vehicle and attempt to free the victim.

The vehicle became heavily involved with fire and smoke, and Eric was pushed back numerous times while trying to extricate the victim through the doors, even cutting the sunroof opening larger with a Sawzall to attempt extrication. As first due fire and paramedic units arrived at scene, Eric placed himself in harm's way and eventually the young man was pulled from the vehicle.

While the driver suffered 3rd degree burns and traumatic injuries, spending months in a Burn unit, he survived the accident and is recovering to this day.

For his selfless and heroic efforts, Eric was awarded the highest honor given to California Emergency Responders.

On behalf of the almost 400 men and women of the CAL FIRE Nevada Yuba Placer Unit, It is my honor and privilege to recognize both Joe and Eric for their achievements and this well-deserved honor.