



Tulsa District USACE Park Ranger BJ Parkey helps out two girls as they fill out a water safety quiz at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Southwestern Division water safety event at the McConnell Air Force Base Air Show and Open House Sept. 29 & 30.

Taking water safety to the troops

by Sara Goodeyon
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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Southwestern Division water safety team held its division-wide water safety event as part of the Wings over McConnell 2012 Open House and Air Show Sept. 29 & 30 at McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita, Kansas.

More than two dozen team members from the division and its four districts (Tulsa, Little Rock, Galveston and Ft. Worth), as well as the Kansas City District and the National Water Safety Team staffed a 150 foot by 100 foot area during the two day event visited by more than 100 thousand military members and their dependents who attended the Open House and Air Show.

"For the past several years, the division has been promoting and supporting a division-wide water safety event in one of the four districts," said Louis Holstead, Southwestern Division representative to the USACE national water safety team. "The McConnell Air Show event had previously been showcased at the International Boating and Water Safety Summit through the USACE Best Management Practices forum and many people were aware of its magnitude and potential. We felt that since Tulsa District was hosting the division event this year that this event would be ideal to invite folks from throughout the division to participate."

Tulsa District's Fall River Lake Project Office began a relationship with McConnell AFB about five years ago, supplying water safety materials to Outdoor Recreation and participating in McConnell AFB's Outdoor Recreation Summer Days program. This relationship led to McConnell's Outdoor Recreation Director Jim Vause inviting the Tulsa District to present a water safety event at the biannual air show in 2010.

"We recognized that we have a lot of military coming to the lake due to the proximity to Wichita," said Natalia Pope, Tulsa District water safety team member. "That opened our eyes to them coming out to our facilities and we wanted to work toward supporting our military. It started small and then we were invited to be a part of the 2010 air show. We partnered with the Kansas City District and did it then on a smaller scale than this year and it was a big success."

The Corps area was situated in a high-traffic area, and an RV trailer was provided by Outdoor Recreation to give Corps personnel and volunteers a place to take breaks and to store supplies.

The size of the water safety event tripled when it became a division-wide effort because of the amount of resources the districts and division could provide. The Corps conducted interactive and educational activities such as a life jacket display, a low head dam display, and multiple boats on display. Corps park rangers or a water safety volunteer staffed each area to answer questions. Bobber the Water Safety Dog was there and there was a children's coloring table. The Corps also offered individuals of all ages the opportunity to take a water safety quiz with the chance to earn promotional items.

The quiz came in two versions, one for adults and another for children. Lured by the giveaways, people lined up to take the quiz. Rangers and volunteers educated participants about water safety as they took the quiz. The quiz was the brain child of Pope and Corps Park Ranger Gary Simmons. They created it about five years ago and subsequently a team was formed to come up with the questions for the quiz. The team changes the quizzes each year. Through a partnership with the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks and Tourism, the Corps provided the paper and the questions and the department printed them.

"The quiz makes such a difference. We had to cut our interpretive program, like going out to schools to talk about water safety," said Pope. "Our efforts of face-to-face and hands-on contact have been cut dramatically. This quiz is a great way for us to get that back at a lower cost. The face-to-face contact is so important because the participant sees that someone actually cares about them. They are more attentive to the message and they retain it and it often prompts them to ask questions."

One of the biggest draws to the Corps area was the pedal cars. Children, and even some adults, got an opportunity to navigate a course while wearing goggles that impair vision. The activity demonstrated the effects of alcohol on the body and encouraged people not to drink alcohol while boating.

For two days, while military members, their families, and the public checked out the Corps' activities and displays, the rangers and volunteers told the Corps story and shared the water safety message with them.

"I have been active in the water safety arena for most of my career and have attended or participated in a number of events. I would have to say that the McConnell AFB Open House event would be high on my list for the number of individuals contacted and the effectiveness of the Corps' involvement," said Dean Roberts, Tulsa District water safety team leader. "This active participation from the staff, in my opinion, is one of the main reasons that this event was so successful."

Water safety education has long been a top priority of the Southwestern Division, which annually hosts more than 80 million people on the lands and waters of its 88 lake projects.

Each district water safety team work events, big and small, to continually present the water safety message to the public. The McConnell event was the finale to a year-long campaign to reduce fatalities at Corps lakes and recreation areas.

"Although we did not reach our always present goal of zero fatalities, the numbers for this past year were much better than the previous one," said Holstead. "I believe this is largely in part to the dedicated efforts of our people who have a vision and a passion that all of our visitors go home safely at the end of the day."

The USACE reports that nationally, the fiscal year water-related fatality total for 2012 is 150, as compared to 188 water-related fatalities at the end of September 2011. Some of the fatalities are still under investigation and this is a preliminary view based on available data.

Pope is already thinking ahead to the 2014 McConnell AFB Open House and Air Show and said the district will try to do the event again.

Reflecting on the success of the McConnell event, Pope said, "It makes me feel like 'mission accomplished.' Like maybe a life might be saved. Maybe that parent will go buy those life jackets and put them on that child and set an example by wearing one themselves."