

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Soldiers Who Helped Save Four Lives From Burning Car To Be Honored At National Guard Today

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Ernice Gilbert **December 13, 2016**



ST. CROIX -- Following a widely read [Consortium story](#) about the brave acts of a V.I. National Guard soldier and his colleagues that touched Virgin Islanders home and abroad -- which saw the soldier, Deron Van Lange, above, along with help from four other soldiers, rescuing four individuals from a burning Kia Motor small SUV that had crashed into a tree near Plaza Extra West -- V.I.N.G. said on Monday that it would honor the soldiers today during the National Guard's 380th birthday celebration.

The event will be held at the Joint Force Headquarters in Estate Bethlehem today at 3:00 p.m., according to a National Guard release. There, Brigadier General Deborah Y. Howell will award the five soldiers for their act of bravery during the December 3 accident.

The soldiers who will be recognized today are PFC Van Lange, Sergeant Titus Dubois, PFC Brandon Titre, CDT Rasheed Escobar and Sergeant Cornelius Jn Baptiste.

According to the release, the territory will join the U.S. mainland in recognizing December 13 as the birthday of the National Guard. On this date in 1636, the first militia regiments in North America were organized in Massachusetts, according to the release.

Backstory

Mr. Van Lange left his home to attend military drill at about 4:15 a.m. on December 3. He headed to the Queen Mary Highway (Centerline Road) and made the left from the Consumer Gas Station, heading east.

"I came across the vehicle in the tree," he said. Seeing the situation, Mr. Van Lange immediately stepped into action, urging the driver of the vehicle to get out because the vehicle would soon catch fire.

Mr. Van Lange said he then carried the female passenger to sit near his vehicle, which was about 10 feet away from the accident, and ran back to the crash scene to continue the rescue effort. By then, a small fire had started in the vehicle. "But he couldn't get out. He was pinned between the dashboard, the front seat and the door," Mr. Van Lange said. "The driver kept telling me go to the passenger door, and when I looked I saw a female in the passenger's seat. I went around, tried to open the door but couldn't get it open. Eventually I was able to pull the glass open, stick my hand inside, unlock the front door and open it."

"I noticed another guy on the backseat, so I ran in the vehicle through the passenger-side front door, told him to come out but he wasn't moving; he was in total disorientation. I grabbed him and started pulling him out. When I did that, I noticed that the fire started to get bigger," Mr. Van Lange said.

He took the second victim over to his car, and told a V.I. National Guard soldier who had arrived to the scene to look after the two victims. Mr. Van Lange made a third dash towards the burning vehicle to rescue the driver, and noticed that a fourth person was stuck on the backseat. He went through the passenger-side front door again and pulled the third victim — who tried to help himself but was stunned and disoriented by the accident — out of the burning vehicle. "I pulled him over to my vehicle and told him to stay clear of the accident because the vehicle was going to catch fire," Mr. Van Lange said, referring to the third rescued victim.

By then, the vehicle was being consumed by fire and the driver was still stuck inside.

Mr. Van Lange rushed back to the burning vehicle attempting to rescue the driver, but the driver's position meant that some effort was needed from the driver if the rescue was to be successful. Another V.I. National Guard member had arrived to the accident scene, a first lieutenant, and pleaded with Mr. Van Lange to leave the driver.

"He told me to leave him, because it doesn't make sense for both of you all to die," Mr. Van Lange said. "I couldn't deal with the thought of just leaving him but I had no choice, because the heat became hotter."

The driver, sensing his fate, uttered a few words, telling Mr. Van Lange to leave.

“It’s okay, I know I’m going to die. It’s alright,” the driver managed. “I’ll die. I’m going to die.” Mr. Van Lange said the driver’s words — accepting the that he was about to die — troubled him all Saturday. Mr. Van Lange then went over to his vehicle, overwhelmed by the situation, and started to scream.

“I was in a rage because I couldn’t take the thought of him burning,” he said. “Then I heard him start to scream and I was like, ‘Oh My God.’” The first lieutenant on the scene urged the driver to pull himself out. Mr. Van Lange then hurried to the burning vehicle and saw the driver pulling himself out.

“He hit the ground and started to roll away and I immediately just ran, grabbed him and pulled him away from the vehicle,” he said. Mr. Van Lange was assisted by another army sergeant in moving the driver away from the burning small SUV.

“His chest area was burned, so we used some wet grass to out the fire,” Mr. Van Lange said. He then sat on the ground with the driver, whose head was resting on Mr. Van Lange’s leg, with blood bleeding from multiple parts of the driver’s body following the near deadly ordeal.

“I stayed there with him until the paramedics came,” he said. All four victims survived.