

The Virgin Islands Consortium

They Sacrificed Their Safety To Save Fellow Citizens: V.I. Soldiers Honored At National Guard Ceremony

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ST. CROIX -- The four soldiers seated in front of an audience of family and friends, and the flashing lights of media cameras in a room at the National Guard facility in Estate Bethlehem this afternoon, though given a chance to speak, did not talk about the fateful day earlier this month that led to their honoring ceremony.

But they beamed with pride as remarks from army and government officials, including written remarks from Governor Kenneth Mapp, lauded the soldiers for their selfless acts -- led by PFC Deron Van Lange -- that saved the lives of four individuals who were trapped in a burning Kia Motor vehicle in the wee hours of Saturday, December 3.

"On Saturday Dec. 3, the actions of these soldiers were innate; their response displayed the values of their families, their communities and the armed forces," said St. Croix Administrator Stephanie Williams on behalf of Mr. Mapp. "You stood up for the needs of your citizens and your community. You thought not of your personal safety, but the safety of others. You were ready to sacrifice your life; for your actions, I deeply applaud you."

Mr. Van Lange was awarded the Army commendation medal, as well as the Virgin Islands commendation medal, for his "heroic and immediate action" [during the accident](#). Sergeant Titus Dubois, PFC Brandon Titre and Sergeant Cornelius Jn Baptiste were all awarded the Virgin Islands commendation medal for their heroic actions and neglect of self to serve others.

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Brigadier General Deborah Y. Howell, visibly proud of her soldiers' actions, conveyed gratitude during her remarks this afternoon. "I could never be more prouder than I am today. In our short 43 years, since 1973, I am humbled to stand before you and commend these brave soldiers," she said.

Following the short ceremony, family, friends and fellow soldiers acknowledged the heroes with hugs and handshakes.

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.

Feature Image: From left to right: Sergeant Cornelius Jn Baptiste, Sergeant Titus Dubois, PFC Brandon Titre and PFC Deron Van Lange. (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC)