

## Coast Guard recruits get a home for the Holidays

Written by CWO Donnie Brzuska  
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CAPE MAY, N.J. – The Coast Guard and American Red Cross will place more than 200 Coast Guard recruits with approximately 80 South Jersey families for Christmas as part of Operation Fireside Tuesday at 11:45 a.m.

Coast Guard Training Center Cape May has approximately 200 recruits in training from more than 39 states, U.S. territories and countries. Operation Fireside has placed recruits with South Jersey families during the holiday season since 1981. It allows recruits to celebrate the holiday with a host family while they're separated from their loved ones during the rigorous basic training program.

“Our new Coast Guardsmen will be conducting dangerous frontline Coast Guard missions in the U.S. and abroad within days of graduation, and we make them Coast Guardsmen by pushing them to new levels of physical, mental and emotional toughness,” said Capt. Bill Kelly, the commanding officer of Training Center Cape May. “The volunteers of Operation Fireside make them feel at home, which is probably one of the greatest gifts for a service member separated from their family during the Holiday season.”

Operation Fireside has been coordinated annually by the American Red Cross Southern Shore Chapter in Cape May Court House, N.J., since the program started three decades ago. The Red Cross solicits and tracks volunteers and host families, while Training Center Cape May pairs each recruit with a family Christmas Day.

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The families and the recruits will meet at Training Center Cape May's Guardian Chapel, and the recruits will be with the families until 8 p.m. While the recruits are off base, they will be allowed to eat as much as they want, call home, and relax before beginning training again that same day.

"We're proud to say supporting military members is just one of our many Red Cross missions, and the families who host these men and women are also honored to have them in their homes," said Donna Croskey, the Operation Fireside coordinator for the Red Cross. "Even after the Holidays, many of the host families attend the recruits' graduation ceremony and stay in touch long after boot camp."

Training Center Cape May is the Coast Guard's only enlisted basic training program, and more than 83 percent of the Service's workforce receive basic instruction here to become Coast Guardsmen. The recruits are trained in everything from fire arms familiarization to basic water survival.

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