

ng troops ck home

them some rare military training. "It was one of the most realistic things we've done," McKelvey said. "We had to move a large number of people in a short time. And we could see the enemy — the enemy was that fire."

Maj. Jack Gardner, who was in charge of the battalion that came through Saturday, praised the Forest Service's training and coordinating of the firefighters.

"The field conditions were better than we normally have," Gardner said. "The food was a lot better."

He also said the troops were happy with the food and the conditions in the fieldhouse on Saturday night.

The meals, catered by the Kountry Korner Cafe at Four Corners, included barbecue beef for dinner and souffle for breakfast.

The Forest Service started planning with fieldhouse officials for the overnight stay about a month ago.

Randy MacDonald, the building supervisor, said preparation was easy.

"We laid the tarp on the floor (for the sleeping bags), got the bathrooms and towels ready and set up the tables for meals," he said. "It's been running really smooth."

Another 550 soldiers from various units will return today, leaving 1,200 Fort Lewis soldiers in Yellowstone for another 10 days to mop up, said 1st Lt. Bob Brewer, spokesman for the 9th Infantry Division. Another 1,600 troops deployed Thursday to fight fires near Helena were ordered Sunday to return by bus, Brewer said.

Snowstorms have helped stop the fires that have burned more than half the park's 2.2 million acres.

"We prayed for snow and prayed for rain," said Deena Kohler as her husband, James, gathered his bags. "And we were answered. We praise God for that."

After a brass band greeting in front of the unit's barracks, Lt. Col. Frank Brittain praised his troops' performance.

"We left here 28 days ago not knowing anything about firefighting. We found out it's a lot of hard



STEVE DOWELL/CHRONICLE

Army troops from Fort Lewis, Washington spent the night at the Brick Breeden Fieldhouse Sunday.

work," he said.

Brittain added that several U.S. Forest Service officials told him they would rather use soldiers than professional firefighters.

Some soldiers said they were upset at the disparity between

Army pay and that for civilian firefighters.

Base pay for a private is \$671 per month, but some civilian firefighters were making as much as \$3,700 per month, said Brewer.

"There's a lot of screaming about pay," Brewer said. But he said Army pay regulations contain no provisions for forest fires and Congress would have to act to boost the pay of soldiers-turned-firefighters.