RAF Mildenhall, ENGLAND -- Lt. Col. Rex Saukkonen, 352nd Special Operations Group director of staff, makes a grumpy dinosaur face as he reads "Dinosaur Roar" to over 30 children during story time at the base library on July 29. Colonel Saukkonen is one of three readers participating in "Leadership Reads" one of several projects sponsored by the American Red Cross in support of the nationwide "United We Serve" volunteer initiative sparked by President Barack Obama. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Marelise Wood)

Special Operations Group personnel head up volunteer effort

By Tech. Sgt. Marelise Wood
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RAF Mildenhall, ENGLAND – "Roar," said the dinosaur as the children squealed with delight.

This was the scene at the base library during its weekly Wednesday story time. Lt. Col. Rex Saukkonen, 352nd Special Operations Group director of staff, was reading "Dinosaur Roar" by Paul and Henrietta Stickland, and the over 30 children in attendance had no problems responding and joining in. Most of the children were story time regulars, but this was no regular story time.

Colonel Saukkonen's special appearance was due to a United We Serve project called "Leadership Reads." Holly Harper, station chair for the American Red Cross RAF Mildenhall office, put out a call for members of base leadership to read to children during story time, and the 352nd SOG answered the call.

"The U.S. military community is full of strong, positive role models for our children," said Ms. Harper. "Connecting the leadership on base and the role models around us to an activity like reading will hopefully help reinforce the message that reading is a fun, worthwhile activity that leads to success in school and in life."

President Barack Obama's hope for success and improved conditions for all sparked the United We Serve initiative. United We Serve is a nationwide effort aimed at engaging Americans in community service to create positive change and help counteract the growing social needs resulting from the economic downturn.

"This summer, I'm calling on all of you to make volunteerism and community service part of your daily life and the life of this nation," said the president. "Economic recovery is as much about what you're doing in your communities as what we're doing in Washington – and it's going to take all of us, working together."

The ARC took this message to heart. They have taken the lead on the United We Serve initiative at Mildenhall and have drafted several project ideas, in addition to "Leadership Reads," for which they are currently canvassing base volunteers.

"Military service is a unique sort of 'volunteer' service and being a part of a military family is a special sort of service in and of itself," said Ms. Harper. "But community service is something different and special. As individuals, we should all try and encourage volunteering because giving back and working together will strengthen our neighborhoods and give us and our children a sense of responsibility for the health of our own communities."

Master Sgt. Cynthia Franklin, 67th Special Operations Squadron, aviation management superintendent, feels this responsibility and chose to sponsor the "Leadership Reads" project because she thinks projects such as this are important.

"I chose this project because children are our future, and I think the more they read, the better their chances are to succeed," said Sergeant Franklin.

One more "Leadership Reads" session is scheduled for Aug. 12 in conjunction with the base library's story time.

"Programs like this show children that reading is fun," said Colonel Saukkonen. "It encourages them to want to read. More importantly, it demonstrates the importance of reading to children."

Anyone interested in learning more about United We Serve projects, or who would like to volunteer, can call the ARC at 238-2107.

"Volunteering gives back to the community, making it stronger and closer," added the colonel. "You're not a person in a community, but a person WHO HAS PRIDE IN THAT COMMUNITY."