

Airmen in the Fire Service

Michael Archer | October 11, 2007

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For the most part, when people think of the U.S. Air Force, they think in terms of planes and pilots. But the Air Force is much more than that. From 1965 to 1993, Chanute Air Force Base outside of Rantoul, Ill., was home to a premier firefighting school. The base has since closed, but the school, now known as the "Fire Protection Training Division" relocated to Goodfellow AFB in San Angelo, Texas. In the years that it operated, many future firefighters received their first taste of firefighting there. Here is a sampling of their stories:

Herpetologist Heitmann

"I wanted to be hired into a civilian fire department, so I would take any classes [at Chanute] that crossed over from the Air Force to municipal firefighting (heavy rescue, light rescue, trench rescue, etc)," said Captain Bill Heitmann of Chino Valley Independent Fire District, a former Air Force firefighter with the 42nd Squadron at Chanute and the 62nd Squadron at George AFB. "I was the Range Fire Guard out at Cuttyback Bombing Range when I was at George and really had a lot of fun driving around the range putting out fires, and learning how to handle snakes (George AFB has lots of snakes), so now I use that knowledge to teach snake classes for the fire department."

Jetta on a Stick

Not all incidents involved fires — some involve rescue operations. "I was on a three-person rescue unit at Hahn Air Base in Germany after going to Rescue School for pilot extrication and one incident that happened off the base was where a drunken serviceman drove off a dirt road and his Jetta went airborne, wrapped itself around a tree about six feet off the ground," said Captain Brian Savage of Culver City Fire Department, a former Staff Sergeant with the 50th Civil Engineering Squadron. "The guy ended up living, everything below his belly button was fractured and he spent eight months in the hospital, but was eventually discharged and sent home."

Exploring the Possibilities

The reputation of the Air Force firefighter training program is widely known. "As a Fire Explorer with LA County FD, I met some firefighters and found out the Air Force was the only place in the military where I could be strictly a firefighter and get the kind of training I wanted," recalls Battalion Chief Darryl Cleveland of Pechanga Fire Department.

ABOUT MICHAEL ARCHER



Michael Archer is a wildfire consultant and writer. He has written articles for *Home and Fire Magazine*, *Wildland Firefighter Magazine*, and other publications, lectured to many groups about fire issues, been quoted by Associated Press and USA Today reporters, and also appeared on cable and network TV discussing wildfire issues. Currently, he is acting as webmaster and technical consultant to Wildfire Research Network (www.wildfireresearch.org), a Los Angeles-based citizens' action group that promotes firefighting issues involving the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI).

His "Firebombers Incorporated" series of novels gives readers an intriguing "what-if" scenario on how 21st century technology could modernize the wildland firefighting force. His novel "Firestorm," received excellent reviews from *Writers Digest*, *The Nashville News*, *The VVA Veteran* (Vietnam Veterans of America's magazine) and firefighting professionals across the United States. His company, Firebomber Publications, donates 50 percent of net profits to organizations that support the families of injured and fallen firefighters.



You can visit his website at: www.firebomberpublications.com

Firestorm can be purchased at Amazon.com

Comments can be sent to: marcher47@firebomberpublications.com

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Bugs, Anyone?

One of the more unusual jobs in the Air Force MOS is that of a survival specialist, not something you would ordinarily associate with firefighting. "I was an Air Force combat survival trainer for pilots from 1997 to 2003," said Tony Barbi, a firefighter/paramedic with Culver City Fire Department. "That includes arctic survival, water survival, basic land survival, learning to inspect parachutes, life rafts, and all the survival gear that goes on an aircraft." All of these would be useful skills for pilots who find themselves in hostile environments, although the thought of eating bugs to survive doesn't sound particularly appealing.

For Further Reading

For readers who enjoyed these stories and would like to read more about the adventures of Air Force folks in the fire service, visit the Firefighter Interviews webpage www.firebomberpublications.com/Interviews.htm at Firebomber Publications and read interview notes from lots of firefighters who have served this country in two exciting careers. It will be entertaining time well spent!

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