

Exciting Job for Vets With Specialized Skills

Michael Archer | April 30, 2010

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Air tankers are the big guns of firefighting. They play an important role in battling wildland blazes across the U.S. What's more, many veterans found a second career in the firefighting industry as pilots, crew, and ground personnel servicing these airborne firefighters. And, veterans discovered that skills they wouldn't be able to use in the civilian workforce — close air support and attacking targets on the ground — are applicable against a tenacious enemy: wildfires.

It Began With an Idea

One of the largest air-tankers ever to be fielded against wildfires is the DC-10 — a converted airliner. Rick Hatton, president and CEO of 10 Tanker LLC, explains how a cargo plane became a firebomber: "In 2002, a private company came up with an idea that some newer technology may be appropriate for aerial firefighting. We put together some resources, all private capital, to explore the concept of taking a large, fixed-wing transport-category airplane and making it appropriate for aerial firefighting."

"We went to Boise, Idaho to the National Interagency Fire Council, and we went to a number of companies who flew aerial firefighting services. We learned that increased capacity, speedier responses to and from fires, and improved cost-effectiveness would be welcomed by some of the agencies that contract for aerial firefighting support, like the U.S. Forest Service, in addition to some states and counties," he added.

The result is a mammoth air-tanker that carries four times the payload of previous USFS aircraft (12,000 gallons versus 3,000 gallons for the P-3 Orion, formerly the largest fixed-wing aircraft in the USFS inventory), and travels at jet speed.

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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Not a 9-to-5 Job

When the 10 Tanker gets a call the pace quickens — and shifts lengthen — accordingly. "It's not a 9-to-5 type of job," Hatton agreed. "When it needs to be done, you get it done, because a fire doesn't care what time it is." There could also be some travel involved as the 10 Tanker expands its horizons overseas.

"For international contracts, this aircraft will ferry 3,000 miles at jet speeds without any problem, therefore you can one- or two-stop it anywhere you want to go," said Hatton.

"We two-stopped it all the way to Australia, and we got there in about 18 1/2 hours. We had three of us flying, and two flight engineers, so we just rotated."

Military Connection

Hatton comes from a military aviation background and flew F-4s in the Marines.

"I've always felt that firefighting and the Marine Corps were two very positive experiences that I took a number of lessons from into whatever I pursued thereafter," Hatton mentioned.

This also gives him a very favorable impression of his fellow veterans. "A man or woman just getting out of the service is used to a lot of responsibility, typically more responsibility for their age than many of their civilian counterparts and the challenge is to find a civilian career that can match that. And it's not always easy to get a job that you're really excited about. All our guys just can't wait to get on with it."

How to Prepare

Hatton advises veterans to prepare for a career in the air-tanker business by getting an equivalent license from the FAA when leaving the military. "You take some written exams, and you'll get whatever you're qualified to do, with respect to single-engine, multi-engine, etc.," he said.

Hatton doesn't have a large staff. He operates with a staff of about 13 people, including the flight crew.

"If we were to hire a pilot out of the military, we'd want them to have, ideally, some low level experience. Unless they have a KC-10 background, they're not going to have any experience flying a DC-10, but we're big enough, and experienced enough [341 missions to date], that we can start with either a DC-10 person, and teach them to fight fires, or with a low-level guy, and teach them the DC-10,"

They may not be that big as of yet, but considering the increasing size and ferocity of wildfires worldwide, that may change.

For now the department has two DC-10s, and Hatton's vision is to have at least five seven of airplanes with the federal government at strategic locations throughout the West, and perhaps even in the East. For more information on 10 Tanker LLC, go to www.10tanker.com.

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