

Getting Fit for Firefighting

Michael Archer | August 17, 2007

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Although there is a fair amount of book knowledge required to become a firefighter/paramedic, there is also a physical component. Let's face it, you can't be a 100-pound weakling in a job that entails hauling hoses up stairs or carrying people out of burning buildings. Fire departments realized this need and put in place a series of tests to determine who is fit to be a firefighter and who isn't. The tests have different names, but the aim is pretty uniform - to confirm that the candidate can do the job.

CPAT

Most fire departments require the Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT), which was created by the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) and the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). This test involves a series of weight-lifting exercises, some cardio-vascular workouts, and navigation through a dark crawlway - eight events that have to be completed in 10 minutes 20 seconds.

"There's about 150 fire departments in California that accept the CPAT and it grows every month," said Rich Alarcon, who runs the CPAT Testing Center in Orange, Calif.

Alarcon adds, "We see a lot of military people coming through and the biggest mistake they make is that they stop working out after they get out of the military. They go, 'Well, I've only been out of the military three to six months and I was in good shape to get here,' so they crash because they quit working out. If you don't keep working out and you just show up, you're probably not going to be successful. The key is not to quit your workout routine."

And, in the case of the CPAT, it's not free, so if you don't pass the first time, you have to pay to do it again. "If they aren't working out, they're going to pay me \$150 and then they're going to pay me another \$150 to do it a second time," Alarcon summarized.

For those who aren't sure whether they can hack the test first time out, there is hope. "You get two free orientations when you sign up for the test and pay the \$150," said Alarcon. "You actually get to come to our site and manipulate each one of the events, but a lot of people don't take advantage of that." For more information, go to the CPAT website, and read up on the financial assistance program as well.

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

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Biddle

The Biddle test is another fire department favorite. In nine minutes 34 seconds, the participant has to complete 11 events similar to the CPAT. "Some departments have lowered [the time], saying 'I want someone who can do it in seven minutes and 30 seconds,'" said Tracy Rickman, who is the coordinator at Rio Hondo Fire Academy.

"Some agencies say Biddle, some say either/or [CPAT or Biddle]." One big advantage to the Biddle test is cost. "The monthly open test is free," Rickman said. "We don't charge anyone anything." Why the difference? Because the money charged to each CPAT applicant is used to buy the props used in the test. For the Biddle, fire departments pool their own money and buy the props. For more information, visit the Rio Hondo website.

Other PATS

Even though the CPAT and Biddle are the most widely used tests, there are many others. Several fire departments administer their own special Physical Ability Test (PAT) right on the premises. "We have a Physical Agility Test that we give right here on site," said Assistant Fire Chief Kevin Mathieu at Twentynine Palms Fire Department (at the Marine Combat Center). "We don't take the CPAT at all." Which means the applicant had better make sure what each fire department needs (and make sure department information you have is current, as departments do change their requirements from time to time).

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Not only are there differences between the various PATs, there are also differences between departments on how long the test is valid. Some departments allow a test to be valid for up to 18 months while others may only honor them for three months, so be sure you check with the department(s) where you plan to apply on this important point.

Last words

After speaking with recruiters at many departments, one reason people from a military background fail to pass a PAT came up more than any other — not keeping in shape once the candidate processed out of the service. And another important point: after you've obtained PAT certification, keep up the PT because you've got to remain in good shape. "If they call you for an academy [months later], they don't give you two to three months working out to get ready," cautioned Alarcon. Word to the wise: Keep up that workout routine so that you can look forward to a rewarding career as a firefighter.

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