

## Military Training Helpful for SDFD Air Ops

Michael Archer | November 21, 2008

On Oct. 25, 2003, the Cedar Fire erupted in San Diego. By the time it was finally corralled, 280,278 acres had been burned, 2,820 buildings (including 2,232 homes) were destroyed, and 15 people (including one firefighter) had been killed. At that time, it was the largest wildfire ever seen in California and San Diego Fire-Rescue Department (SDFD) had only one leased helicopter air-tanker at their disposal to fight it. It became abundantly clear that SDFD needed their own Air Operations group (Air Ops), something which was reinforced by the October 2007 wildfires in that area.

### Genesis

When initially established, Air Ops consisted of one leased helicopter, which was loaned out to another department up in San Bernardino due to lack of funds in San Diego when the Cedar Fire began. In the aftermath of that disaster, SDFD leadership began to formulate plans for a more effective air force to deal with wildfires, as well as other emergencies in the San Diego area.

Little did SDFD realize that the future leader of Air Ops was watching the Cedar Fire unfold on TV. "In 2003, I was the Air Boss on USS Peleliu (LHA-5)," Air Ops Chief Jim Gillcrist said. "We were overseas and I was getting streaming video of the Cedar Fire while I was running air operations on the ship, real time. I was looking at the use of helicopters and I thought, 'Hey, that's probably something I could do.'"

"I retired on April 4, 2004, and one of the irons in the fire was to work for San Diego Fire Department. They did not accept my position as a pilot, but did offer me a position to run air operations," Gillcrist continued. "The rationale for hiring me was that, since I'd been in charge of a squadron and an advanced aviation training command, I was a good fit for San Diego's expanding program."

### Expansion

And Air Ops is definitely expanding. "We've [received] a second helicopter, an \$11.9 million Bell 412EP and we have a Bell 212," Gillcrist explained. "Two CL-415 Super Scoopers leased from Canada are located with Air Attack 690 (a Gulfstream Turbo Commander surveillance aircraft) at Ramona Field."

"We've gone from three to six pilots and crews, so we're in the process of completing the training for the new crews," said Gillcrist. "There's a lot of risk-management decision-making going on to make sure we are professional and safe at the same time."

### 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](http://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](http://www.firebomberpublications.com)

Firestorm can be purchased at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)

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### Day Ops / Night Ops

What's involved in a typical day? "I got a chance to go out, sit in back today and watch a training event, taking one of the new pilots up into the Otay Training Area, landing in saddles and knolls, hugging a ridgeline, making use of uplift to load the rotor disk, execute a slow, controlled approach to a landing where we had put a torque limit on the landing, so only so much power was available for the landing, it was all cool stuff!"

Military training with Generation III NVG night ops can come in handy in firefighting as well. "When I was in the military, it was our goal to fly approximately 30 percent of your flight time at night," Gillcrisp asserted. "When CAL FIRE (the California firefighting agency) says 'we need you tonight out in this area, and we need you to setup a night helibase,' we need to know how to collaborate to do that."

### The Future and a Second Chance

As with any organization that's growing, there are certain growing pains. "We have one of the aircraft at Montgomery Field and the other at Brown Field near the Mexican border," Gillcrisp stated. "We're looking for a fixed facility, since we're working out of trailers right now."

But enthusiasm will help overcome many of the obstacles Air Ops faces down the road. "I'm doing what I love and I love what I'm doing!" Gillcrisp asserts. "My principal uniform is a flight suit - I didn't want a job where I had to wear a suit and tie."

Why choose firefighting after a career with the best military in the world? "When I began looking at a second career, I was looking for something where I could serve and where I could get stoked like I did in 26 1/2 years in Naval Aviation," explained Gillcrisp. "Last October I saw the wildfires almost shut the city down. I've talked to a number of local Navy decision-makers to include the establishment of a Helicopter Coordination Center, and I'm thinking I could be a military liaison in San Diego to better inform our leaders about what the military can and can't do." What better job for a former Navy helicopter squadron commander?

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