

## Sailors in the Fire Service

Michael Archer | November 16, 2007

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Fire aboard a ship is a Sailor's worst nightmare. When you're miles from shore, sitting on a floating fuel (and sometimes ammo) dump, the prospect of a fire getting out of control is not a happy one. Fire aboard USS Forrestal, many years ago, left 132 men dead, 62 injured and two missing. Perhaps this explains the importance of fire training for everyone aboard ship. And perhaps it gives Sailors who enter the fire service later in life an edge over veterans from the other services.

### The Final Countdown

Art Organista, a fireman/paramedic with Chino Valley Independent Fire District and former Petty Officer 2nd Class, had two reasons for joining the Navy: firefighting and naval fire training. "I wanted to be a fireman and, after seeing the movie 'The Final Countdown,' I talked to Navy recruiters and they told me there was a special program for people who wanted to be firefighters," said Organista. Was the Navy experience worthwhile? "There were thousands of guys testing for four jobs at municipal fire departments and my experience in the military was my leg up on these guys," he said. "Even though I had the same certifications as the other job seekers when I got out, when I mentioned that I'd been a firefighter in the Navy, boom, I got three job offers."

### Family Tradition

Of course, not everyone joins the Navy for the firefighter training. For some, it's carrying on a family tradition. "Members of the family have been in the service since the Spanish-American War," said Bart Chambers, a former Petty Officer 1st Class assigned to Fleet Marine Force and current Battalion Chief with Indio Fire Services in Riverside County. Whereas many go into the Navy without thinking of the firefighting aspect, afterwards they may find it to be more inviting, like Bart did. "I had originally intended to be a policeman, but got the bug when I finished my active duty and worked as a seasonal firefighter with CDF (California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection)." You just never know when that Navy firefighting training may come in handy.

### 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)

Comments can be sent to: [marcher47@firebomberpublications.com](mailto:marcher47@firebomberpublications.com)

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### Coast Guard Duty

Even though in peacetime the US Coast Guard is not officially Navy, during war they work closely with their naval counterparts to patrol the oceans of the world. One member of the club is Paul Shakstad, a former Quartermaster who just retired from a career as Chief Pilot with the Los Angeles Fire Department's Air Ops section. When asked to recount the moment that most defined his Coast Guard experience, he related this sea story. "Visiting Adak in the Aleutian Islands during the Cold War. Back in the mid-60's the area was pretty much in the middle of nowhere, but then we rounded a corner and got a view of this bay which was full of spy ships, destroyers, and subs. P-3 Orions were on the air base, which had a full Marine and Navy garrison, I mean it looked like something out of a James Bond movie." Think Coast Guard duty is pretty routine? Think again.

### Mining Haiphong Harbor

Navy duty can have its exciting moments as well. Captain Ron Bell of Burbank Fire Department, a former 3rd Class Petty Officer Bosun's Mate aboard USS Tripoli, says, "In late 1972 the United States mined Haiphong harbor and we were detailed to drop off a UDT and SEAL Team as close to shore as we could. This was 4 a.m., but the beach was lit up like daytime due to B-52 strikes. It's an experience I will carry for the rest of my life."

### Silent Service

There are many different specialties in the Navy, but one you don't hear much about is the submarine service. Maybe that's another reason this exclusive club is called "The Silent Service." Captain Ed Banda of Los Angeles Fire Department had this to say on the topic of what he liked about being a Petty Officer 2nd Class aboard USS Wahoo (SS 565), "The basic camaraderie and the feeling that we were unique, since less than 2 percent of the Navy was submariners. We were a tight-knit group and when we were on the beach we stuck together, so it was sometimes the submarine sailors versus the surface-craft Sailors — the two groups didn't really co-mingle."

### For Further Reading

To read more sea stories about sailors in the fire service, visit the Firefighter Interviews webpage [www.firebomberpublications.com/Interviews.htm](http://www.firebomberpublications.com/Interviews.htm) at Firebomber Publications and read interview notes from lots of folks who have served this country in two exciting careers.

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