

Soldiers in the Fire Service

Michael Archer | December 15, 2007

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Many Soldiers have had fulfilling second careers in the fire service. Whereas other industries might not be as interested in these warriors, the fire service welcomes them with open arms. They already understand the chain-of-command, know how to work together as a team, and are generally mature beyond their years. Being entrusted with multi-million dollar equipment, going in harm's way, and leading fellow Soldiers all go a long way towards preparing them for life as a firefighter or paramedic, or as the support personnel who help save lives and property. These are some of their stories.

Walking Man

How many Soldiers have signed up for a Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) in order to avoid some activity, only to end up doing what they tried to avoid? It happened to Howard Lewis, an Airport Rescue Firefighter (ARFF) with Los Angeles City Fire Department and retired major with the California National Guard. "When asked which OCS program I wanted (Infantry, Armor or Artillery) I thought Infantry meant walking so I chose Artillery," he said. "Where did I end up (in combat) ... walking with the Infantry (First Cav) as an Artillery F.O." The best laid plans ...

Culture Shock

Bonnie Reed, an Administrative Services manager with Riverside County Fire and former Buck Sergeant, caused quite a stir at her base. She had enlisted as a WAC just before the Army transitioned to the "One-Man's-Army" in the mid 70's. Riding her motorcycle on base one day, she was struck by a motorist. "When they took off my helmet as I was sprawled out on the ground, my long hair cascaded out and the driver of the car shouted, 'You're a girl!' Something the helmet and unisex uniform hid." The incident so epitomized the changing culture in the Army that she was on the front page of *Army Times*.

Multi-Generational

Although a family tradition of military service is rare these days, it still has meaning for some. "My Dad is still in and my grandfathers were in the Service," said Jay Strine, a firefighter/paramedic with Los Angeles County Fire Department and a former specialist-4 (E-4). And the fringe benefits don't hurt, either. "I wanted to take advantage of the GI Bill for school," Strine added.

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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Pilots Wanted

Typically, people think of Soldiers as being strictly ground-pounders. But the Army is more than a one-dimensional service. "[Dad's] Army pilot friends mentioned the Army Warrant Officer Pilot Training program and I thought that sounded pretty good," said Lee Cranney, a former Army captain and current helicopter pilot with LA County Fire Department Air Ops. "I was told I'd have to go to Vietnam, but decided that I was probably going to get drafted anyway, so [I] signed up to be a helicopter pilot." That was a great career decision for him, because it paved the way for him get into flying for one of the best aerial firefighting outfits in the country.

His fellow pilot at Air Ops, Jerry James, agrees about his career after the military. "[It] far surpasses anything available in the helicopter industry," said James, a former Chief Warrant Officer (CWO-2). "I enjoy firefighting. It's a real thrill to get out and knock down fires." And they do an excellent job of it, too, as evidenced by the recent award of the prestigious Igor I. Sikorsky Humanitarian Award to LA County Air Ops.

Confessions Of A Cable-Splicer

As the saying goes, life in the Army is 99 percent boredom and 1 percent sheer terror. Herb Johnston, an engineer with Los Angeles City Fire Department was with 275th Signal Battalion during the war in Vietnam. Here you have a cable-splicer who never expected to see frontline duty, but who found himself in the middle of a fire fight. "We got harassed a lot at this old French post the ARVN were manning," he recalls. "In fact, I was recording a cassette tape for my wife back in the States one night when we got hit hard, really hard. I had the whole thing on tape as we were firing grenade-launchers, small arms, and gunships came flying over us firing. The gunships came in fast and just obliterated the enemy force. The guys back at Phu Loi liked hearing the recording, but I recorded over it with some music I wanted to hear. Wish I had kept the tape because it sounded like a war going on." I imagine it would have made it into *somebody's* Shock and Awe audio collection.

For Further Reading

For readers who enjoyed these stories and would like to read more about Soldiers in the fire service, visit the Firefighter Interviews webpage 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. It will be entertaining time well spent.

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