

Training First Line of Defense for Firefighters

Michael Archer | October 31, 2008

Of all the cities in Los Angeles County, Long Beach is probably the most diversified. Defined as a "big, small city," it combines many aspects of a larger metropolis such as Los Angeles into only 55 square miles. Within that area are a major port, a major airport, high-rise office buildings, waterfront properties, freeways, and gangs, which provide a wide array of challenges for Long Beach Fire Department. As such, the Long Beach Fire Department [Training](#) Center Academy (LBTCA) has one of the best training programs in the country, one that's documented in journals such as *FireRescue Magazine*.

Instructional Format

The training program is broken up into blocks of instruction. "Typically we run one class of 24 cadets per year, with testing beginning in April," explains Assistant Chief and Director of Training Ken Portolan. "We do five blocks of instruction after four weeks of EMT training. The remaining 12 weeks is some classroom time, but the majority of the time you're out in the drill area doing hands-on training."

"We've worked with a professor from Cal State Long Beach to develop a curriculum based on adult learning theory," Portolan adds. "We've looked at the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains that we refer to as head, hand, and heart skills."

Realism Counts

How realistic is the training at LBTCA? Very. "We do a lot of scenario-based training," Portolan says. "Not only do you do the basics of throwing ladders, tying knots, pulling a hose, and basic power tools, but we have a number of live-fire exercises and actual vehicle extrication. And we're seeing a change in our mission with terrorism and weapons of mass destruction where we're the first line of defense."

"Our focus at training is that when you leave training, you're ready to go to work," he continues. "There's a working knowledge level and a qualified knowledge level and we want you at the working knowledge level when you leave."

Entrance Requirements

To get into LBTCA, applicants need some basic qualifications. Candidates require a GED or high-school education, an EMT certificate, and are going to have to pass the CPAT test for application, and having a Paramedic qualification is a plus.

But just because you have the basics, don't assume you can compete, because typically there are 4,000-5,000 candidates for just 24 jobs. "We've had some applicants coming through here who have bachelor's and even master's degrees from some major colleges, so education is very important," says Portolan.

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 USAToday 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.wildfiresearch.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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Exam Pointers

Once an applicant has fulfilled the entrance requirements, the exams are next. Applicants take a written exam, do a video-based and a mechanically based aptitude exam, which is followed by an oral exam. Then, based on the results, the applicant is placed in bands (A-C Band).

"Those who don't make it through our class fail for one of three reasons," Portolan explains. "They don't have the study skills and they don't have the comprehension skills to pass in the classroom. They don't have the physical abilities, such as lack of stamina. Or there may be a lack of desire or commitment, which really affects the previous two areas."

Veterans' Advantage

Veterans make excellent candidates. The LBTCA's Civil Service Department gives 10 veteran's points which, in most cases, will bump them up to the next band.

Portolan adds: "Veterans understand that we're a paramilitary organization, they understand the command structure, and they have a maturity level from the military and hands-on experience that serves them well. Out of our last class of 24, four or five were military guys. They tend to have the leadership qualities that allow them to integrate well with their classmates, form study groups, they're used to working in teams, used to working in harsh conditions, and they're used to the rigors of the job, so they are a very good fit for the job."

Shipboard firefighting experience is handy, too. "We have two 88-foot fire boats in the harbor and we're looking at Advanced Maritime Training for some of our folks to prepare for a situation where our land-based folks end up on a ship fire. We also have lifeguards at the beaches and they have five rescue boats, who we integrate with as well."

How to Prepare

"A lot of agencies offer ride-along programs, so I would encourage veterans, as they process out, to contact the fire department about participating in a ride-along to get a birds-eye view of firefighting," says Portolan. "Military folks subscribe to the 'see one, do one' philosophy. Go to www.lbfd.com where there are grade sheets, videos of doing ladder throws and those kinds of things. Start taking tests and improve the study skills."

Visit Military.com's [Fitness Center](#) to learn the fitness standards for fire academies.

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