

Vets Wanted to Train at OC Firefighting Academy

Michael Archer | August 28, 2009

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In the last [article](#) we discussed the Orange County Fire Authority (OCFA), located in sunny Southern California. This time we take a closer look at the OCFA Academy that supplies the firefighters that staff this 850 person department. Capt. Mike Contreras, Academy Coordinator, is our tour guide.

Five-Part Process

"It's a five-step process to get into the Academy: it's a written test; a physical agility test (Biddle), an interview, a background check, and a medical exam," Contreras explained. "Once you've completed those steps, you're put on a list, and ranked based on qualifications and experience, and then the people at the top of the list are given job offers."

That seems straightforward, but let's take a closer look at those five steps. "The Academy is 18 weeks long it runs everything from basic introduction to the fire service to truck operations, and other courses which require a fair amount of mechanical aptitude," Contreras begins. "Fifteen weeks before the beginning of the Academy, we bring in new applicants and we give them a taste of what Academy life is going to be like from a physical fitness standpoint."

"One of the biggest indicators of success in the Academy is physical fitness," continued Capt. Contreras. "We put these candidates on individual programs to prepare them physically for the Academy, then we re-evaluate them when they get to the Academy, and we can tell what their chance of success is in passing the Academy."

"The written exam is designed to test their basic knowledge, consisting of math, English, basic mechanical aptitude, not really a whole lot on firefighting and it's basically designed to find out if you have that ability to learn what the Academy wants to teach you in a high-pressure environment," Contreras explained. "Since so much of what we do in the fire service is interacting with the public, the oral interview is important."

"The first part of the oral interview, they sit you down and ask a few questions, and the second part is where they find out how articulate you are. This is done to find out whether you can speak before large groups, because a lot of our work is speaking with the public."

High-Stress Environment

"Being able to work in a stressful environment, while still maintaining your wits about you, is important," Contreras affirmed. "I tell recruits, 'you have to get used to working in organized chaos, because if working in chaos disrupts you, this probably isn't the job for you.'"

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.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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"During those 18 weeks, we step it up, both from a physical standpoint, and also the volume of information," he added. "It comes down to the ability to act with the physical component and the stress component bearing down on you."

And that begins with the application process. "We started out with 3,500 applicants in this most recent class, which were whittled down to only 28 people who actually got in," Capt. Contreras revealed. "In our most recent graduating class, the high grade was 98.6 percent, and the low grade was 92.4 percent."

How to Prepare

So how does someone considering a job with OCFA prepare before applying? "Go and visit fire stations, so they have a good understanding of the job for themselves, which includes doing a ride-along with the fire department," stated Contreras. "It always helps to have an EMT (Emergency Medical Technician) certification before applying, as well. Fire science courses from a junior college or online can be useful, so try to complete four to six classes, and see if the G.I. Bill will pay for Paramedic school."

Military Edge

As with many departments, OCFA looks favorably upon military service. "We'll help in any way we can with the military, who have done so much," Capt. Contreras said. "I've been part of seven or eight academies and that military background definitely helps."

"I actually have a firefighter working under me who is a retired Navy SEAL, and we've got a guy who was in Marine Force Recon, we have a couple of MPs, a couple of Academies ago we hired a Coast Guard guy, so we have a diverse military group," recalled Capt. Contreras. "When you have a choice between a military veteran who may have served in Iraq or Afghanistan for a year, versus a college kid who lived at home with mom and dad for four years, there's really no comparison, because they're at opposite ends of the spectrum."

More Information

For those interested in more info on the OCFA Academy, visit the OCFA website at www.ocfa.org, where you can also find out about ride-alongs.

To learn more about law enforcement or fire fighting jobs visit Military.com's [Veterans Career Network](#).

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