

Connecting with Kurt Kamm

Karen Terrill, Office of State Fire Marshal

*Editor's Note: The new novel, **One Foot In The Black**, is about a young man who becomes a seasonal firefighter for the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection after he graduates from high school. He decides to stay in the fire service and make a career out of it. The book tells the story of his first years as a firefighter as he learns the ropes and ultimately experiences a firefighter's worst nightmare: a burnover in which his captain and mentor is killed. Author Kurt Kamm spent many hours with CAL FIRE personnel and patterned his character's experiences after the stories he heard. Karen Terrill recently interviewed Kurt Kamm:*

Q: You were a lawyer; why did you write your first novel about a CAL FIRE firefighter?

A: When I retired, I moved to Malibu and joined a writing class. One day coming home on my bike, I saw a helitack crew with their helicopter on the Pepperdine University lawn. I thought it would be interesting to find out about their lives and write about it. It started out as a short story about an abused kid from Michigan and was supposed to end when he became a seasonal firefighter. That turned out to be chapter 3 of 34 chapters. It consumed me.

Q: You've been studying firefighters for quite a while now. What do you think of them?

A: I think they are the most selfless group of people I have ever known. They have a strong drive to help people, love fighting fires, and need the adrenaline boost it gives them. They also need the comradeship of the crew, and are generally not loners. Firefighters love what they do, regardless of the pay. One of the Los Angeles County Fire Department psychiatrists described firefighters as adult boy scouts. I count as good new friends a dozen firefighters, and four times as many as good acquaintances.

Q: Did you ever consider being a firefighter?

A: Are you crazy? Am I crazy? No, but I wouldn't mind starting at the top and be a Chief.

Q: Greg (the central character) had an abusive father, and the poor relationship with his father haunted him. Did you pattern the father after anyone you knew?

A: I'm still trying to figure out where Greg's dad came from. I had a great father, and I grew up in Denver, not Saginaw, Michigan. Greg definitely needed a role model. He learned nothing at home (or all the wrong things) about the relationship between men and women. He also needed the security he finally found in his fire crew.

Q: What kind of research did you do for the book?

A: Thanks to CAL FIRE, I visited the Academy at Ione, the facility at Auburn and half a dozen stations, and I saw the fire observation tower off Interstate 80, which ends up in Chapter 5 along with the Colfax Station. I met everyone from the lowest ranking firefighter to some chiefs. It was a great experience. At Los Angeles County Fire, I attended their 4-week Academy for wildland trainees, met helicopter pilots, visited the inmate camp and rode in the engines. Everywhere I went, firefighters of all ranks said, "Welcome, what do you need, what can we do for you?" I watched a lot of Forest Service videos, read a lot of burnover investigation reports and non-fiction fire books. From start to finish, the book took 3 years.

Q: Do you think CAL FIRE staff will like the book?

A: I think they will like the book because they will easily identify with the various characters and events, laugh, and perhaps shed a tear. CAL FIRE got a bit of rough treatment in the book, because it was Greg's first experience away from home, and it had to be in the form of tough love. I think the overall spirit of firefighters shows through – tough but fair, willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done. Greg learned a lot during his time with the department.

Q: What stands out as you look back over the experience of writing the book?

A: I probably met 150 firefighters. I didn't meet one who wasn't a positive thinker, friendly, and willing to help. I've met a lot of different groups of people and don't know any others I could say that about.

Q: Any chance for a sequel? I'd like to find out what happens to Greg.

A: I think about Greg almost everyday, and wonder how he is doing. He's like a real person to me. I've started on a book about arson, which will have some great characters and suspects. Wait until you read about the Priest/Exorcist who tells the investigators that arson is the work of the devil who is trying to bring down all the telephone poles which look like crosses.