

July 11, 1997

## Firefighters Bring Passion And Public Service to Web

By JASON CHERVOKAS & TOM WATSON

### DIGITAL NATION

This week, a firefighter from Goteborg, Sweden, will take a busman's holiday: a visit to the Virginia Beach Fire Department's facilities. The Department has arranged a tour of its training facilities, stations, and headquarters. Firefighters in the summertime tourist mecca on the Atlantic Ocean are looking forward to exchanging stories and ideas with their visitor.

So how did the international exchange come about? Not surprisingly in this increasingly wired world, through the [Virginia Beach Fire Department's Web site](#), where visitors can get the latest public safety information, check out the Department's rigs or visit the decidedly unofficial "bullpen" of Company 18 -- the virtual version of the firefighters' traditional off-hours hangout, where you can meet the men behind the gear.

In the always fraternal world of firefighting, the Web has lifted geographic boundaries, allowing firefighters -- both paid and volunteers -- greater reach with their messages of public safety; their homages to bigger, better, more technically advanced equipment; and their stately tributes to those who risked their lives to save others.



The Company 18 Bullpen logo  
from the Virginia Beach Fire  
Department's Web site

The Virginia Beach site has been a huge success, and not just because it brought a visitor from Sweden, said William Paul Bailey, Sr., the firefighter who created it.

"It was only going to be tool that I could use to get the firefighters to use the computers in the station more often and to make them more comfortable with the use of this type of technology," he said. "The interest in the site has caused

firefighters who would not normally touch the computer to log on and search the Internet." And that, in turn, has led to greater computer use and to better communications within the department, he said.

In Stamford, Conn., the Web is both a tool for teaching the greater community about fire safety and a weapon for fighting arson. On the official [Stamford Fire Department Web site](#), the Fire Marshal's office has instituted a new feature: an online form for submitting an anonymous tip for the Stamford Arson Task Force.



My name is Pluggy.  
I'll be your tour guide  
while you visit  
StamfordFire.com

Credit: Philip L. Hayes

**Pluggy, an animated character aimed at children, will conduct a tour of the Stamford's Fire Department's new site.**

The Stamford site is a professional job, mixing a vast array of public information with a massive collection of photos of firefighters in action. It's not surprising, really, because Stamford's Fire Department has embraced digital technology in many areas, from its fire incident reporting software to the sophisticated LAN it installed to link the five satellite stations and fire headquarters.

Plans for the site include a Shockwave version aimed at children, including an animated character, Pluggy, who will conduct a tour of the site, offer an electronic quiz and dispense a digital diploma for passing the online safety course.

"Unlike many fire department Web sites which are designed to attract other firefighters from around the world, we designed ours as a customer service center for the citizens of Stamford," says the site's webmaster, firefighter Phil Hayes.

Of course, it still reaches other members of the fire fraternity all over the place.

Chief Ron Graner said: "Just last week while on vacation, I stopped to see a friend in Georgia who is the training officer for the department where I previously was chief. The first thing he said to me when I got out of the car was 'Great Web site!' "

In many smaller towns and villages, the local Fire Departments are staffed with volunteers, and membership is a smoky blend of public spirit and the desire to join a fascinating club. That spirit shows up well on the Web, where virtual communities thrive not because of great software, but because the people they attract share mutual -- and often passionate -- interests.

[The Volunteer Fire Department of Beltsville, Md.](#), has what amounts to a personal page on America Online, complete with its Fred Flintstone sign displaying the Department's motto: "Where there's smoke, there's BVFD." It's aimed at getting "as many people involved as possible," said the site's webmaster, Matt Tomlins, a volunteer in Beltsville, which is located between Washington, D.C., and Baltimore.

It also serves to garner some respect for volunteer firefighters: "We put out fires, go into burning buildings, and take the same chances that paid firefighters do. We are

not people who bring coffee and doughnuts to the paid firefighters."

The site is fun, with links to pages of photos, events and the "Ladies Auxiliary." So is the site of the [Averill Park-Sand Lake Fire Company](#), based in Rensselaer County in upstate New York, a volunteer group that's been fighting fires since 1900. When Bob Fickies started the site a year ago, there were only a handful of New York departments online. Now there are more than 100, and Fickies says that the reach of the Net is helping firefighters to save lives.



**Averill Park-Sand Lake Fire Company  
site**

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A few months back, Fickies started a small chat group of rescue people interested in the possibilities of using hovercraft in emergencies.

"We've got 14 departments in the group now, and we've all learned something new," Fickies said. "In my bunker coat pocket I carry a small German fire hatchet a firefighter friend sent to me from Moenchengladbach, Germany. He is carrying a U.S. medical trauma bag and gear I introduced him to."

In New Jersey, a group of firefighters has taken the idea of Web publishing even further, publishing a serious and professional zine dedicated to the exploits of the Garden State's fire departments. [New Jersey Firefighters](#) brings some interesting backgrounds together. Its news editor, Mike Ratcliffe, who writes stories and takes pictures for the site, is a firefighter for Lawrence Township in Mercer County, and a full-time reporter for The Trenton Times. Its Web editor and graphic artist, Don Summer, is a firefighter for Millstone Township in Monmouth County and also works for a design firm in Eatontown. And the editor and publisher is Dennis Symons, a professional firefighter in Washington Township in Mercer County.

Symons said that the Internet "allows firefighters access to vast amounts of knowledge and also allows them to communicate with each other to share advice and personal experiences."

His site offers real stories, with plenty of firefighting details, like the account of a Chesterfield Township fire, in which a bolt of lightning ignited a blaze in two barns, bringing firefighters from four counties to the scene.

"Heavy fire rapidly engulfed the dry hay in the barns, and a towering column of smoke rose into the air over the farm," according to Ratcliffe's account.

Pretty heady stuff, but not as dramatic as one portion of the [Boston Fire Department's terrific Web site](#), which Curt Holzendorf, district fire chief for special projects, said has attracted firefighters from around the world, including Lithuania, Sweden, Germany and Australia. Along with plenty of fire safety info and a history

of the Department (founded in 1678), there is a link to a page listing the scores of firefighters who have died in the line of duty since the mid-19th century.

It takes a long time to load.

**DIGITAL NATION is published weekly, on Fridays. Click [here](#) for a list of links to other columns in the series.**

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- [Virginia Beach Fire Department's Web site](#)
- [Stamford Fire Department's Web site](#)
- [The Volunteer Fire Department of Beltsville, Md.](#)
- [Averill Park \(NY\) Fire Department](#)
- [New Jersey Firefighters](#)
- [Boston Fire Department](#)

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