

BOOK REVIEW: *GHOSTS OF THE FIREGROUND*



Hutch Brown

Some say that firefighters are just in it for the money (Brown 2001). That is certainly not true of Peter M. Leschak, whose 20-odd years of firefighting experience have inspired a successful career as an outdoor writer. Leschak's new book, *Ghosts of the Fireground: Echoes of the Great Peshtigo Fire and the Calling of a Wildland Firefighter* (HarperSanFrancisco; San Francisco, CA; 2002), bears testimony to what many firefighters know: Firefighting can be a calling.

Firefighter Calling

Leschak recounts his experiences as a helitack manager during the 2000 fire season, weaving in the story of Father Peter Pernin, a Catholic priest who survived the 1871 Peshtigo Fire, one of the greatest tragedy fires in U.S. history. In many ways, Leschak's book is confessional. A one-time theology student, Leschak chronicles his progression toward and through the fireground, which for him came to replace the role of religion. "I've tapped into the spiritual aspects of fighting fire," he declares in the first chapter. The spiritual side of firefighting is what much of his book is about.

Leschak is a skillful writer, and some passages show all the lyricism of good nature writing. At times, however, the style is uneven. It seems odd, for example, to read that a fire burning "beneath a canopy of large firs" should be "in full sunlight"; or that human lives are

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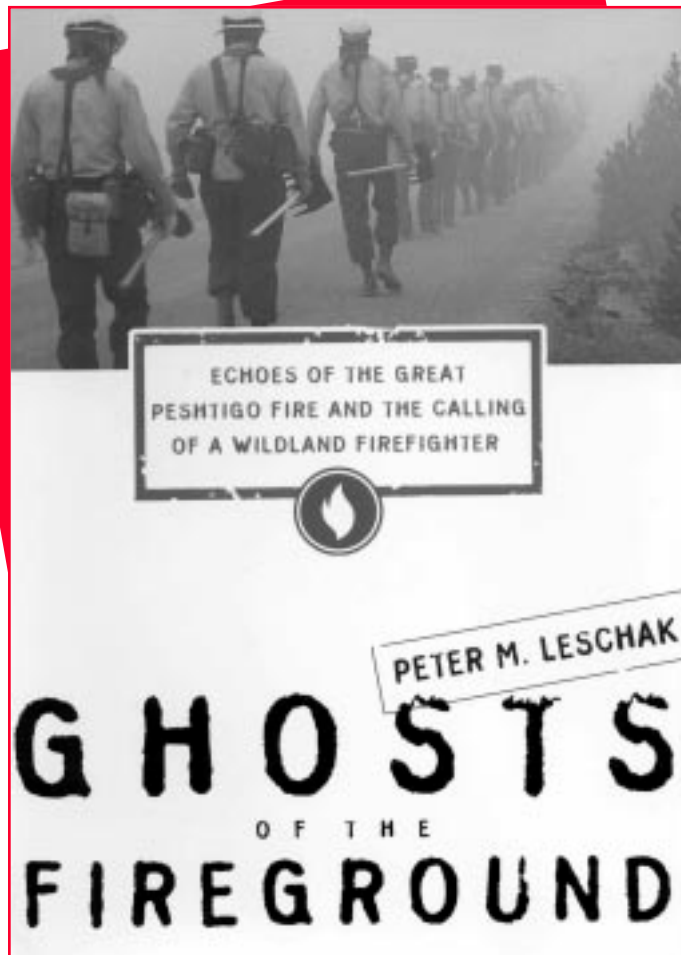
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"dramas reenacted from scripts created ten thousand years ago," long before the first tablet bore the first script. At times, it seems unclear who the intended audience is; the reader learns what a snag is, but not what an "Incident [Management] Situation Report out of Boise" is. Firefighters need no explanation for either, but the

general public certainly does, at least for a Situation Report.

Valuable Book

But these quibbles do not detract from the tremendous value of Leschak's book. It is chock-full of interesting insights and information presented in a very readable, easily understandable manner. The



Peter M. Leschak's new book Ghosts of the Fireground.

story of Father Pernin and the Peshtigo Fire is an obvious instance. Another is the plight of emergency firefighters, who “possess few of the rights and privileges that most American workers take for granted. There is no guaranteed term of employment, no health benefits, no sick leave, no vacation time, no seniority consideration, no grievance procedure, no career path.” Leschak’s passion for fire kept him coming back, but he “watched dozens of good firefighters regretfully quit the profession because they couldn’t afford homes, families, or even a reliable vehicle.” So much for being in it just for the money.

Leschak gives wonderful explanations on complex subjects, such as fire behavior in steep terrain or the significance of thousand-hour fuels. His rendition of an “old trick used by firefighting instructors” (see the sidebar) marvelously illustrates the interaction of heat and fuel in the fire triangle. Even neophytes will easily get the point.

Leschak’s most important points relate to firefighter safety. The safety theme pervades the book, beginning with a description of risk homeostasis. People tend to accept certain levels of risk; paradoxically, if they think they are somehow safer, they will behave more dangerously just to reestablish the accustomed level of risk. Leschak cites a study showing “that after acquiring antilock brakes, a sample of cab drivers eventually drove more aggressively.”

A related problem is normalizing risk. “It’s a paradoxical aspect of firefighting,” notes Leschak, “that often it’s the veterans rather than the rookies who sink themselves into trouble.” Whereas a rookie

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might think twice about entering into danger, the veterans have survived so many risky situations that they begin to accept them as normal. Leschak frankly admits to normalizing risk and to becoming “a victim of a common fire service mind-set: can do!”

Leschak’s self-critical accounts of his fireground experiences carry strong safety messages, culminating in his refusal to follow an order that would have compromised the safety of his crew. The book concludes on that note: “But in surveying the season and our own trials, one moment focused in front of all others: on the hot, lost road at Boulder Creek, bracketed by flames, the soot-stained flock gathered round; and the word I offered to my commander was *no*.”

Spirituality

The “soot-stained flock” is Leschak’s crew, his “congregation.” Ultimately,

the book is about Leschak’s search for salvation on the fireground, partly by protecting his crew. Leschak accepted his calling as a firefighter “for the same reason I once matriculated at a Bible school—to be a minister in a church. To scratch a line to salvation.”

Leschak makes an interesting and credible connection between firefighting and finding spiritual salvation. “The fireground can be sacramental,” he concludes, “in the sense of providing an outward sign of inner ‘grace,’ that is, the favor and blessings of moral strength. We are often better for having worked there.” Firefighters will know exactly what he means.

Reference

Brown, E. 2001. What burns me about the way we fight wildfires. *Washington Post* (Washington, DC). April 29. ■

WHICH ONES WILL BURN?*

There’s an old trick used by firefighting instructors. Write a list under Column A on the blackboard: water, rock, concrete, steel, asbestos, brick. Then under Column B: gasoline, wood, paper, charcoal, kerosene, cow chips.

“Now,” you say, suppressing a benign smirk, “which of these lists is composed of materials that will burn?”

* From Peter M. Leschak, *Ghosts of the Fireground: Echoes of the Great Peshtigo Fire and the Calling of a Wildland Firefighter* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), p. 48.

Many students sense a trap, but few know the correct answer: neither. None of the listed substances actually burns. No solids or liquids, just gases. It’s possible to douse a small fire with diesel fuel.

Only when the materials in Column B are heated to the point of outgassing will they ignite. Since gasoline, for example, vaporizes easily under normal atmospheric conditions, it readily and violently burns; ... wood is tougher to light.