

Lessons repeated by the harshest of teachers

I must admit frankly that I came to John Maclean's fine book, "Fire on the Mountain," about the deadly wildfire in 1994 near Glenwood Springs, with all the conceit of the Southern California hotshot I once was.

Maclean looks at the whole picture, a lightning strike seven miles west of town sputtering for days until blowing into an inferno July 6 that killed 14 firefighters and threatened the lives of all 49 people on the blaze at the time, and on through the investigations that followed.

As I did while a wildland firefighter, I gathered the investigative reports after this tragedy, hunting clues through the eyes of the ground-pounder.

The key for me then, as it remains after reading Maclean's book, turns on a sentence from one of the smokejumpers on the fire.

"I didn't think it would burn because it was so green," Kevin Erickson, based in Missoula, Mont., said in a statement to an investigator, talking about the Gambel oak, piñon pine and juniper mix that blanketed the mountain.

For me, that sentence captured the lack of knowledge, off-fire support and prudence on the line that led to the disaster.

Maclean, who incidentally will lead a dinner discussion Jan. 27 about his book at the Vinter's Restaurant at Eagle's Nest hosted by The Literacy Project and Verbatim Booksellers, details the bureaucratic dysfunctions that set up the tragedy.

Thanks to the book, I have a better understanding of the rivalries, the

lapses in settling jurisdiction, the strategic blunders, and the great communication gaps in the Western Slope fire management, during the outbreak of fires that summer. Useful knowledge all, and efforts to address those problems are welcome indeed.

But all the bureaucratic chaos is a given, simply part of the daily world for the firefighters when hell breaks loose in the form of multiple fires in a region bone dry and aching for rain. And that's pretty much every fire season in Southern California, where I served for five years on the Los Prietos Hotshots, a 20-person hand crew based in Santa Barbara, after a couple of seasons on an engine crew.

Good support in the background and even upper management on a blaze were gifts, icing, definitely not to be expected. What mattered was our ability to read and react to the flames we fought by hand. No excuses about failures from above; our lives were the ones on the line, and ultimately we had to take full responsibility for them.

So as you might imagine, I have a cold-blooded assessment of how the fire killed so many people at once, and it has nothing to do with when an air tanker should have dropped fire retardant or failures to communicate weather reports to the crews on the line.

Those people did not have to die for the predictable lapses in the bureaucracy. They got themselves killed breaking most rules guiding downhill fire-line construction and wildland firefighting in general. And, if I understand the report and the book right, even with those fatal mis-



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takes they still had a chance to read an ominous increase in the fire's behavior 40 minutes before the fire blew out the canyon where they were cutting line — time enough to pull out safely.

How often does this lesson have to be taught? Maclean frequently refers to the infamous Mann Gulch Fire in '49 that killed 13 smokejumpers in similar circumstances near Helena, Mont. But fiery refresher courses have taken nearly as many lives at a time in much the same way between these book-end tragedies.

The most notable cautionary tale in Southern California for my generation of hotshots was the Loop Fire in 1966, in the mountains behind Los Angeles. The top hotshot crew of its day, El Cariso, shouldered past fainter hearts and cut line downhill in a fold in the mountainside called a chimney, for the obvious reason fire explodes up in much the same way water flows down.

The bottom of the fire was still free to burn and it slowly, inevitably spread into the base of this wrinkle in the mountain. From that point, it reportedly took all of a minute to run

the full 2,200-foot chimney, killing 12 members of the El Cariso crew.

Out of that fire came the guidelines for downhill line construction, which insist on lookouts who can see the fire at key places, staying out of chimneys or the tighter folds called chutes, firing out the line behind the firefighters so they have clean burn to escape to if necessary, and a safe place to escape from any point along the fire line. Other than not encountering a chute, the firefighters on Storm King Mountain ignored these rules.

As I slowly advanced through the fire seasons to squad boss and eventually as an acting foreman on the predominate Southern California hotshot crew of its time, the 10 Standard Orders, 13 Watchouts (now 18), downhill guidelines and such distilled to this for me: If things go to hell right now, where do we go?

Firefighters debated the guidelines we all had to commit to memory to earn our red cards, I read shortly after the South Canyon Fire, a decade removed from the line myself by then. One smokejumper claimed in a commentary for The Missoulan newspaper to "often violate the Standard Orders" in a necessary effort to complete a dangerous job: It was a job at the main investigative report that had the temerity to suggest that the firefighters' "can-do" spirit helped land them in trouble, touching off a firestorm of its own among the families and colleagues of those who died on the mountain.

It's a tough thing, blaming the dead and the distraught leaders who survived on the mountain, and I

sensed the book, the investigative reports and articles about the fire tipped just a bit on that account.

But I don't recall disregarding these rules, and I served on what I believed and still believe was the most aggressive, productive and efficient crew of its type in America. We fought hard while following the guidelines closely, taking nothing for granted — not management, not the weather, and not the flammability of the fuels on fire.

I don't doubt the courage, the passion or the heart of anyone on that fire when it blew. I understand this business, in my memory, in my dreams and in the now-rare flinch as if swinging a super plate at night as I drift off to sleep. I was in these trenches long enough to still know what it is like on a going fire.

But as one of the smokejumpers leading the firefighting effort, Don Mackey, said more than once, though perhaps not quite enough, on that mountainside: "There's nothing here worth dying for."

I wish he'd followed his own good advice while he still had a chance. It's a harsh business, firefighting. So are the lessons. We'd do well, those of us with the guts to take on fire by hand, not to water these lessons down in a misguided sense of loyalty or squeamishness about controversy.

Mackey and the others were good, brave people. But the leaders among them screwed up that afternoon.

And fire is a merciless teacher.

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