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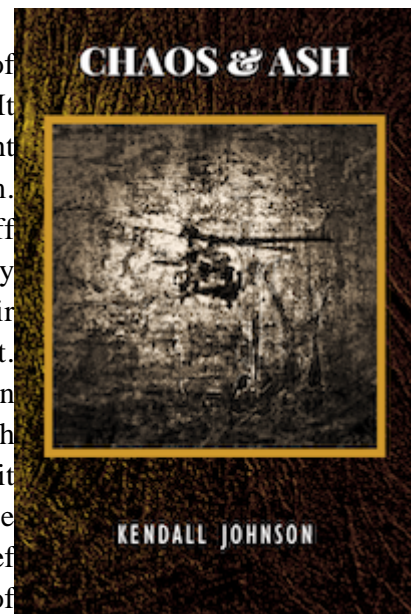
Kendall Johnson: “Firestorm”

Kendall Johnson · Wednesday, September 23rd, 2020

A wind shear had knocked down most of the trees on the lee slope of the mountain, and so far only the trunks had been salvaged. Branches and duff lay several feet thick and had dried brittle hard after two years of drought. Terpene fumes rose from the piles of needles and resin-rich pine kindling. When the huge fire finally came over the back of the mountain, it showered sparks along the entire slope. A thousand little starts joined one another and soon the entire mountain went up in firestorm that resembled those solar flares that twist across the face of the sun.

The firestorm followed its own convection across the bottom of the canyon, barely pausing to eat a set of cabins as it passed. It seems that two engine companies on scene saw the circle of eight cabins, each pair with a large propane tank between them. Knowing it could be hot, the two captains decided to drop off their crews in a safe area then return to the cabins alone. They parked the engines side by side, laid out hose, engaged their pumps and were putting wet to red when the firestorm hit. Flames swirled over and around, then they engulfed the cabins in seconds. Searing winds evaporated water before it could reach from the engines to the cabins. One of the captains said that it was so hot that the cabins seemed to be shimmering. The propane tanks were beginning to cook-off, and the pressure relief valves sounded like jets. The two captains took refuge in one of the cabins, certain they were dead.

Later, in the debriefing, I asked them what they did in the few minutes they had in that cabin. “We found beers in the refrigerator and had one. We wrote last messages to our families and closed them up in the refrigerator, figuring the letters might outlast us and be found later. Then, after we finished the beers, we decided this was not how we wanted to die. We wanted to go down fighting. We went back out into the firestorm, fired up the engines and pumps. We shot water into the wall of flame, into structures that were fully involved even though it was pointless. It was just a relief to be doing something rather than nothing.”<



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“So how did you make it out?”

“It was weird,” one said. “All of a sudden, there was a break. We could see a spot of blue through the fire. We threw down our nozzles and ran through the ring of cabins toward the periphery. We dove through and kept rolling till we were clear. We were just lucky.”

At this point in the debriefing, their crews, who had been sitting together listening to this, all stood up and pressed forward with tears running through the ashes on their faces to embrace their captains. They held each other and wept.

VOTE!

(Featured photo from the Maloof Foundation)

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