



## **3000 Degrees: The True Story of a Deadly Fire and the Men Who Fought It**

*Sean Flynn*

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In the fading industrial city of Worcester, Massachusetts, there are men whose jobs are to brave danger, endure long shifts, and trust other men with their lives. Like their counterparts in cities and small towns everywhere, they are firefighters, and like firefighters everywhere, they take enormous pride in their brotherhood and their calling. On December 3, 1999, as the men of Central Street and other Worcester stations lived their daily lives, worked second jobs, and raised their children, they did not know an inferno unlike anything they had ever seen was about to put them to the ultimate test.

The fire at Worcester Cold Storage was ignited by two vagrants' Christmas candle. When the first firefighters arrived on the scene, the building—a hulking, abandoned, windowless warehouse—was waiting to explode. As men fought to contain the flames with hoses, they were suddenly surrounded by confusing, suffocating darkness and searing steam. Worcester Cold Storage—with its mazelike layout and rooms so insulated that they prevented men from hearing each other's alarms—was turning into a furious beast, disorienting those inside it, seemingly determined to kill as many men as it could.

3000 DEGREES stands with the best works of American reportage. Sean Flynn takes us into the private lives of men heading inexorably into one sudden shared, overwhelming battle. He captures the agony of working wives and mothers hearing the news with mounting terror and a community being hurtled toward unbearable loss. Most of all, he vividly depicts the moments of truth, when ordinary men know that their brothers are going to die, and that to live with themselves, to take another single breath, they too must be prepared to lay down their lives.

## 3000 Degrees: The True Story of a Deadly Fire and the Men Who Fought It Details

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## **From Reader Review 3000 Degrees: The True Story of a Deadly Fire and the Men Who Fought It for online ebook**

### **Marcus Ellis says**

Amazing and deep book. Gives incredible detail and background of all the fire fighters and the families of the lost ones. Tells the story of the fire with immense detail and doesn't miss a single portion of the story. Really touches the heart and has the reader feel like they are at the scene. Amazingly well written and a great read for anyone.

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### **John Collins says**

I can't believe how long ago this fire was ... I remember it quite well.

This book is very well-written. I didn't want to take a break from it. From my knowledge of firefighting, the author did a great job of describing being in a fire, and explaining fire science in an approachable manner.

Recommended for anyone in the fire service or everyday heroes, or for anyone who wants a well-written historical narrative.

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### **Mary Beth says**

Excellent true story of a heart breaking incident and what firefighters go through.

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### **Matt says**

"The funny thing about firemen is...night and day, they're always firemen."

-- Donald Sutherland, *Backdraft*.

*3000 Degrees* is the story of six firemen who died in a Worcester warehouse fire on December 3, 1999. The warehouse was a big, brick, windowless monster with a labyrinthine interior that was hard to navigate in daytime, sans fire. When it became dark, filled with smoke and flame, it was a death maze. The fire started after a vagrant fight knocked over a candle. The fire feasted on the interior wooden frame of the building; air circulating in the elevator shaft turned the structure into a stove. The center of the building got really hot. How hot? If you guessed 3,000 degrees, you win the pony.

Six fire men, in three separate pairs, got lost and died in this worthless, abandoned building. This is their story.

The book is based on Sean Flynn's *Esquire* article called *The Perfect Fire*. I wasn't surprised to learn the title, because this book apes *The Perfect Storm* in just about every respect. Start with a smallish Boston town filled with blue collar folk and all their folksy traditions. Pick a hard, potentially lethal occupation. Find a bunch of

men who died doing this occupation, but make sure you don't know how they died. Ingratiate yourself with the community and get the normally tight-lipped relatives to open up. Speculate about their loved ones deaths. Write a bestselling book. Sell the screenplay. (This book was optioned as a movie, but the Worcester folks, to their credit, wouldn't cooperate. I think they made *Ladder 49* instead. Which proves that the people of Worcester are smarter than anyone is giving them credit for).

I know, that sounds really cynical. I'm sorry, but I'm just about tired of big-city journalists patronizing their subjects, and their readers, by feigning surprise that people who live outside big cities actually have active interior lives. You know, like hopes and dreams and stuff.

The book sets the reader up with quick biographies of the victims, as well as a few survivors. Their stories are profound for their utter ordinariness. These are normal people with normal, messy, sometimes ugly lives. This is all told in a brisk, journalistic style, with a lot of detail and even a little flare. Flynn is a very good writer, and he knows to make the fire a character:

"Mike washed the air above him, scattering hundreds of gallons of water into the void. But he wasn't getting wet. None of the water was splashing back down. He knew it was turning to steam, a mist that would eventually settle on him like a searing fog...For an instant, the flames receded. The bright orange disappeared in a shroud of black smoke, the air finally cooled enough not to burn...In one quick motion, Mike slammed the nozzle shut, twisted on his knees, and started crawling, his shins banging off the floor, his hands slapping along the hose line."

You learn about firefighters, their equipment, their tactics, their lives. After setting the stage, Flynn takes us to the fatal fire. Things start out all right, with everyone doing what they were supposed to do. But in a fire, it's only a single step from normal to tragedy. A pair of firefighters got lost, then another pair, and another. They tried to radio for help, but reception was spotty; they activated their PASS alarms, but the walls were too thick. Within half an hour, they would all be dead.

"They were already woozy from the carbon monoxide, maybe already crippled, their muscles paralyzed. A heavy concentration reduced a man to a paralytic stupor in five breaths, the CO bonding to the red blood cells, starving the body of oxygen. The brain, trying to save itself, would shut down the least important tissues, everything except itself, the heart and lungs."

The problem with the book is that the central event - the deaths of these firefighters, took place out of sight and within moments. That's why this story probably works better as an article - a good piece of long-form reporting. There's not enough story here to support a book. In order to pad out the length, Flynn takes us on a lot of digressions about the lives of these men. This is fine, in and of itself, for some of the digressions are interesting and illuminating. However, he structures these as flashbacks that are interspersed throughout the main narrative. Thus, we are continually being pulled from the central narrative. After awhile, it gets tiring trying to remember where you were in the actual story, which ultimately bleeds it of its emotional resonance.

The section of the book after the fire is oddly discrete, as Flynn bends over backwards not to invade anyone's privacy. There is no discussion of the remains, where they were found (save for a diagram at the start of the book), or what that might have meant. There is little critical analysis of command decisions or tactics. Not that criticism is called for, mind you, but just that there's no discussion at all. The fire was essentially chalked up as a "melancholy accident." Even OSHA had nothing to say, other than wishing the radios were better. OSHA always has something to say.

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### **Diana says**

I kind of remember when this fire happened. I remember seeing the news report and thinking of how horrible it was for the families of the firefighters. This book brought it a bit closer to home, with some of the backgrounds on those who were injured and died in the blaze. I learned quite a bit about how the fire started and the danger the "unoccupied" building held for rescuers. The book was very short but had quite a bit of information in it. I can't say it was enjoyable due to the subject but it was intriguing.

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### **Jordan Larsen says**

I was fortunate to find this book on audio cassette back in 2002 and after listening to it numerous times since then, it's still my favorite audiobook! "3000 Degrees: The True Story of a Deadly Fire and the Men who Fought It" is a gripping and engaging work of real-life literature that chronicles the lives of the firefighters, community and the families impacted by the tragic events of December 3rd 1999 in Worcester, Massachusetts. In what can only be described as the modern day firefighting equivalent of "The Perfect Storm," a small fire ignites in the bowels of a mammoth abandoned warehouse, the infamous "Worcester Cold Storage," encompassing a confusing labyrinth of confined passages, windowless rooms, human waste and clutter; what begins as a smoldering rubbish fire in a reinforced brick and mortar building sparked by two homeless squatters, evolves into a malevolent and murderous blaze. It triggers a Four Alarm response from the gallant fire chiefs and firefighters of the Worcester Fire Department and seals the fate of six brave veteran firefighters in an attempt to combat the inferno and locate two of their missing comrades.

In the hours and days that followed, a small New England town would be rocked to the core and thrust into the media spotlight capturing the entire Nation's attention and that of the world in an overwhelming display of grief and rage at the loss of six ordinary men who lived extraordinary lives and accomplished noble deeds in the line of duty. The incident would radically alter the realm of big city firefighting and be forever seared into the annals of history as a profound reminder of what can happen when things go horribly wrong on the fireground. When a menacing blaze has the overall tactical advantage and controls the battlespace, it can test the very limits of man and machine literally to the breaking point. This story is more than just the harrowing exploits of firefighters; it's also about the people and the community that they share encompassing poignant emotions and characteristics of not just the six fallen firefighters, but also the families and those they served alongside leading up to their last alarm at Worcester Cold Storage.

Journalist Sean Flynn does an exceptional job chronicling the Worcester Six as well as the mechanics and the mindset of urban firefighting. If you've ever wondered what it's really like to run into a burning building and risk your life for a complete stranger or a fellow brother-in-arms when everyone else is trying to get out, than "3000 Degrees" is a must-have book for any seasoned veteran or average civilian interested in life in the fire service. This would make a great movie! Eventhough "Ladder 49" and "The Perfect Storm" were awesome, a film about the Worcester Cold Storage inferno and those who fought it would be amazing to watch because that's what it feels like when you're listening to it or reading it.

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### **Josh Van Dyke says**

As a firefighter this book hits home in a sadly real way! The language vocabulary used is firefighter. Such a sad true story to learn from!

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### **Josiah says**

A gripping story of one of the deadliest fires for firefighters in recent history. The author treats the story and men and women involved with respect and delicacy without glossing over either the tragedy or the rough nature of the firefighters. Chief McNamee sets a strong, heart wrenching example of what true leadership looks like.

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### **Meredith says**

I thought I would have been way more emotional reading this book. perhaps it was because I didn't have time to get attached to the characters before they died. i always find it hard to keep track of a ton of people when they're all introduced at once. I cried once at the end from Denise being at the warehouse when they found Paul. good book

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### **Eric\_W says**

Sean Flynn writes for Esquire and this is based partially on an article he wrote about the terrible fires suffered by Worcester, Massachusetts. The town has lost much of its industrial base and there were many abandoned buildings that were worth more from insurance claims than as empty buildings. It was not uncommon for engine companies to be called out to fires three to five times per night. Sometimes, the fire might be a prelude to the big one, a small fire just enough to set off the sprinkler system, which then would be inactivated until the mechanisms could be replaced. The arsonist would then return to set a fire that would be unchecked by sprinklers, and the firemen would return to the same building several hours later to find a massive fire engulfing the building.

On December 3, 1999, an inferno erupted in the Worcester Cold Storage, ignited by the candles of two vagrants. It was a windowless warehouse just waiting to explode. The building was a labyrinth of segregated rooms, making it hard for the men to communicate and difficult to ventilate, making backdrafts (superheated air at the ceiling ignites smoke particles and gases causing sudden intense heat of thousands of degrees) more likely. Built before refrigeration, when massive amounts of insulating material were required to keep ice cold, the walls were filled with cork, and later polystyrene (made from petroleum) was added. Inside was a jumble of hallways, each having a door that was intended to close tightly after one passed through, in order to keep the cold in. The layers of cork and polystyrene insulation burned vigorously, giving off toxic fumes and intense heat.

The structure became a fireman's nightmare. The vagrants, who set the fire accidentally, left the building and didn't report it, so by the time firemen arrived several hours later, the building was well engulfed on the inside. Reports that some homeless people lived in the building made the job of surveying the inside much more urgent. Rescue units got lost in the darkness and became trapped. Each fireman, breathing at a normal rate, had only thirty minutes of air in the cylinder on his back; only fifteen minutes if under stress or working hard.

As a civilian listening to the book, I could not help but wonder why they were limited to such a short time.

Apparently, it's deliberate because they don't want firemen to be exposed to the intense heat for more than 20-30 minutes without going outside for relief. The special bunker clothes they wear keep them from burning, but they trap heat, and when firemen sweat, it sometimes becomes so hot inside their clothes that the sweat turns to steam! The environment of that fire was so hot that water from a 2.5 inch hose would flash to steam when it hit. Their radios would have been more helpful had they been channeled. The firemen were constantly speaking over the top of one another, and the microphones had a dangerous tendency to short out when they inevitably got wet.

Six firemen were killed. Two men searching the building got lost and couldn't find their way out. Indeed, firemen say that's the problem with Hollywood fire movies. They always show a brightly burning area well-lit with orange flames. In reality, the screen should be totally black, because the smoke can be so intense they can't see anything and spend most of the time crawling on the floor (where it's much cooler anyway). Four more men died trying to find the first two. They also became lost and could not be found.

Finally, after a personal attempt to get up the stairs, the chief ordered all the men out of the building, despite their futile attempts to rush back in to find the trapped men. They had to resort to an exterior, defensive attack, just throwing more "wet stuff on the red stuff," something my civilian mind thinks they should have done right from the beginning. The building was abandoned anyway. The article this book was based on appeared in Esquire entitled "The Perfect Fire." It's definitely a worthy complement to The Perfect Storm, another tragic but wonderfully evocative book.

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### **Al says**

This book hurt, I know John Sullivan from Engine 3 and could feel his anguish when he came out of the building and was looking for his 2 lost firefighters.

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### **Cindy says**

The story of the Worcester Cold Storage fire in December 1999 - the author actually wrote an article about it for a magazine and later expanded it into this book. This fire took the lives of 6 firemen - 2 who were searching for possible victims and got lost/trapped in the building, and 4 more who went after them. This building was a deathtrap, the perfect fire box - insulated to hold in the heat, chemicals treating the walls, and lots of walls and false turns to confuse even the most seasoned firefighter. The author treats the men - both those who survived and those who died - and their families with respect. I did look up some more about this fire - I remembered it and the mourning that followed - and found out that a new firestation has been built on the site of the warehouse and that there is a memorial to the fallen six men. This was a touching story that has been overshadowed by the actions of the first responders on 9/11.

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### **SouthWestZippy says**

This is a sad book about heroes and not just the hero firefighters but the heroes left behind. It is so well written that you feel the emotions of all involved. Wish I could give this more than five stars. Synopsis In the fading industrial city of Worcester, Massachusetts, there are men whose jobs are to brave danger, endure long shifts, and trust other men with their lives. Like their counterparts in cities and small towns everywhere,

they are firefighters, and like firefighters everywhere, they take enormous pride in their brotherhood and their calling. On December 3, 1999, as the men of Central Street and other Worcester stations lived their daily lives, worked second jobs, and raised their children, they did not know an inferno unlike anything they had ever seen was about to put them to the ultimate test. The fire at Worcester Cold Storage was ignited by two vagrants' Christmas candle. When the first firefighters arrived on the scene, the building-a hulking, abandoned, windowless warehouse-was waiting to explode. As men fought to contain the flames with hoses, they were suddenly surrounded by confusing, suffocating darkness and searing steam. Worcester Cold Storage-with its maze like layout and rooms so insulated that they prevented men from hearing each other's alarms-was turning into a furious beast, disorienting those inside it, seemingly determined to kill as many men as it could. 3000 Degrees stands with the best works of American reportage. Sean Flynn takes us into the private lives of men heading inexorably into one sudden shared, overwhelming battle. He captures the agony of working wives and mothers hearing the news with mounting terror and a community being hurtled toward unbearable loss. Most of all, he vividly depicts the moments of truth, when ordinary men know that their brothers are going to die, and that to live with themselves, to take another single breath, they too must be prepared to lay down their lives.

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### **Janet C. says**

This is the true story of the fire in Worcester, Massachusetts in an abandoned cold storage warehouse. Due to the large types and amounts of the fire load - things that could burn, the fire burned extremely hot endangering the lives of the firefighters. The fire department had been notified that there might be residents in the building so a search had been underway. The building was a maze of corridors, walls, and dead ends that made it extremely difficult to locate where the residents might be. Then large amounts of debris was falling from the ceilings and roof so the search and suppression efforts had to be stopped. At that point, the fire department knew that there were six missing firefighters but nobody knew where they were and the conditions of the structure made it too dangerous for the firefighters to go back in to locate the missing men.

The story was well put together. The author developed each individual man with detail of each person and it was almost like I knew them personally. I was horrified, laughing, sad, hopeful but I already knew the outcome.

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### **Kristin says**

I don't specifically remember this tragedy, though as I read the book, I had a vague recollection. Unfortunately, after 9/11 whenever I think of mass casualty firefighting events, the attack on the World Trade Center blocks out all of the others in my mind. Very similar to 9/11 was this fire in an abandoned meat processing plant in Worcester, MA. The firefighters went into the building without knowing what awaited them beyond the walls, with the intent to rescue anyone who may be trapped inside. Sadly, conditions deteriorated within the building, effectively trapping 6 firemen, two who were clearing a floor to make sure there were no victims inside, and 4 who went in to find the first two before it was too late.

Flynn was not a firefighter and wrote the book after reading press coverage of the disaster and deciding that there was more of a story to be told. What he lacked in first-hand experience, he made up for by combining the accounts of firemen who were there and loved ones of the 6 who perished to create a very stirring chronicle of the events of that night. By providing a map in the front of the book and a brief timeline to show how quickly the tables turned on the firefighting efforts, Flynn enhances the picture in readers' minds and

enables them to feel as if they are there with the men. There are also pictures in the center of the book of the firefighters who were lost and others who played key roles in the book.

A good portion of the book was devoted to providing mini-biographies of the 6 firemen, which I particularly enjoyed but others might not care about. All of it was presented as one streaming story, so it wasn't chopped up into chapters on each man. I felt it was important to the memory of the men to explain who they were so they aren't remembered solely because of the fire. Plus, Flynn includes accounts of the immediate aftermath of the fire, as the families find out that their loved ones are missing and their fellow firefighters spend much of their free time sifting through debris trying to find the 6 bodies, since no one knew where the men were trapped and thus what condition the bodies would be in.

Overall, I found this to be a great book, with the only thing I felt it to be lacking was a more extensive long-term aftermath of the fire. While Flynn mentioned that money raised from the outpouring of support for the firefighters went towards buying equipment that could have potentially saved these 6 lives had there been money in the budget for it sooner, he didn't address issues such as what efforts are being made to prevent fires like this one, where there was no escape for the smoke and flames and limited means to fight it, and what the state of the firefighting squad was as a whole, though he did mention certain individuals.

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