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Review by Seth Kastle

Light the Fuse

Vince "Rocco" Vargas | 33rd Degrees Publishing, 2018 | 194 pp. ISBN: 9780999769720

Light the Fuse by Vincent "Rocco" Vargas is pseudo memoir offering guidance in the military to civilian transition and navigating everyday struggles of uncertainty. In Post-9/11 America, there is no shortage of current and former service members doing their best to provide the veteran community with their take on the "self-help book." Since September 11, 2001, more than 2.7 million service members have deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn (Hautzinger, Howell, Scandlyn, & Wool, 2015). This continual conduit of service members experiencing war and returning to the civilian world has flooded the industry with literature. From the endless supply of Navy Seal recounts of intense combat operations, to the lesser-known vantage point of the loggie at war, it is all there. *Light the Fuse* (2018) focuses on the concept of transition; not just the military to civilian transition that so many service members struggle with, but also the concept of life as a continual transition.

Vargas is a second-generation service member and former Army Ranger who served multiple deployments with the Army's elite 75th Ranger Regiment; he is a former border patrol agent, actor, author, and most importantly to him, he is a father and husband. Through Vargas' life and career, he has sustained and negotiated numerous setbacks and obstacles, which he is incredibly frank about; specifically, he notes how each event has shaped him.

For example, he grew up playing baseball. A son of parents who came from humble beginnings but did everything in their power to provide a good life for their family, baseball became a way of life for Vargas. His father who grew up in the streets, introduced him to the game early as a way to keep him occupied and out of trouble. It was his mother, though, that served as the guiding beacon in his life.

Vargas' mother instilled in him the unprecedented self-accountability, spirit, and work ethic that has carried him through every aspect of his life. For Vargas, baseball was always the plan; it was not until failing a ceramics class in college due to attendance and becoming ineligible to play that he would have to transition to something else. Working at a Texas Roadhouse after college with a new baby and no way to support a family, Vargas was drawn to the military.

The difference between *Light the Fuse* and a majority of other books in this genre, is that Vargas shares his experiences through the lens of his shortcomings. He is exceedingly candid about the failures in his life (specifically in the context of reintegration) and how they have shaped him. This is not Captain America's guide to a spotless transition—this is the realistic portrayal of the bumps, bruises, and ultimate accession of a man that has walked the same path many veterans face; this is real life.

Vargas takes a look at the importance of personal accountability, the process of learning to own his current position in life, and understanding his role in making things better. He states, "I am tired of people waiting for the world to create a path—I am just an average dude with an extraordinary drive" (Vargas, 2018, p. 54). This is where the book segments itself from others—this is not about a magic formula, but simply embracing what makes service members different: their unparalleled ability to work. Vargas comments that having a good, productive life is within reach for everyone. They just have to make the choices to go get it.

Vargas lists five common types of veterans that many in the community can acknowledge are a part of its ranks: 1) the veteran with entitlement, 2) the veteran with self pity, 3) the veteran with identity issues, 4) the veteran who thinks being a veteran makes him or her better than the rest of society, and 5) the veteran who gets through these stages to realize they are a civilian who has a set of tools they learned in the military that can make them successful.

While topically, identifying these five types of veterans may seem like a negative statement on the veteran community, it is anything but. Vargas admits to moving through each of these characteristics to where he is now. His commentary is more a statement of self-reflection than a slight. It is an observation of his journey in gaining the self-awareness that has helped him persevere.

The book's thesis statement is that finding and embracing true self-awareness is key to happiness and success. Figuring out, through the constant onslaught of failures in life, is what makes people themselves; this is the true path of transition. For Vargas, this does not just refer to the military to civilian transition, but all transitions life can produce.

Gaining self-awareness is not an easy process, or one that pays off immediately. As Vargas states, "this is a game of preparation meeting opportunity" (Vargas, 2018, p. 84). It is through running the gambit of successes and failures, and executing life experiences that people can begin to understand who they truly are. This does not happen from shying away from or discounting failures; quite the contrary. In fact, Vargas states that running away from failures would have denigrated his ability to take advantage of the role failure has taken in shaping his identity.

Understanding identity has plagued many service members as they transition from the military ranks to the civilian sector. Vargas comments that a kid at 18 joins the military and learns their identity, but when they get out, that identity does not fit into the civilian world. The identity that has been developed has been scaffolded by rigid structure and support. When these pillars are taken away, the identity does not make as much sense. Service Members are often unprepared to step into this new world; it is not just learning a new job, but shifting to a new way of life.

An additional theme of the text is balance. This is an elusive beast for many people who are successful. For service members, putting in the hours and labor to be successful is not an issue. They have already lived that life. Service members who were successful in the military, can be those same people who will be successful in the civilian sector. Success, though, can come at a cost, as it has for Vargas: time spent with his family was his cost, which rolled into greater costs.

His key, though, has been striving to find balance. He believes everyone has key drivers that make them happy; choosing where to place resources such as time and energy and understanding the corresponding sacrifice is where balance comes from. For Vargas, this is not a static frame of mind. Balance comes from continual, purposeful self-evaluation and increased self-awareness. This frame of balance follows the theme of the book: unforgiving personal accountability, nothing is anyone else's problem, it is his. The value of this text is highlighted by Vargas' identification of the priorities in his life, and the subsequent large-scale changes that he has elected to make. It was after a mission as a border patrol agent in 2015, and missing his daughter's birthday, that he decided to move forward to a different chapter in his life. His realization that he had just become his kids' paycheck and he wanted more is what spurred him to act. He had spent nearly 15 years training other peoples' kids; it was time to start training and mentoring his own. Family matters, for Vargas this means saying yes to family daily, and no to work more often.

Priorities will look different for everyone; for Vargas, his top priority is his family. This is his focus, the reason he moves forward. For him, part of finding balance, is the realization that not everything can be number one. For example, he talks about what it has been like to struggle with fitness and lifestyle as a civilian. The consequence of decreased physical activity after leaving the

service is something that many veterans can relate to. For Vargas, it was always simple to chalk it up to living in transition, working long hours, the simple ease and convenience of grabbing fast food.

Most service members were in great shape at one point in their lives; not being in that place anymore can be a bitter pill to swallow. Vargas states that to go back to being all-in on fitness (e.g., embracing a challenging fitness regimen with the diet and lifestyle that leads to being lean and muscular), comes at a cost. It is easy for him to walk tall and seem confident in public, but there is an inner war and shame that wages, the continual reminders and thoughts of what used to be. For him, it is worth it though, if family is the reason, it has to be the top priority. Everything else must take a second place; for him, this is what living life with purpose looks like. This is in no way meant to be a free ticket to justify an unhealthy lifestyle, but more a statement of fact and reality. The balance he seeks does not come without sacrifice. Just because something is not first in order of priorities does not mean it is not important.

The journey Vargas takes readers through is filled with failed marriages, regrets as a parent, unsure career moves, the intense brotherhood and loss of combat veterans, and deciphering what identity and priorities look like. The story is relevant because service members can relate to these obstacles, pitfalls, and triumphs in their own journeys. The advice is credible because it comes from someone who has lived through it and came out on the other side. The book is not billed as the one size fits all guide to success, but more of a “this is what the ugly truth looked like for one person.” Many service members can relate to and benefit from this read. In a sea full of the simple how to’s, *Light the Fuse* is a breath of fresh and critically needed air.

References

Hautzinger, S., Howell, A., Scandlyn, J., & Wool, Z.H. (2015). US veterans and military families. Retrieved from <http://watson.brown.edu/costofwar/costs/human/veterans>

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