

Heroes Real and Imagined

WE
NEED
HEROES

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We Need Heroes

DOES ANYONE REMEMBER Lenny Skutnik? One cold, bitter afternoon, Jan. 13, 1982 to be exact, Air Florida Flight 90 took off from Washington National Airport on a routine run. But within moments, the plane's tail struck the 14th Street Bridge and crashed into the Potomac River. As rescue workers rushed to retrieve survivors, Mr. Skutnik, a quiet copy-room government worker on his way home, parked his car, walked down the river's embankment, removed his boots and coat, dove into the icy water, and dragged a helpless woman to safety.

Two weeks later Mr. Skutnik was introduced to the world when Ronald Reagan, delivering his State of the Union Address to a joint session of Congress, pointed to him in the audience and lauded him as an American hero. The crowd erupted in applause, and people watching at home swelled with pride.

Again on September 11th and the days following, Americans collectively partook in the unexpected advent of the self-effacing hero. As workers in the WTC's Twin Towers desperately tried to work their way to the ground, police and firemen were working their way up. That day, 451 heroes from the NYPD, FDNY, and the Port Authority perished in their efforts to save lives in those combusted towers.

Following that tragic day, we waved American flags and cheered as muscled construction workers wearing boots and hard hats brought their heavy machinery—their lifts and cranes and mechanical shovels—and worked around the clock in the hopes of finding survivors in the Towers' wreckage. Pundit Peggy Noonan, in a column written shortly following those tragic days titled *Welcome Back Duke*, penned these powerful thoughts: "... men are back ... I am speaking

of masculine men, men who push things and pull things and haul things and build things, men who charge up the stairs in a hundred pounds of gear and tell everyone else where to go to be safe."

Recently, we heard the tragic yet inspiring story of Pat Tillman, the high-paid safety for the NFL's Arizona Cardinals who left his lucrative football career to become a Ranger in the US Army. He was killed in Afghanistan in April of last year.

Skutnik, Tillman, the men of 9/11—these are the real heroes of our world. And we need more of them, desperately.

Yes, Shaquille O'Neal, Barry Bonds, Tom Brady and others of their ilk are fun to watch. They entertain. We enjoy seeing them ply their craft. We talk about how they "overcome adversity" and triumph over great odds.

But let's not kid ourselves. The stories of these kinds of heroes—the sports kind of heroes—though surely part of our American culture, do not resonate with us as deeply, as profoundly, as solidly, as do the stories of Lenny Skutnik, the WTC heroes, Pat Tillman, and others like them. That's because each of us has been formed, fabricated, fashioned by our Maker, to intuitively understand what constitutes a true hero. Deep within our human core, when we observe or hear of people acting on the behalf of others out of integrity, self-sacrifice, and courage, we hear a quiet, subtle, satisfying "amen" testifying in our hearts to what is right and good and true.

We need heroes.

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