

The Hero of the Tower

Cyril Richard “Rick” Rescorla was born in 1939 in Cornwall, the southwestern-tip of England. As a boy, he watched as American troops filled his hometown, preparing for the invasion of Normandy in 1944. He admired these brave soldiers and wanted to emulate them, vowing to one day join their ranks.¹

He fulfilled that vow in 1963, when he immigrated to the United States and joined the US Army. Two years later, Rescorla started a tour in Vietnam, where he fought in the Battle of Ia Drang. Some of Rescorla’s exploits there were featured in the book “We Were Soldiers Once...and Young,” and in fact, the famous picture that graces the book’s cover is of Rescorla himself.² General Hal Moore, who co-authored the book and fought in the battle, called Rescorla “the best platoon leader I ever saw.”¹



Fast forward to 1990³. Rescorla had left the army and taken a job as the head of security for a financial services firm in the World Trade Center. Realizing that the towers were a high-profile target for terrorists, he asked his friend Daniel Hill, a trained counterterrorist expert, to evaluate the World Trade Center’s security. Hill agreed.

When Hill arrived, Rescorla had one question. “How would you take this out?” Hill examined the basement and noted there was no real security. He showed Rescorla a load-bearing column in the basement garage. “This is a soft touch,” Hill said. “I’d drive a truck full of explosives in here, walk out, and light it off.”

Rescorla took his concerns to the Port Authority of New York, but his warnings went unheeded. So it was that on February 26, 1993, terrorists driving a truck were able to set off a bomb in the basement of the North Tower.

While the World Trade Center had withstood that particular attack, Rescorla knew that more terrorism could be expected. In 1998, he was filmed in the World Trade Center itself, discussing the likelihood of terrorists flying a plane into one of the buildings. He convinced his firm to let him create a company evacuation plan. Employees were drilled twice a year as Rescorla showed them how to move calmly and efficiently down the building’s emergency staircases. Since his company occupied twenty-two floors in the all, he dictated that employees move down in pairs, with people from each floor taking their place in line behind those already descending. And he quelled any and all grumbling. As Rescorla himself said it, everyone had to follow the “Eight P’s”: *proper prior planning and preparation prevents piss-poor performance*.

In the meantime, he was growing older and less healthy. While his wife, Susan, was a source of constant happiness for him, he dreaded losing the strength and energy of his youth. Cancer had been plaguing him for years. At an army reunion, he once said, “Look at us. Hill with a heart attack. Me with cancer. We’re old men, and we’re going to die with people spoon-feeding us. Men like us shouldn’t go out like this.”

Despite his words, he didn't like being honored for his past or feted as a war hero. "The real heroes are dead," he once told Susan.

But on the morning of September 11, 2001, he woke up early, just as he always did, telling his wife that he had never felt better in his life. "I love you so," he said, before leaving for the World Trade Center.

What happened after this, understandably, is a bit more difficult to piece together. But from eyewitness accounts and phone calls Rescorla made, it's clear he spent his last hours exactly the way he would have wanted to heroically.

At 8:15, he and Susan spoke over the phone, with Rescorla at his desk on the 44th floor of the South Tower. At 8:46, the first plane hit the North Tower. When his wife heard the news, she called his office and spoke to one of his coworkers.

"Don't worry. Rick is getting everyone out," the coworker said. "He's out there with his bullhorn now."

While others were debating what to do, whether to stay or go, Rescorla wasted no time. He immediately began shepherding everyone out, just like it was a drill. Then he called his friend Dan Hill. "I'm evacuating right now," Rescorla told him.

Hill listened over the phone as Rescorla gave instructions. He even heard Rescorla singing an old Cornish hymn, something he had done in Vietnam to comfort other soldiers.

*Men of Cornwall stop your dreaming;
Can't you see their spear points gleaming?
See their warriors' pennants streaming
To this battlefield.
Men of Cornwall stand ye steady;
It cannot be ever said ye
for the battle were not ready;
Stand and never yield!*

Suddenly, Rescorla was back. He told Hill how a voice had come over the intercom, advising workers to stay at their desks instead of leaving.

"What'd you say?" Hill asked.

"I'm getting my people out of here," Rescorla answered.

Minutes later, the second plane hit. Frantically, everyone began streaming out of the building. Rescorla stayed to help manage the evacuation. But he found time for two more phone calls. The first was to his wife.

“I have to get these people out safely,” he said. “If something should happen to me, I want you to know I’ve never been happier. You made my life.”

Then he called his friend Hill for the final time. “Call Susan and calm her down,” he said. In the meantime, he said, he would make one last sweep.

At 9:58, fifty-six minutes after the second plane hit, the South Tower collapsed.

Though the tower fell, taking Rick Rescorla with it, almost everyone below the impact zone made it out alive, including 2,687 members of his own company. Their safety was Rescorla’s responsibility, one he carried out to the very end. Thanks to his bravery, cool head, and zealous preparation, he ensured the safety of almost every person under his care.

September 11, 2001 will always be remembered as one of the most terrifying days most of us will ever know. But it’s not the cowardice of the attackers we should remember first, or the fear we felt, or even the sorrow. It’s true that 9/11 showed the worst aspects of mankind but it also showcased the best. Love and loyalty, courage and commitment. What happened in those towers was a tragedy, but it should also serve as inspiration. On every floor, normal men and women did everything they could for each other. Supporting the wounded, comforting the frightened, laboring until their last breath so that others could survive to tell their tale.

I pray we never have to endure a day like that again. But whether we do or not, we should never forget the example all those brave men and women set for us. So this September, spare a thought for the heroes of the towers. Spare a thought for Rick Rescorla.

Sincerely,



Michael B. FitzPatrick, CLTC
President and Co-Founder



Sources:

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rick_Rescorla

² “Rick Rescorla Memorial,” accessed August 2nd, 2013. <http://rickrescorla.com/>

³ James B. Stewart, “The Real Heroes Are Dead,” *The New Yorker*, February 11, 2002. http://newyorker.com/archive/2002/02/11/020211fa_fact_stewart