

Remembering a Sept. 11 hero

Nov. 30, 2001, New York, New York.

The low, quick-moving clouds provided a dramatic backdrop to the 40-foot flag suspended between the two ladder trucks. It is an image I will carry with me to the end of my days, as it inspired not only much sadness and anger, but also hope.

Michael Carlo was a member of Engine 230 out of Manhattan and was among the first responders when the planes hit the towers on Sept. 11. His funeral was among the last held of the New York Fire Department's simply because no trace of him was ever found.

Michael and his older brother Rob, both New York firefighters, are my second cousins on my mother's side. Though they lived in New York, and my family lived in "Philly," their mother, like the rest of the parents of her generation who had moved away from the upstate coal mining town, would take them "back home" to Wanamie, Pa., for extended visits with the family during breaks from school. My sister and I always looked forward to trips upstate when we were little because Wanamie was a small town fairly crawling with cousins of my age, either permanent residents or on extended trips like us.

Having Michael in town only made it that much better.

From exploring the clay-like wastelands at the end of the street (which he christened "the desert") or walking up to the reservoir to go ice-skating, Michael always turned the mundane into an adventure. We sledged down hills on cut up cardboard boxes and went roller skating at the rink in Nanticoke, where Michael was the speed skater who would come up behind you to push you twice as fast as you were already going. When Michael was in town, a game of cops and robbers was replaced by "Emergency," in which he and my cousin Jon were "Gage" and "DeSoto" from Rescue 51 while my sister and I played the damsels in distress.

As we grew up and became teenagers who were too cool to accompany our parents upstate, the easy intimacy of childhood playmates was replaced by tentative shyness. When we saw each other at family reunions, most of us cousins would circle each other, afraid to be the first to break the ice, lest we find those happy memories of childhood were not enough to sustain an adult relationship.

The only two cousins I was never reluctant to approach were Jon and Michael. Always quick with a smile and eager to catch up with you, the expected awkwardness would disappear immediately and it would be just "us" again: good friends who played hard and let their imaginations run wild for those all-too-brief and magical days back in the seventies.

Though we lost Jon tragically in 1993, Michael never changed. He was one of those devilishly good looking guys who had dozens of girlfriends who invariably remained friends with him after the romantic relationship ended. He went skydiving, owned a powerboat, traveled the world and turned his earlier games of "Emergency" into the real thing when he joined the FDNY. He never stopped living his adventures.

On Sept. 11, once our immediate family was accounted for, the word came from New York: Michael was missing. In the days immediately following the attack, we had hope that Michael would turn up, dusty, bruised and wondering what all the fuss was about. As the days went on and the mission at ground zero changed from rescue into recovery, we held out hope that we would find at least a trace of him. Pictures a journalist took at ground zero showed Rob searching for his brother, digging through seemingly insurmountable piles of rubble, his face set in grim resolve; the heartbreak only visible in his eyes.

Then that hope faded until there was none.

So, on Nov. 30, 2001, the FDNY sent two chartered buses down to Wanamie to collect Michael's family so they could bid him farewell. As we came into New York, we could look across the river to where the towers once stood, now no longer smoldering, simply gone, erased from existence.

Firefighters come out for their own, and over 300 came to honor my cousin. Most were NYFD, but in addition to the delegation from Wanamie, there were firemen from Boston, Philly and as far away as Vancouver. They lined up in full dress outside the church, white-gloved and standing at silent attention as the Pipes and Drums followed his family to the church. The strains of "Amazing Grace" played by a lone bagpiper moved even the most stoic to tears.

The church was packed with family, friends and well-wishers, at least 600 strong. Mayor Guiliani came and spoke, as I heard he did for all 343 firefighters who perished on that day. Michael was eulogized by those who knew him best: friends, co-workers and teammates. Rob spoke with love and honor about the brother who was also his best friend.

I remember standing in the crowd at the reception afterward when the enormity of Sept. 11 overwhelmed me. I mourned not only for Michael and our family, but also for the whole country. I felt honored and proud to be standing in the same room with the men of the FDNY. I felt rage at those who did this to us.

Most importantly, though, I felt hope. Standing elbow to elbow in that crowded gymnasium, surrounded by people who came to pay their respects to my cousin — many of whom had never even met him — I felt hope for America. Courage is still a trait that we recognize and honor, and the people who possess it we rightfully call heroes.

Five years after Sept. 11, we've had time to crunch the enormity of that tragedy down into a tiny manageable ball that most of us can live with. We don't see the footage of the towers collapsing, the images of the ash-covered day traders, the desperate messages written in the dust looking for loved ones. Exposure to these images has been deemed "insensitive."

We are beginning to forget the reality of that day.

We recognize Sept. 11 by reading the names of those who perished, but even this has become less solemn. Precedence is given to the opinions of yammering experts, musical interpretations and talking network heads in love with the sound of their own voices.

All I want to hear on Monday is Michael's name. He was not a victim of Sept. 11, but a hero. I need to know that he is remembered.

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Commentary



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