

9/11 remembrance: Firefighter Michael Carroll

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"Only those are fit to live who do not fear to die; and none are fit to die who have shrunk from the joy of life."

-- Theodore Roosevelt

In the spring of 1986, 24-year-old Mike Carroll had an important decision to make.

A brilliant kid, he had graduated second in his class of 300 at LaSalle Academy, an achievement that earned him an engineering scholarship from Manhattan College. He used that degree to land a well-paying job in the new and growing tech division of AT&T. But something gnawed at this quiet but hard-wired young man who was coming to the realization that a shirt and tie, a desk, and the stultifying routine of a corporate existence were not for him.

Michael Thomas Carroll was born and raised in Yorkville, the upper East Side, working-class, predominantly Irish neighborhood where, despite its location in a city the size of New York, everybody knows everybody. He was the fourth and final child produced by the union of Bill and Jean Carroll, following brother Bill Jr., and sisters Eileen and Nancy.

Bill Sr. (1928-2012) was a proud product of America's Greatest Generation — Navy veteran, iron-worker, and then a fearless New York City firefighter. "Pop" was the larger-than-life, old school, family patriarch familiar to millions of baby boom generation homes. As a second-job steam-fitter, he had installed sprinklers in the World Trade Center. Until he retired, big Bill Carroll answered the fire bells in the night as a member of Hook & Ladder Company No. 3 at 108 E. 13th St. in the East Village. Pop's older son, Bill Jr., would follow in his father's large footsteps, eventually becoming a captain and in charge of the same Ladder 3 firehouse.

Unbeknown to his family, Mike had quietly taken the fire department's rigorous written and physical entrance exams. The brainy and brawny college grad scored a perfect 100 on the written test and aced the physical with a score of 99. He was definitely "in" — if he wanted to be. As if predestined, when he was at his most ambivalent about his future,

Mike got a call from the department: "Come, follow us." Mike answered the siren call in a flash.

If not "grandfathered" into Ladder 3, Mike was certainly "fathered" in as Bill Sr. and brother Bill Jr. pulled enough strings to see that their favorite rookie fireman got assigned to their same firehouse.

After being hazed as "Altar Boy" and "College Boy" for his darkly handsome features and his, well, boyish enthusiasm, Mike's physical prowess and coolness under (and in a) fire earned him the gradual respect of his band of brothers in the close-knit Ladder 3 company. His obvious skills also caught the attention of Ladder 3's commander-in-chief, one Capt. Patrick J. Brown.

"Paddy" Brown was an NYFD legend — profiled in Time magazine, no less — whose sensational exploits above and beyond (some of his superiors said way beyond) the call of duty, had saved the lives of many New Yorkers in dangerous, high-rise fires. He earned commendations and reprimands sometimes at the same fire. Mike eventually earned the position of Capt. Brown's "chauffeur" or driver of the firetruck with Brown riding shotgun, discussing strategy and tactics as they raced to a reported blaze. Like Paddy Brown, Mike was instinctive, fast, smart. Never reckless, they were both consummate professionals.

Michael Carroll also answered another call the following year, marrying Nancy Fox, a pretty, blond, blue-eyed neighborhood girl who used to hang around — waiting for Mike to notice — the Carroll household while her older brother, Phil, played with Mike. They were married on Sept. 26, 1987, in the massive St. Ignatius Loyola Catholic Church, the religious epicenter for the mostly Catholic Yorkville.

While Nancy continued to work in the administration of Lennox Hill Hospital, Mike searched for another job to fill the gaps of the standard work week of a professional firefighter: 24 hours on, 48 hours off. As a teen, he had worked for a Manhattan contractor who had an exterminating business on the side. The prescient Mike bought the side business, confident of its recession-proof future in an island city of 1.6million souls and perhaps twice that number of unwanted insects all packed together in a mere 23 square miles.

Children followed: a son, Brendan Michael, born in 1994, and a daughter, Olivia Leigh, in 1998. With money saved and Mike's two jobs, Nancy became a stay-at-home mom.

If they survive the rigors and dangers of their chosen profession, New York City firefighters can retire after 20 years with a pension equal to half of their annual salary. As

the 21st century dawned, Mike dared to think about that retirement only seven years away. He thought, he confided in Nancy, he'd like to teach American history. Or be a coach — he loved coaching his young son's baseball teams. With the unusual work schedule they have, firefighters with children get to spend a lot time with them both at home and at school. Mike was an engaged, benevolent dad, a boundless source of good humor and quiet strength.

The fateful day

At 7:59 a.m. on Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001, on the last morning of their lives, 39-year-old Mike Carroll and the other 11 firefighters on duty at Ladder 3, were gassing up one of the trucks and preparing to end their shift. Over the crisp, cloudless early morning skies of Boston, five men hijacked American Airlines Flight 11 en route to Los Angeles. Forty-seven minutes later, after flying so low over the Hudson River that West Point cadets stopped their calisthenics long enough to watch, the hijackers flew the plane carrying 87 passengers and crew right into the 93rd through 99th floors of the World Trade Center's North Tower.

At 9:03 a.m., United Airlines Flight 175, also hijacked after leaving Boston's Logan Airport, flew at 500 mph into the World Trade Center's South Tower, gashing that building's 77th through 85th floors. Aboard that airplane, also bound for Los Angeles, were 60 passengers and crew.

Shortly after American Airlines Flight 77 took off from Washington, D.C.'s, Dulles airport, at 8:20 a.m., five men commandeered the plane and, after murdering the pilots, turned it around and crashed it like a low-flying missile into the first floor of the Pentagon: 59 passengers and crew were on board Flight 77.

Across the Hudson, at the airport in Newark, N.J., at 8:42 a.m., United Airlines Flight 93 rolled down the runway and lifted gently into the azure sky headed for San Francisco. That flight carried 40 passengers and crew not counting its own complement of jihadists. After hijacking the plane, its new pilots turned the big 767 around and headed back east toward Washington, D.C. Before reaching its intended target, a determined group of passengers — briefed by cellphone contact with relatives on the ground about the results of the first three hijackings — attempted to retake control of the plane, a bold move because they had no weapons and the real pilots were dead. Unsure if they could turn back the rebelling passengers, the desperate hijackers rolled the plane into a steep dive, disintegrating it upon a nose-first impact in a field outside Shanksville, Pa.

Back in New York, an alarm was activated at Box 5-5-8087, the station closest to the Twin Towers. Mere blocks from the giant infernos, Battalion Chief John P. Williamson,

Capt. Patrick J. Brown, Lt. Kevin Donnelly, Firefighters James R. Coyle, Gerard P. Dewan, Jeffrey J. Giordano, Joseph E. Maloney, John K. McAvoy, Timothy P. McSweeney, Joseph J. Ogren, Steven J. Olson, and Michael T. Carroll jumped into their trucks and, sirens splitting the air, raced to the raging fires.

Heroic efforts

Arriving at the chaotic scene, as thousands of World Trade Center office workers rushed out of the burning silos, the men of Ladder 3, and an army of other firefighters, police officers, EMTs, and other first responders, rushed in. Thanks to their collective, heroic efforts, and with almost no coordinated communications, "only" 2,606 people died in and around the Twin Towers which, on an average day, had a workforce of 50,000. (125 people perished at the Pentagon.)

When last heard from, Ladder 3's men had made it to the sky-lobby on the 44th floor of the North Tower, where a triage had been set up. Paddy Brown and Mike Carroll were treating burn victims when, at 9:58 a.m., an ear-splitting rumble and roar announced the collapse of the South Tower, sending up geysers of debris and smoke. An order was given to evacuate the North Tower, but it is not known if the Ladder 3 men heard the command or simply ignored it, opting to stay with the injured and dying.

At 10:28 a.m., as a transfixed world watched on live television, including Nancy Carroll, who knew by then that her childhood friend, her sweetheart, her lover, her husband, the father of her children, her Mike was in that building, the North Tower ceased to exist, crashing at a rate of one floor per second into a pile of smoking rubble 10 stories high.

Caring for victims

Is it too much to believe that, with the terrifying sound of collapsing floors approaching them, Mike Carroll and Paddy Brown, and perhaps the others, would have shielded the helpless civilians with their own bodies before eternity overtook them all? If greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for a friend, what does it say about a man who willingly gives up his life for a stranger?

Hope of his survival finally abandoned, Nancy somehow found the courage to tell her children, ages 7 and 3, that their beloved father wasn't coming home. For weeks, as the fires continued to burn (they would burn for exactly 100 days), her family was denied the closure of a funeral as none of the Ladder 3 men had been recovered. Finally, in October, Nancy consented to a service and a memorial Mass at St. Ignatius Loyola. In mid-December 2001, she and her family got the real thing. Mike's remains were found, next to Paddy Brown's and near some of the people they had tried to save.

Firefighter Michael Carroll was brought home to a cemetery just a few blocks from where Nancy and her children now live, in Ridgewood, N.J., a New York City bedroom community where, on a clear day, its inhabitants can see the Empire State Building. Twelve residents of Ridgewood lost their lives that terrible day. Three of them, two employees of Cantor-Fitzgerald and one from Aon Insurance, are buried next to Mike. Two of the graves are memorial headstones only.

In an interview, Nancy says the scars of that black day will never heal, that she struggles to live as she continues to grieve. She lives now for her children — "raising them like my Mike would have wanted," a tear escaping from each eye of this New York-resilient, but deeply wounded woman. Nineteen-year-old Brendan, with the dark good looks and easy charm of his father, is a sophomore at Marist College. Olivia, 15, is a beautiful high school sophomore whose shy demeanor belies the inner strength of a talented young woman from whom the world will inevitably hear.

In remembrance

In 2002, after a chance meeting with Lt. Reid Jantz, a surviving member of what was left of Ladder 3, he gave me a holy card of one of the fallen from that company. The card was Michael T. Carroll's. These memorial cards are a Catholic ritual, distributed to the mourners of the faithfully departed, displaying on the front, usually, a likeness of the deceased's patron saint for whom she/he was named and perhaps a favorite prayer on the back.

The front of Michael Carroll's card is a picture of him, laden with the uniform and accouterments of a fireman, but with a beatific smile across his handsome face. I have kept this card on a wall in my clothes closet, trying to give that brave man with the stout heart a glimpse and a quick reflection before dashing out to rip into another day.

For years, I was unaware of anything about Mike Carroll, the man, the son, the brother, the husband, the father, the fireman. Now, after meeting and talking with Nancy, I (and you) do and, hopefully, we can appreciate the richness of the life of one of the sea of lost faces of 9/11.

On the back of Mike Carroll's holy card is an Irish blessing that ends "... and until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand."

Perhaps if there had been more room, one could have added an excerpt from the eulogy that a devastated Theodore Roosevelt gave after the loss of his youngest and favorite son, Quentin, a casualty of World War I:

"Only those are fit to live who do not fear to die; and none are fit to die who have shrunk from the joy of life. Both life and death are parts of the same Great Adventure. Never yet was worthy adventure worthily carried through by the man who put his personal safety first. ... [A]ll of us who give service and stand ready for sacrifice, are the torch-bearers. We run with the torches until we fall, content if we can then pass them to the hands of the other runners. The torches whose flame is brightest are borne by the gallant men at the front, by the gallant women whose husbands and lovers, whose sons and brothers are at the front. These men are high of soul, as they face their fate on the shell-shattered earth ... and no less high of soul are the women with torn hearts and shining eyes; the girls whose boy-lovers have been struck down in their golden morning, and the mothers and wives to whom word has been brought that henceforth they must walk in the shadow. These are the torch-bearers; these are they who have dared the Great Adventure."

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