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MILLERTON NEWS

One flag to never forget 9/11

By CORY ALLYN - Staff Reporter
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PINE PLAINS — It first began the afternoon after Sept. 11, 2001. It was a very hot and humid day, but inside the “frozen zone,” in the thick of building rubble and debris from the World Trade Center Towers, it was even hotter. Destruction from the collapsed towers had heated metal beams below ground level to nearly unbearably hot temperatures; rescue workers’ boots were melting as they walked across them.

Thousands of workers were in the frozen zone that day, still looking for anyone trapped underground or buried in the remains of the Trade Center. Earlier that morning, the last survivor had been rescued, and there were still hopes that more would be found.

A good friend of Emergency Service Unit Detective Rich Miller was missing, and Miller’s unit was searching near what was left of Building 5. There was a breach hole leading down into the basement levels of the complex’s 16 acres, and near it, sticking up out of the rubble, was the antenna from the North Tower. Miller took a look at the antenna, and said to friend and fellow officer Richie Hartigan, “We’re putting a flag up for our guys.”

Pledging to remember

It was an emotional story for Miller to tell, standing in front of about 100 veterans and municipal officials at the Carvel Country Club last Saturday, July 18. The Post 911 Foundation, an organization founded by Miller, who iconically raised the first American flag in the frozen zone following the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, held a breakfast and presentation to raise awareness for their cause to honor and assist veterans and first responders who have served the nation after the 9/11 attacks.

Leading the foundation are Miller and its president, Scott Neil, who serves as the senior enlists advisor for the director of United States Special Operations Command’s Interagency Task Force in Tampa, Fla. Several other members of the foundation were in attendance at the event, which preceded the American Le Mans Series at Lime Rock Park in Lakeville later that afternoon.

The Primetime Racing Group raced a Dodge Viper on Saturday, the only American car in the race, and partnered with The Post 911 Foundation for the race. After that event was set up to raise awareness for the foundation, a breakfast and presentation event was organized and held at Carvel.

The foundation has two main goals: to raise nationwide support for the remembrance of 9/11, and to assist veterans returning from combat having trouble readjusting to their normal lives.

Several important municipal leaders, including state Assemblyman Marc Molinaro, took the opportunity before the presentations began to apologize for the government’s lack of recognition of 9/11.

“Even today we don’t have a memorial raised,” said Molinaro. “It’s somewhat embarrassing for me. Our nation, our state and our government can do a heck of a lot better.

“The collective memory of the American people is momentary, and in the case of 9/11,” he continued, “I think there is a desire to move on.” Molinaro however said that forgetting about the events of Sep. 11 would be “among the most egregious acts to the service of these men standing before you today. We are who we are because of our collective history. On behalf of a fairly dysfunctional government, I offer you a very genuine offer of gratitude.”

Bernard Kerik, the former police commissioner of New York City who was in his office when the towers were hit, said that 9/11 changed the entire country.

“It’s changed the way we responded to crisis and the way we fight our wars in the future,” Kerik said. “If

nothing else, I'm here to say thank you to the members of the military, police personnel and first responders. Nobody knows how important they are to this country more than I do. I can't thank you enough for what you've done and what you represent."

The first flag

"There were no flags in the frozen area yet," Miller said. He and Hartigan had the go-ahead from their superiors. The only problem now was, where to get a flag.

There was nothing in the immediate area, but the two officers were determined. They finally found a flag on a stage in Stuyvesant High School, where the police department had set up a second command center.

Miller and Hartigan made their way back to the frozen zone with the flag wrapped up and tucked under his arm.

"I didn't want to make it a spectacle," he said. No members of the press were allowed in the frozen zone, but en route the two were stopped by a reporter who wanted to know where they were going with the flag.

"We'll tell you later," Miller replied.

"Well, what are your names," the reporter persisted.

"We'll tell you later," the two answered again.

Inside the frozen zone, a battalion chief sent two men with Miller and Hartigan toward the antenna with a ladder.

"I almost gave it to the guy next to me to stick up there," Miller remember. "Rich gave me a push toward the ladder and said, 'Get up there.'"

While the news media wasn't yet allowed in the area, photos and a video exist of Miller raising the flag, taken by workers inside the frozen zone, all of whom had stopped to salute the flag as it was raised.

"When I looked down and saw all the people turned to me, I almost dropped the flag," Miller said, smiling. "I didn't realize it was going to be such a big deal."

A little bit of wire held the flag securely in place. The image of Miller atop the ladder, amid the smoke and rubble, raising the American flag the day after the worst terrorist attack ever on American soil, is one few people will forget.

Taking care of veterans

The video shown to those who attended the breakfast has never been released to the public, Miller said.

"It's important for veterans to see and hear this," said Neil. "This is a very powerful image and message."

The lack of recognition shown to soldiers returning home, Neil said, is certainly taking its toll on the mental health of veterans.

"Soldiers are quietly coming and going," he reported. "The parades are starting to wane, but for us the conflict isn't over."

One of the trends Neil said he is starting to see soldiers returning with are the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a classic label the foundation doesn't support.

"It makes it seem like an illness," said foundation member Jerry Lavelly. "We wanted to start something

where we can support these guys at a grassroots level without having any stigma attached. The symptoms are a lot of the same things that cops and first responders go through.”

Lavelly and Neil have written a research paper on how to recognize combat veterans who need help, pointing out the positive effects of peer-to-peer counseling.

“We realized that classical PTSD diagnosis and treatment isn’t cutting it when you have over 50 percent of people coming back and experiencing something,” Lavelly said. “This is about building on a more preventative basis.”

Much of the foundation’s goals include bringing together other grassroots organizations interested in the same goals, like the Wounded Warrior Project, which had several members in attendance. Other events similar to the presentation at Carvel have been held, and the foundation intends to take their story and cause on a nationwide campaign called “Follow the Flag,” where the flag that Miller raised will be taken across the country, raising money for a memorial at Ground Zero. On Sept. 11, 2011, on the 10-year anniversary of the attacks, the foundation hopes to have raised enough support to have the flag permanently installed there.

“This is all grassroots,” Neil said. “We’re honest Americans. This isn’t going to come from the top, it’s going to come from the bottom.”

Sergeant 1st Class Brian Coons is a Pine Plains resident and recently returned from Afghanistan.

“It’s an honor to stand in front of these guys,” he told the audience. “We all appreciate what they’re doing.”

It was announced after the presentation that Wachovia Bank will match, dollar for dollar, any funds raised by the foundation. The foundation thanked everyone for attending, including the Durst Organization for hosting the event, and Roger Lougheed from Peddler’s Cafe in Pine Plains for cooking breakfast.

“I knew 90 percent of the room,” said town Supervisor Gregg Pulver after the presentation. “It’s a group of people who talk to one another and can feel that camaraderie. There are a lot of unsung heroes right here. I know [the foundation] will take off, and I hope we will be a part of that.”

More information on The Post 911 Foundation can be found by visiting its Web site at post911foundation.org.

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