



From the Barracks to World Trade Center Hero

By Michael Gibson

Professor of Law
Oklahoma City University School of Law

On the morning of September 11, 2001, you and I stared at the television, watching smoke pour out of the World Trade Center's twin towers, wondering what was happening in the heart of New York City.

Rick Rescorla, OCU LAW '75, was too busy to watch or to wonder. He was in Tower 2. He was saving 2,700 lives.

Ten years later, Rescorla's heroism has been recognized in books and in *Time Magazine*. A History Channel documentary is devoted to his 1993 prediction that terrorists would use a plane to hit the World Trade Center; experts in counterterrorism and security discuss his eight-year campaign to prepare his co-workers for the disaster he had predicted. He is the subject of a full-length opera; his statute stands on the Walk of Honor at the National Infantry Museum, Ft. Benning, Georgia.

Here at OCU, we hardly know him.

Rescorla's OCU file is just seven pages long. His law school transcript has nothing out of the ordinary (although you could say that four years of night classes in the old Barracks were anything but ordinary). He filled out his law school application by hand, and most of his answers are typical for the time. "How many hours per week do you work? *Forty*" "Why do you apply to this particular school? *Evening courses will not conflict with my employment.*"

Some are not so typical.

“From what high school did you graduate? *Humphry Davy School, Penzance, Cornwall, England.*”

“What extra-curricular honors have you won? *“Governor’s Oklahoma Commendation Medal; Silver Star; Bronze Star w/ oak leaf cluster; Purple Heart.”*”

Growing up in Cornwall, Rescorla was fascinated by the American soldiers stationed nearby, and he learned the songs of his region, songs like *Men of Harlech*, which commemorates the seven-year defense of Harlech Castle in Wales in the 1400s.

He joined the British Army, did police work in Rhodesia, and then entered the U.S. Army. He served two tours in Vietnam with the 1st Cavalry Division: sometimes he sang to his troops to calm them. Lt. General Hal Moore described him as “the best platoon leader I ever saw” and put Rescorla’s photo on the front cover of his book.

In 1967, Rescorla became a U.S. citizen, took a friend’s advice, and enrolled in a writing program at the University of Oklahoma. In 1972, he entered OCU LAW’s evening program. Back then, we were in “the Barracks”, two bricked-over, World War II Quonset huts with a leaky roof and drafty windows. He graduated in 1975, taught for a few years, then entered corporate security.

He wound up in New York City, working for Dean Witter Reynolds, a brokerage firm headquartered in the World Trade Center. In 1990, he and a friend warned the New York Port Authority that the center was vulnerable to a car bomb in its parking garage. The Port Authority took no action. Three years later, a terrorist did just what Rescorla had predicted.

After that bombing, Rescorla predicted another attack on the World Trade Center, even suggesting that terrorists might use a plane full of explosives. He pressured his company to move out; he urged the Port Authority to reform its security and evacuation plans. He got nowhere.

Then he made the decision. If no one would help him save his co-workers, he would teach his co-workers to save themselves.

He began regular evacuation drills, standing in the stairwells, stop watch in hand. He taught his colleagues always to go down, not up (helicopter rescues from rooftops are rare). He told his co-workers never to wait for police or fire fighters, to always take charge of their own survival.

He persisted for eight years, despite a divorce, a long battle with cancer, and a second marriage. In 1997, Dean Witter merged with Morgan Stanley, putting Rescorla in charge of security for floors 44 through 73 of Tower 2. He kept up the drills, insisting that *everyone* participate, even visitors.

Time Magazine's Amanda Ripley described Rescorla's planning and persistence in her book, *The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes—and Why*:

The radicalism of Rescorla's drills cannot be overstated. [This was] an investment bank. Millionaire, high-performance bankers on the seventy-third floor chafed at Rescorla's evacuation regimen. They did not appreciate interrupting high-net-worth clients in the middle of a meeting. Each drill, which pulled the firm's brokers off their phones and away from their computers, cost the company money. But Rescorla did it anyway....His military training had taught him a simple rule of human nature, the core lesson of this book: the best way to

get the brain to perform under extreme stress is to repeatedly run through rehearsals beforehand.

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Rick Rescorla heard an explosion next door in Tower 1. As he grabbed his bullhorn and his hard hat, someone from the Port Authority came over the building's loudspeakers, telling everyone to stay at their desks.

But Rescorla was adamant. He went from floor to floor, telling Morgan Stanley employees to evacuate, to stay away from the elevators, to follow the procedures they had practiced for so many years.

Then he took a position in the sky lobby of the 44th floor, where his fire drills traditionally had ended. He was directing traffic down the stairs at 9:03 a.m., when the building shook violently.

No one knew that the terrorists' second plane had struck. The lights went out. The hundreds of people on the 44th floor felt Tower 2 tip to one side, then snap back up. People were thrown against walls, thrown to the floor. People panicked, started to run to the stairwells.

Rescorla's voice came over the bullhorn. "Stop. Be still. Be silent. Be calm."

And then Morgan Stanley employees heard the strangest of all the sounds they would hear that day. Just as Rick Rescorla had sung to his troops in the jungles of Vietnam, he was singing to them, singing that old Welsh song:

Tongues of fire on Idris flaring,

News of foeman near declaring.

To heroic deeds of daring,

Call ye Harlech men!

Groans of wounded peasants dying
Wails of wives and children crying,
For the distant succor crying,
Call ye Harlech men!

....

Mothers, cease your weeping.
Calm you may be sleeping.
You and yours in safety now
The Harlech men are keeping.

Ere the sun is high in heaven,
They you fear by panic riven,
Shall like frightened sheep be driven,
Far by Harlech men!

People stopped, listened, and resumed the drill they had done so many times before.

Rescorla moved from floor to floor, still singing, still calming his co-workers.

At one point, he stopped and called his wife, Susan. According to James B. Stewart's biography, *Heart of a Soldier*, Rescorla told her not to cry. "I have to get these people out safely. If something should happen to me, I want you to know I've never been happier. You made my life."

Two thousand, six hundred, and eighty-seven Morgan Stanley employees made it out of Tower 2 that morning. Rick Rescorla, '75, was last seen on the stairs on the 10th floor, walking up.

I learned about Rescorla in 2002, purely by chance. *Time Magazine* had named *Heart of a Soldier* the best non-fiction book of the year; the *Oklahoman's* review of that book mentioned Rescorla's studies at OCU. I read the book, but somehow I didn't appreciate the enormity of what the man had done.

The bombing's tenth anniversary persuaded me that I was wrong. I mentioned Rescorla to our director of marketing and communications, Brook Arbeitman, who worked for the Oklahoma Office of Homeland Security for more than seven years. She had learned about Rescorla at a community preparedness conference in Washington, D.C several years ago. He was inspiring to her for many reasons, but especially in the area of emergency preparedness planning, which was part of her work at Homeland Security. Brook said she used to talk about Rescorla when she gave presentations across the state. But, it wasn't until she started at OCU LAW that she learned he was an alumnus. She was shocked that in a state where we are so proud of our citizens and their great accomplishments, no one here knows about Rescorla, his ties to Oklahoma or his heroism on 9/11.

I discovered the History Channel regularly shows a documentary about him, *The Man Who Predicted 9/11*. The Oklahoma Military Hall of Fame inducted him in 2009. The San Francisco Opera premiered a full-length opera based on his life, *The Heart of a Soldier*, on Sept. 11, 2011. The University of Oklahoma posthumously named him its Alumnus of the Year. But I had let OCU do nothing.

The day after the tenth anniversary, I told Rescorla's story to my students in Contracts and in Sales and Leases. I played for them the Royal Regiment of Wales' version of the song so many of Rescorla's co-workers remember hearing as he guided them down the stairs.

It is *Men of Harlech*, that old Welsh tribute to those who defended their community for seven long years back in the fifteenth century. The movie *Zulu* (1964) had its own version, but I like to think that Rescorla used the traditional lyrics he had learned as a boy. You can find them by googling "Men of Harlech music" and looking for a black screen with the lyrics in white.

I'm listening to that song now as I type. My eyes are full of tears, as were the eyes of my students last fall. Next year, I will tell Rescorla's story to a new group of students, but that will not be enough.

So I ask for your help. I stand willing to write a check, but I need your ideas and your support. How can we honor someone who did not give up in the jungles of Vietnam, the old Barracks of OCU, or the stairwells of the World Trade Center, someone who saved 2,700 lives and then gave his life trying to save more?

And in honoring Rescorla, we will do something even more important. Our students need to know that wherever they came from, they still can make a difference in this world.

They need to realize that lawyers can do more than draft complaints and accumulate billable hours.

They need to understand that when they come to OCU LAW, they come not just to study Contracts, the Rule against Perpetuities, or even the intricacies of *Pennoyer v Neff*.

They come to walk in the steps of a hero.