

Introduction

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When I received an emailed letter from Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) Commissioner Larry Herke on August 31, 2020, I excitedly opened it. “Thank you for submitting your application for appointment to the 9/11 and Global War on Terrorism Task Force,” it read. “Your application stood out to us and we would like to offer you an appointment to the Task Force as one of its Public Members.” Of course, this news was thrilling to me. Within a matter of hours, I responded back, “It is with great humility that I accept this appointment for the duration of the position’s term.”

So began my nearly two year journey serving on MDVA’s Task Force—an experience that I frequently describe as one of the greatest honors of my life.

The Task Force’s mission was three-fold: (1) commemorate the 20th anniversary of 9/11 on September 11, 2021 in Minnesota; (2) identify speakers and provide educational resources to the community; and (3) create a definitive written history of Minnesotans impacted by 9/11 and the Global War on Terrorism that ensued. The Task Force’s formation coincided with the 20th anniversary of 9/11 which was of course a meaningful event in and of itself. But perhaps just as important from a timing perspective was the acknowledgement that countless Minnesotans were impacted by the events of 9/11 or in the ensuing war and their memories and stories were going untold. The Task Force members all understood implicitly that it was our responsibility (at the direction and leadership of Commissioner Herke, Randal Dietrich, and others) to seize the opportunity before us: to capture as many experiences, memories, and reflections from our fellow Minnesotans before it was too late.

To that end, I had an innate understanding that I personally had a unique story to tell on behalf of myself and my deceased father, Tom Burnett Jr. Tom was a native of Bloomington, MN and a passenger aboard United 93 on that fateful morning in September, 2001. He and his fellow passengers heroically fought back against the terrorists aboard his ill-fated flight and although they were successful in thwarting an attack against the plane’s intended target, none of the passengers or crew survived. I was 16 years old when he passed. This loss was further complicated by the fact that he and my birthmother gave me up for adoption in

the mid-1980s through a closed process. When I learned in early 2004 that I had narrowly missed the opportunity to meet him, I was heartbroken.

However, I knew that Tom's role in my life could not end on 9/11 or even in early 2004. I was adamant that his life and legacy would have a lifelong impact on me. So, I immediately sought to connect with his surviving relatives—the individuals who would eventually become much-loved, much-cherished family members to me. They generously shared their memories of Tom with me. As a result, I began to collect data points about the kind of life Tom lived and I learned who the larger-than-life 9/11 hero was during his 38 years on Earth.

I learned that when his plane was hijacked on 9/11, the first person he called was his wife, Deena. I learned that he frequently wrote letters to elderly family members to check on their ailing health. I learned that he owned land in western Wisconsin and would come back every year to take my cousins and other relatives hunting. I learned that he counseled my aunts and grandparents whenever they had a major decision to make. And I also learned that in the late 1980s, Tom wrote me a letter that I would not receive until after his passing. In it, he spoke of his love for our shared heritage and family. "I come from parents that have instilled a strong sense of family as well as loyalty in me," he wrote. "Be sure: I love you..."

All of the artifacts and stories painted the portrait of a man who cared deeply for his family and they now allow me to talk about Tom to my three children--Tom's grandchildren. But Tom was not the only Minnesotan lost too soon, nor was he the only brave individual who helped change the course of U.S. history. There are countless Minnesota families grieving or celebrating the lives of their own family. The family members of those brave men and women deserve to have their loved ones' stories told and re-told for years to come. And if those families are anything like my own family (and Tom's), connection, love, and honor matter. This comprehensive history commissioned by the Task Force profiles the brave Minnesotans who fought, served, and (in some heartbreaking cases) died for their country. I hope the stories told in this book provide peace to the family members of our brave Minnesota heroes. May their sacrifices be remembered for generations to come and may their values and heroism inspire all of us lucky enough to learn about them.