

America's Firemen, 9/11/01 "LESS WE FORGET"

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BROTHERS ... ON HOLY GROUND

Director: Mike Lennon

*NEW YORK ([RPRN](#)) 09/11/10 —
Personal Testimony from Mike
Lennon Retired New York
Fireman*

**"LESS WE FORGET" It's been
nine years.**

I responded there shortly after the second tower fell. I was spared the sight of the planes, the collapses... the jumpers. I saw a

jumper once, during a night tour in Brooklyn, ten years earlier. I didn't ever want to see one again. And that was only from six flights up.

We worked through the night, our eyes and lungs nearly shut from the choking dust, not talking much or even looking at each other. But it was a week later, when we started finding the body parts, that it was really hard to look at each other. People need to know we wouldn't stare at those little pieces that we would carefully put in the five gallon buckets. We wouldn't stare out of respect. They were our friends and neighbors, our families. They were our countrymen.

I had actually retired early from the New York City Fire Department, but that day, like thousands of others, I un-retired. None of us made a conscious decision to go down there, it was instinct. And it was instinct that made us go back down day after day.

At about five-thirty I was high up on the pile when 7 World Trade collapsed. Its demise was imminent and the area had been cordoned off. Forty-seven stories and hardly anyone paid attention. I was busy following another fireman through a long, narrow void. He thought he saw something move, so we spent nearly a half-hour crawling our way to it. Nothing. It was unbearably disappointing.

It had taken me and the other fireman nearly as long to exit the void as it had to climb in to it. By the time the two of us climbed back we were exhausted. We finally took a break, sitting across from each other on a pair of mangled I-beams. He looked about my age, an Italian name faded along the side of his turnout coat, with captain's bars and the emblem of a Bronx ladder company attached to his collar. There was something both

troubling and comforting about him at the same time. I felt a bond even though we had never met – momentary partners through unthinkable happenstance.

As we sat there in the dusk, caked in sweat and filth, a cool September breeze came by. For an instant I felt renewed...inspired. I wanted to seize the moment to make some small talk and find a way to gain perspective. Though I'd kept pace with him throughout our search, there was a heightened sense of urgency to the way he pushed on. I remarked how ambitious he'd been in forging ahead for that hour.

"I had to," he replied. "My brother and my wife's brother are both buried down there."

I tried to speak, to say something that could hold some sort of promise, but no words came out. I've thought over the years what I should have said to that captain. Its nine years later and I still can't find the words.

I had become a filmmaker after I retired in '97 and after a month of digging I put down my shovel and grabbed my camera. Along with my small crew we set out to do interviews at almost every firehouse in the city that lost men ...343

men. It would eventually become an award winning documentary, "Brothers On Holy Ground."

Filming was sometimes harder than digging. Nearly every firehouse in the city had been turned into a shrine by grief-stricken members of the community. Flowers, pictures, candles and posters, proclaiming a combined affection for "their" guys adorned every available space. One note in particular, written to a missing fireman in the East Village, stayed with me for months:



Dear Manny,

Thank you for the smiles, your kindness, your sweet spirit. I will miss you so very much – more than anyone will ever know. God carry you on angel's wings, sweet Manny.

Love,

Maria

For a time I thought about tracking Maria down to see if she could speak more of Manny – her dear, sweet Manny. I thought perhaps she could say more pretty, poetic things about this fireman I never had the privilege to know. But contacting her would have been wrong. She said all she wanted about him on a rain soaked piece of paper taped to a firehouse door.

At Engine company 33 on Great Jones Street a man whose twin brother was among the missing firemen showed up unannounced one day. As he walked through the door, the firehouse momentarily erupted in a chorus of shouts

and cheers over the prospect of their lost brother's return. A sober quiet soon replaced the celebration as reality began to set in. It was almost too cruel to bear.

At Ladder 15 in Lower Manhattan, where a dozen men perished, one fireman told me of how his wife had given birth that day at a Staten Island hospital. He trembled as he recalled rushing back and forth from a hallway with a view of the burning towers, and the delivery room where his wife was receiving an emergency C-section. It's my guess he's still tortured over the decision to stay by his wife's side that morning. Tomorrow his daughter turns nine.

But today I find myself thinking about that captain, about his wife and mine, and why I was so lucky.

My father rarely mentioned landing on Omaha Beach, or advancing to liberate the concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald. My brother Tom never spoke of his experiences at Chu Li or Da Nang during the Tet offensive. There is a similar element in their character, a subtle, weary strength that comes from experiences that men should never have to endure.

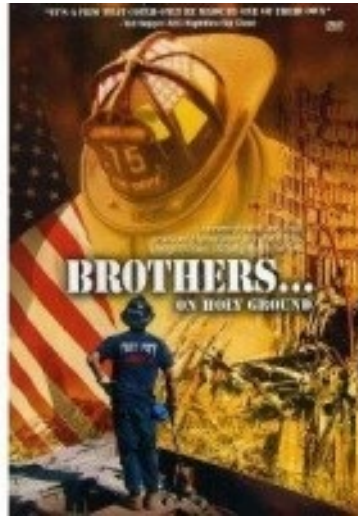
Nine years ago, when I sat and watched that captain ponder his next move, I wondered at which time he would develop that same strength, or if he had earned it at that very moment. Would it give him added support when he had to face his wife? Or his brothers and sisters and his mother and father?

I got up and rested my hand on his shoulder for a few seconds. It was something I thought men did in those kinds of situations. He never looked up. "Take it easy, brother," I heard him say, as I walked away in search of another void. I haven't seen him since. It's been nine years.

Personal Note: Brothers On Holy Ground

I have seen this documentary many times. Every time I see it, it hits me emotionally. Just hearing the wives, mothers, fathers, brothers and fellow firemen talk about their loved ones. How these firemen(343} who perished, went into the World Trade towers as people were running out. Their only

thought was to save lives without any regard for their own. How the director, Mike Lennon, combines actual footage from that day and then using scenes of those involved in this personal loss. It is a must see for anyone whether they are American or from any other country.



Twin towers of the World Trade Center burning.

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Extra image credits: wikipedia

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Jeffrey Jolson is Hollywood Today founding editor-in-chief and a RushPRnews partner and contributor since 2006. Jeffrey, of the Al Jolson family, also founded HollywoodReporter.com and Grammy.com. Hollywood Today reporters have written for Vanity Fair, Rolling Stone, Forbes, Variety, The Hollywood Reporter, the New York Times, the Boston Globe, The San Francisco Chronicle, AP, E!, Popular Science and Popular Mechanics.

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