

Remembering the Chinese American Heroes of 9/11

by Michael Kwan and Philip Chin, San Francisco

It's been ten years since September 11, 2001, when more than 3,000 innocent civilians perished.

We would like to acknowledge the hundreds of brave men and women, police, firefighters, emergency workers, and individuals of many backgrounds and ethnicities who risked and sadly lost their lives among thousands of others on that fateful day so that others might live. Among those brave people were four Chinese Americans heroes whose stories are rarely heard in the media, two of whom perished and two of whom survived that day.

Mrs. Betty Ong : Flight Attendant on American Airlines Flight 11, Age 45

Ms. Betty Ong lost her life on the first of four aircraft which were hijacked on the morning of 9/11. Despite terrifying circumstances, Ong's calm and collected reporting provided crucial information that gave the first clues to the identification of the hijackers.

She hid and locked herself in a toilet stall after the hijacking, called air traffic controllers, and with the help of fellow flight attendants described in detail, everything occurring on American Airlines Flight 11 in its last 23 minutes in the air. Her phone call led the FAA to shutdown federal airspace for the first time in US history.

8:19 AM: Ong reported, "The cockpit is not answering, somebody's stabbed in business class-- and I think there's mace-- that we can't breathe--I don't know, I think we're being hijacked."

Her continued conversation included details of the vacated seat locations of the four hijackers, which established a correlation between the hijackers of the other aircraft. 911 Commission Chairman Thomas Kean declared that "Betty Ong was a true American hero."

Flight 11 crash into the World Trade Center North Tower on 8:46 AM. Betty Wong grew up in San Francisco's Chinatown neighborhood, graduating from George Washington High School in 1974. [The first four minutes of Betty Ong's call can be heard here.](#)



Mr. Zhe "Zack" Zeng : Emergency Medical Technician, Age 29

Zhe "Zack" Zeng's final moments were caught by a Fox TV camera, revealing his last heroic and selfless acts. While many in the streets had fled from the stricken buildings, Zack, who had recently completed his Emergency Medical Training, had put himself in harm's way to help victims, and became one himself.



Source: Rick Ho, Sing Tao Newspaper

The Fox TV camera caught Zack rendering aid to an injured woman on a stretcher before the South Tower collapsed.

It was the last image of Zack alive. Weeks later, Zack's stunned Mom noticed Zack on TV and identified her son to the media. Seeing her son on TV was the first confirmation to her that he was dead. Days later, Zack's DNA was recovered and identified giving absolute confirmation of his death in the World Trade Center.

In recognition of his voluntary heroism a special day was selected to honor Zack. On that day the Governor of New York, the Mayor of New York City, and thousands of New York citizens honored young Zack Zeng with a memorial service and by changing one block of Bayard Street in downtown Manhattan to Zack Zeng Way.

"It didn't surprise anybody who knew him," said Peggy Farrell, Zhe's supervisor. "He was a completely selfless person - he was just someone who would automatically volunteer his assistance. To me, it was a truly heroic display. Running towards the smoke and ash, he knew there were many that needed his skills."

Zhe "Zack" Zheng emigrated to the US with his parents in the late 1980s from Guangzhou, China. He was a member of the Brighton Volunteer Ambulance and a project manager at the Bank of New York.

Mr. Isaac Ho'ipi'i: Pentagon Police officer (survivor)

Officer Isaac Ho'ipi'i put his own life at risk to save 15 others on 9/11. As one of the first responders to the burning Pentagon building, Isaac plunged into the toxic inferno and led or carried out more than 15 injured people to safety (12 survived). He returned repeatedly until it was too dangerous to re-enter. To this day, Isaac wishes he had re-entered to save more lives, and says he isn't a hero.

Isaac Ho'ipi'i is from Hawaii and is of mixed blood, with Native Hawaiian, Chinese, and Portuguese ancestry. He was last reported with lung problems attributed to his 15 rescue missions in the fiery and smoking hole in the Pentagon. Mr. Ho'ipi'i was honored by the Pentagon and White House with the Public Safety Officer Medal of Valor, the highest honor a public safety officer can receive and the equivalent of the military's Medal of Honor.

David Lim, New York /New Jersey Port Authority Police Officer (survivor)

Officer David Lim was a member of the K-9 team working with a trained explosives sniffer canine. Officer Lim was in the basement of World Trade Center North Tower when it was struck by American Airlines flight 11, the hijacked plane that carried Betty Ong.

Leaving his canine in his basement kennel, Mr. Lim had climbed up 44 flights of stairs to evacuate survivors, and was working his way downwards when WTC South Tower was hit, shattering all the windows and injuring those around him. Using his structural firefighting and elevator evacuation training, he and a dozen firefighters guided hundreds of victims down and out of the building to safety.

Before he could complete his own escape while escorting an elderly and handicapped woman with several firefighters, the North Tower collapsed. Miraculously, they all survived the collapse, and five hours later, managed to find their way out of the ruins of the World Trade Center.

"The reason we took this job is because people needed our help," he said. "I did my job well that day, but I don't know if I'm a hero. I think the people who died that day were heroes," explained Mr. Lim.

Mr. Lim was honored at a special ceremony in New York City. Since 9/11, Lim has become a lieutenant for the Port Authority Police of New York and New Jersey and a role model for Asian Americans interested in law enforcement. At Camp Saejong in northern New Jersey, a program for young Korean-Americans, camp co-director Lindy Galver said the campers connected to Lim on the fact that he was "an average man who rose to an extraordinary challenge."

We can see from these four stories that when there is real crisis, there are many bystanders and then there are heroes. On this ten year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, let's recognize that there are heroes among ordinary Americans of all backgrounds, Chinese Americans among them.

For additional information about Chinese American heroes, please visit the **Chinese American Heroes** website at www.chineseamericanheroes.org.