

**Rick Rescorla**

1939-2001

# The Man Who Predicted 9/11

**BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP**

Rick Rescorla's heroism at the World Trade Center has been well documented. Less known about this British import is that he was once a Sooner.



*"Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid."*  
—Raymond Chandler, *"The Simple Art of Murder"*

A kind of shorthand had developed between fellow OU alumni Rick Rescorla and Fred McBee during their 30-year friendship. When one of them quipped Raymond Chandler's famous quote on the detective hero, they both knew what it meant: Sometimes you have to gather your courage and just do what needs to be done.

What had to be done is nearly beyond comprehension even today, five years after 9/11. Who could have predicted the searing images of planes flying into the World Trade Center, or the towers disintegrating, taking 2,200 lives in their fall?

But Rick Rescorla did predict the events of 9/11, with eerie precision. And because he did, 2,700 people survived. The chief of security for Morgan Stanley Dean Witter guided all but six of his company's employees out of the south tower before the building collapsed around him.

Dozens described Rick with a bullhorn in his hand, shepherding co-workers down the stairwell while shouting, "Today is a day to be proud to be an American," and singing Cornish folk songs. They were songs he learned as a child in Hayle, England, the same songs he taught his troops in Vietnam.

*"He is the hero; he is everything."*

The tiny village of Hayle is filled with tales of warriors, so it was natural that Rick joined the British Army at 16 to fight Communist forces in Cyprus and Rhodesia. Seeking a new challenge, he joined the U.S. Army to fight in Vietnam.

Rick graduated from Officers' Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1965. He became a second lieutenant and platoon leader in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, which landed in the middle of the first major battle of the Vietnam War.

At Ia Drang, Rick first drew fire sneaking behind enemy lines to scout Vietnamese positions. As the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion absorbed waves of attack, Rick kept spirits up by leading military cheers and belting out Cornish war songs.

"We all thought we were going to die that night, and Rick gave us our courage back," Ia Drang veteran Bill Lund told *The Washington Post*. "I figured, if he's walking around singing, the least I can do is stop trembling."

Rick's company then was sent to rescue ambushed members of their battalion. "I saw Rick Rescorla come swaggering into our lines with a smile on his face . . . saying, 'Good, good, good. I hope they hit us with everything they've got tonight. We'll wipe them up,'" recalled Lt. Larry Gwinn in the 1993 book, *We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young*.

Rick took a bullet in the arm and fought for six hours before the battle he called "a long, bloody traffic accident in the jungle" ended.

More than 300 men died at Ia Drang. Rick earned a Silver Star, a Purple Heart and Bronze Stars for Valor and Meritorious Service. He kept the medals stored out of sight and avoided contact with fellow veterans. Although he was interviewed for *We Were Soldiers Once . . . and* even helped edit the book, Rick refused to read the finished product.

"We were flown away," Rick said to the authors, "but the stench of the dead would stay with me for years after the battle."

When the film version, *We Were Soldiers*, was released, a special edition of the book featured star Mel Gibson on the cover. But the original cover photo shows Rick—tired, dirty and on constant watch for attack.

*"He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man."*

Fred McBee met Rick at the coffee shop in OU's Hester-Robertson Hall, where young writers gathered daily. Many of them were like Rick, fresh from Vietnam and studying under the G.I. Bill. They spent hours reviewing news from the war front.

"We majored in coffee shop," jokes Fred, now an author and retired professor at the University of South Florida. "The news was pretty real at our table."

Rick, who became a U.S. citizen in 1967, chose OU to study under William Foster-Harris and Dwight Swain in the Professional Writing Program. Rick was fascinated with Western and Native American history. The Western History Collections, then located in Bizzell Memorial Library, were a favorite haunt. "If he wasn't in class or Hester-Robertson, you could find him in the stacks," says the



Photo Provided

Between duty tours with the British Army, Rescorla took time to graduate with the 1960 class of constables with the Metropolitan Police in London.





Left: War correspondent Peter Arnett took this photo of Rick Rescorla during the 1965 Battle of Ia Drang, the first major action of the Vietnam War; the shot was later featured on the jacket of the book, *We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young*. Since Rescorla's death, the photo has become an icon of his service and sacrifice.

Below: OU alumni Fred McBee, left, and Rick Rescorla, here in 1992, met over coffee in OU's Hester-Robertson Hall. "Our relationship was basically play," McBee says of his friend. "It was one great, 33-year-long conversation."

AP Images

former Betsy Nathan, a 1972 OU education graduate who became Rick's wife.

The campus was consumed with the Vietnam War, and Rick took Betsy to watch student protests. "He was very interested in hearing the other side of the story and how they perceived it," she says.

In four years Rick finished both a bachelor's and master's in English. He studied law at Oklahoma City University while working for the Oklahoma National Guard and the Postal Service Technical Training Center, where he trained security guards.

Fred gleefully remembers Rick was told other candidates for the postal training job were better trained in martial arts. "May I make a suggestion?" Rick asked. "Throw us all in a bear pit and see who comes out alive."

"He had a very dry, very wicked sense of humor," Betsy says.

Rick taught criminal justice at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, where their son, Trevor, was born in 1976. The day Trevor came home, "I got left in the car, and the baby got taken upstairs," Betsy laughs. "And that's the way things were—his kids came first." Their daughter, Kim, was born in 1978 near Chicago, where Rick worked in banking security.

In 1985, Rick became head of security for Morgan Stanley, which merged into

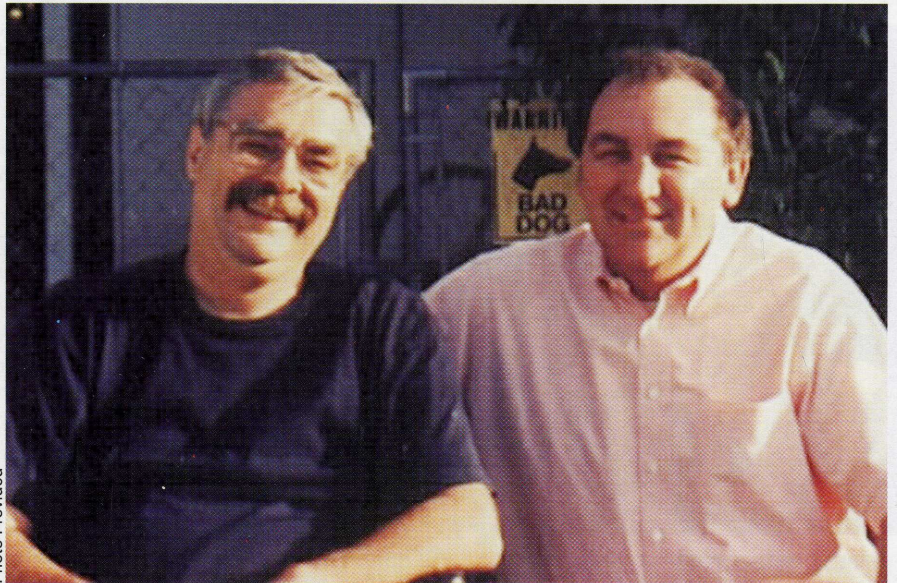


Photo Provided

Morgan Stanley Dean Witter and Co. The company was one of the largest investment banks in the nation, occupying 22 floors of the World Trade Center.

*"He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor—by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it."*

In 1990, Rick called Dan Hill, his best friend since Fort Benning. Rick was worried the World Trade Center was a perfect terrorist target, and he relied upon

Dan's experience in counter terrorism to find vulnerable spots in the building.

Dan asked to be taken to the basement parking garage. They walked in without being stopped, and Dan pointed to a load-bearing column. "This is a soft touch," Dan later recalled for *The New Yorker*. "I'd drive a truck full of explosives in here, walk out, and light it off."

Rick took Dan's prediction to Port Authority officials. He was quickly rebuffed.

On February 26, 1993, Fred and Rick were talking by phone when an explosion sounded in the background. "I've gotta go," Rick said.





Above: Betsy Nathan and Rick Rescorla met and married as students at OU. Even through divorce and remarriage, Betsy and Rick remained close. "He was my best friend, and you never lose your best friend," says Betsy, who returned to Norman in 2002 when the OU College of Arts and Sciences recognized Rick posthumously with its Distinguished Service Award.

Left: Only 16 when he joined the British Army to fight in Cyprus and Rhodesia, Rick Rescorla came to the United States in 1963 to go to Vietnam with U.S. forces, becoming a citizen in 1967.



A basement truck bomb filled the towers with smoke. Employees at Morgan Stanley panicked, and Rick reportedly jumped onto a desk and threatened to drop his pants unless they listened.

Rick helped clear the building and was the last person to evacuate. Six people died in the bombing; 300 were injured—but the towers still stood. It seemed that the worst was over, but Rick thought otherwise. Dan told *The New Yorker* Rick assumed the towers would remain a terrorist target. The question was not *if*, but when, and how.

Rick, Dan and Fred developed terrorism scenarios. Now that ground security was tight, an air attack made sense. Fred designed computerized flight-simulations and concluded an air strike would be "a piece of cake."

Rick went to the Port Authority, and again his advice was rejected. He began lobbying Morgan Stanley to move out of the World Trade Center. But the company's lease was years from expiring, and many felt Rick was overreacting.

Fred says Rick had the highest respect for Morgan Stanley, but he thought the firm was naïve when it came to warfare. "They never stood in a field of 600 dead people and thought about what men could do to each other."

In 1998, Rick was interviewed for a documentary on the nature of warfare, now titled "The Voice of the Prophet." "We're talking about terrorist action," he said. "Terrorist forces can tie up conventional forces, they can bring them to their knees. . . . Hunting down terrorists, this will be the nature of war in the future."

Rick could not have predicted his own future. After 25 years, Rick and Betsy divorced. Rick discovered he had prostate cancer, which spread to his bones. He underwent chemotherapy and was given six months to live. Shortly after, Rick met and fell in love with Susan Greer, who would become his second wife.

The Rescorlas were a devoted, romantic couple whose interests complemented each other. Rick's cancer appeared to go into remission, and they traveled to Hayle to renew their vows after just one year of marriage.

*continued*



“He was the love of my life,” Susan says simply.

Betsy and Rick remained on good terms and even attended Kim’s theater productions together. “If, at any time, one of us really needed the other, we would have been there,” she says.

At work, Rick was doing everything he could to prepare the company’s employees for a nightmare scenario. “A good deal of our conversation every day was about terrorism,” Fred says. “It was on his mind.”

Rick trained the employees of Morgan Stanley to leave the building quickly and safely through evacuation drills.

“Our whole company was trained to get out of the building . . . probably because of a vision he had about the future that most of us never would have envisioned,” said Morgan Stanley’s Jack Kemp in a History Channel documentary, “The Man Who Predicted 9/11.”

Rick called Susan each workday at 8:15 a.m., and September 11, 2001, was no different. Half an hour later, another call came—this one from Susan’s daughter, urging her to turn on the television.

In Florida, Dan had just seen coverage of the north tower attack when his phone rang. “Are you watching TV? What do you think?” Dan recalled Rick asking in *The New Yorker*.

Dan agreed it could be a terrorist attack. “I’m evacuating right now,” Rick said, adding he had overruled the Port Authority, which told him the south tower was safe and to keep employees at their desks. Dan could hear Rick cheering on the evacuees and singing to them by bullhorn. They hung up.

Dan soon saw live coverage of a plane striking the south tower.

Susan also saw the crash. Fifteen minutes later, she told *The New Yorker*, Rick called. “Stop crying,” he said. “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.”

The 2,700 employees of Morgan Stanley were on their way to safety. Some hesitated, but Rick’s evacuation drills had left their mark.

“There were a lot of reasons not to leave the building,” Bill McMahon of



Photo Provided

Susan and Rick Rescorla visit the Cornish Arms, Rick’s favorite locale in his hometown of Hayle, England, with childhood friend Mervin Sullivan and his daughter, Helen Sullivan. Rick and Susan renewed their marriage vows in Hayle after just one year of marriage. Since 9/11, Susan has devoted her life to preserving Rick’s memory. “Rick was a very humble man, and I know he would think that everyone on September 11<sup>th</sup> was a hero,” she says.



Photo Provided

Morgan Stanley said to the History Channel. “But there was one reason to go—Rick said, ‘No matter what happens, the first thing you do is you get in that stairwell, and you get out of the building. Forget everything else. Nothing else matters.’”

Last seen, Rick was on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor, heading back upstairs. He called Dan to say he was going to make a sweep for lost or injured people. Rick asked Dan to call Susan and calm her. While Dan and Susan were talking, she screamed. Dan turned to his television and saw the south tower collapsing.

Rescorla retired from the National Guard after 20 years with the rank of colonel. His military and wartime experience gave him lifetime friendships and a unique perspective on terrorism that helped him predict the events of September 11, 2001.



# “I didn’t want anyone to forget what Rick did on 9/11, but more important, I don’t want the U.S. and the world to forget what happened.”

*“He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world.”*

That night, Susan slept next to one of Rick’s suits and left his car at the train station, just in case.

Betsy, too, hoped against hope, and Kim copied flyers to distribute throughout Manhattan. While watching footage of the towers disintegrating, Trevor told his mother what they all dreaded to hear: “As much as you think and want it, Dad did not survive that.”

No trace of Rick’s body was found. Memorials were held in New Jersey and Hayle. Susan since has launched a national petition to honor Rick with the Presidential Medal of Freedom and established the Richard C. Rescorla Foundation. She is leading funding for a bronze statue of Rick, unveiled April 1 at the future site of the National Infantry Museum at Fort Benning.

“I didn’t want anyone to forget what Rick did on 9/11, but more important, I don’t want the U.S. and the world to forget what happened,” Susan says.

Kim, now 27, followed in her father’s footsteps by graduating in English from Marist College and Seton Hall Law School, where the family is working to establish a scholarship in Rick’s name.



Photo Provided

This bronze statue of Rick, inspired by the now-famous photo from Vietnam, was dedicated in April at the site of the National Infantry Museum, near Fort Benning, Georgia. The ceremony was attended by more than 500 people, including his widow, Susan Rescorla, and his two closest friends, Fred McBee and Dan Hill.

Trevor, 30, a criminal justice graduate of John Jay College, is preparing for law school. He began his six years in the New Jersey National Guard at age 17.

“We have a lot of really happy memories of Rick, and we were able to make our way through,” Betsy says.

Susan, Betsy and Fred each are ada-

mant that Rick would not want the attention that has come from simply doing what needed to be done.

“Those of us who knew Rick well can’t help but feel the destiny in what happened,” Fred says.

Perhaps Rick gets the final word on destiny. In “The Voice of the Prophet,” he looked straight into the camera and unequivocally stated his personal code of conduct. “The fact is, I live by what I publicly declare,” Rick said. “If you publicly declare what you’re about, say, ‘I don’t believe in being a soft man; I believe in being a tough guy,’ then you’re going to be held to it.”

*“The Man Who Predicted 9/11” will be rebroadcast on the History Channel at 8 p.m. ET/PT, 7 p.m. CT, August 15. The Rescorla story is also featured in “Countdown to Ground Zero,” scheduled for the History Channel at 8 p.m. ET/PT, 7 p.m. CT, August 13. Portions of “The Voice of the Prophet” can be viewed online at*

*www.atomfilms.com/af/content/voice\_prophet. For more information on the Richard C. Rescorla Foundation or funding for the installation of the National Infantry Museum statue in Rick’s honor, visit [www.rickrescorla.com](http://www.rickrescorla.com).)*

*Anne Barajas Harp is a freelance writer living in Norman, Oklahoma.*