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Marine Lance Cpl. Gary R. Nichols fires an AT-4 light anti-armor weapon at an old tank during fire and maneuver training near Camp Bucca, Iraq, in July 2005. The Army base was named for Special Forces veteran and career firefighter Ron Bucca, the only Fire Marshal in FDNY history to die in the line of duty. (DoD photo by Cpl. Eric R. Martin, U.S. Marine Corps.)

IN THE THICK OF BATTLE: THE RON BUCCA STORY

By Phill Powell

It's a mighty long way from Baghdad to Brooklyn. And if you journey from Baghdad to a dusty point some 300 miles southeast, near the port of Umm Qasr, you'll see Camp Bucca rising from the heated desert sand. The Army base was originally intended to be used as a temporary holding facility for Iraqi POWs, but that was before the war. Then the very urgent need arose for a place to jail those suspected of operating on behalf of the insurgency, and Camp Bucca became the primary prisoner housing for the area, even accepting some detainees who'd previously been lodged at the now-notorious Abu Ghraib prison.

Camp Bucca's connection to the FDNY is a sacred one, because the installation was named in memory of a 23-year veteran of the FDNY, a man who carried to rest with him the sad distinction of being the only fire marshal of the Fire Department of New York ever to die in the line of duty. The facts surrounding that event-which took place four years ago this month on Sept. 11, 2001-are astounding, but no more so than many of the other key moments in the extremely memorable life of Ron Bucca.

ONE MAN--MANY LIVES

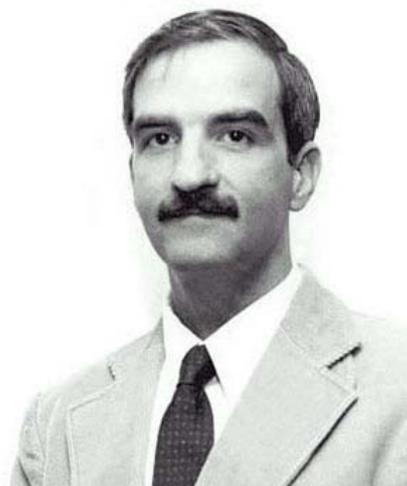
When the FDNY lost 343 members on 9/11, each of those firefighters died a hero. But for Ron Bucca, like many of those lost to the department, he had already been a hero several times over, perhaps many times over. Even observers from outside the department knew Bucca was somehow different, that this guy was really something special.

By the time he made that final run up the south tower on that sunny Tuesday morning, he'd lived three heroic lives, and excelled at each. Not only had Bucca served the FDNY in a celebrated career-14 of those years as a firefighter and 9 of them as a fire marshal. He was also a licensed nurse, and trained in many medical disciplines. Were those twin career paths not enough, he was also a distinguished soldier and war hero. Like a superhero, there was a sense that there was nothing Bucca couldn't do.

By all accounts, Ron Bucca was a colorful character, full of intellect and humor. He was a devoted family man to boot. His courage was legendary and had earned him five FDNY citations for valor, not to mention decorations won during two tours of duty in Vietnam. He continued to exhibit his trademark bravery right up to the very last day of his life, when he made a critical decision to once again place himself in harm's way in order to serve his fellow citizens. Bucca made that choice instantly and never looked back. As always, he hit the stairs running.

TRIPLE THREAT

Ronald Paul Bucca was born on May 6, 1954, to Joe and Astrid Bucca-one of the couple's three sons. He arrived into a postwar America that was at the top of its game in most respects, a land of endless opportunity for a kid



Lots of livin' to do: Ronald Paul Bucca excelled in three careers, as a decorated combat-tested Special Forces soldier, a celebrated FDNY "lifer" with 14 years spent as a firefighter and another 9 as Fire Marshal. Were that not enough for one resume, he was also a Licensed Practical Nurse.

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A YEAR OF 9/11 MESSAGES

On September 12, 2001, we launched a feature on this site where visitors could post a message for New York's Bravest. In the year that followed we recieved more than 2000 messages (many of which were printed in a special issue of Firefighters Quarterly Magazine). We still have them here on the site, as a memorial and a reminder.

- [9/11 Message Center](#)

like Ron. This was a place and a time in which children would actively envision becoming a firefighter, a medical practitioner, or a war hero. Bucca was the rare child who saw himself in all three roles. Even rarer, he grew into the adult who actually achieves those dreams.

The Soldier

Bucca was always read to take on a challenge, and his first career-in the US Army-offered him plenty. He served with the 101st Airborne Division during the Vietnam War, specializing as a door gunner and then a paratrooper with the famed Screaming Eagles. In time he became a Green Beret, working with the 11th Special Forces Group and the Defense Intelligence Agency (which he served as a Military Intelligence Analyst). He remained as a reservist in the US Army's Special Forces, finally achieving the rank of Warrant Officer.

The Firefighter

During Bucca's 23 years with the FDNY, he covered many bases-spending 14 years spread across different outfits: Engine Company 95, Ladder Company 2, the Fitness Unit, Rescue Company One, the Fire Department Terrorist Task Force. In 1992, Bucca was promoted to Fire Marshal, the position he would remain in for the rest of his life.

The Nurse

Ron Bucca was fully dedicated to the cause of saving lives, whether it meant rescuing fire victims, or treating them medically. He became a Licensed Practical Nurse, backed up with degrees in OSHA and Fire Science from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice (part of The City University of New York), as well as a Bachelor of Science degree in Public Safety from Mercy College (New York, N.Y.).

LARGER THAN LIFE

You might expect a man this resolutely tough and down-to-business to be lacking in personality, but you'd be wrong. Friends who recall Bucca remember a sardonic and playful wit who enjoyed coming up with little sayings ("Ron-isms," as others have called them). Some include:

- "Take Murphy's Law and multiply it."
- "This one is as sharp as a basketball."
- "I need this like I need a heart attack."

His sense of humor was a constant source of fun for his fellow smoke-eaters. Bucca would even decorate the helmets of his comrades, often with bawdy bits of humor.

Another compelling aspect of his diverse personality involved his appetite for adventure. In addition to reaching new heights through parachuting, Bucca could also descend to new depths through his love of scuba diving. In addition, he rode motorcycles, back-packed across Europe-nothing was off the menu for this go-getter. Nor were his past-times all physical; Bucca applied his inquisitive mind to quieter mental pursuits like history and archaeology.

Still, it was the larger-than-life nature of Bucca that made him so famous within the department. And no single incident did more to increase his legend than the horrifying 1986 ordeal through which he won his nickname, "The Flying Fireman."

While trying to rescue another firefighter, Firefighter Bucca fell five stories and lived to tell the tale. Thanks largely to his Special Forces training and excellent physical condition, Bucca was able to contort his body and land basically like a cat. Although the fall broke his back and sidelined him for a full year with other injuries, Bucca vowed to return to his rescue unit. He did exactly that-one year later.

In addition to showing grit and determination through his painful recovery (even designing his own physical rehabilitation program), Bucca also displayed much compassion to those he met. Nowhere was this more evident than with Bucca's bonding with another Bellevue patient, a NYPD officer named Steven McDonald.

McDonald had been paralyzed below the neck when fired upon by a teenager in Central Park. He was lucky to have survived the shooting, but tell that to a man whose mobility has just been robbed by a bullet. Bucca sensed the dark depression that McDonald was feeling, and made it his mission to try to alleviate that emotional anguish as best he could. Therefore, Bucca (wearing a body brace as he recovered from a broken back) would painfully trek down to the injured cop's room. By talking with McDonald, spending time with him-letting him know that someone else could relate to his pain-Bucca aided in McDonald's recovery, and made a friend for life.

SPRINT TO THE FINISH LINE

Like many of the firefighters, rescuers and EMTs who were killed on 9/11, Ron Bucca didn't have to show up at the WTC that fateful morning, but came anyway. Upon learning of the dual attacks on the WTC, Bucca called his wife, Eve, to let her know he was en route to the disaster.

Bucca had been trained as an antiterrorist intelligence expert, so the 9/11 attacks didn't come as much of a surprise to him. His wife has said he had been expecting a terrorist attack of that size and shape for some time. As a fire marshal, Bucca had investigated the first attack on the WTC in 1993, so he knew his way around. In fact, Bucca had really studied the Twin Towers, trying to concept better evacuation plans in case an attack arrived-going so far as to keep a set of blueprints of the towers. During the weeks leading up to 9/11, Bucca had even consulted with maintenance workers at the WTC about alternate ways out of the building, so convinced was he that a massive attack was on the way.

On Sept. 11, when Bucca and his partner, James Devery, arrived at the South Tower, they had no direct knowledge that the massive structure was already in the process of collapsing. They entered a side entrance and ascended the stairwell, pausing on the 30th floor to offer aid and comfort to a woman who was incapacitated there. Afterward, Bucca instructed his partner to help the lady out of the building. Bucca then hoofed it up the stairs for another 49 floors, for a total climb of 950 feet, reportedly using his runner's strength and endurance to help him scale the stairs two at a time.

When he did finally reach the 78th floor at 9:45 a.m., he linked up with Fire Chief Orio Palmer and members of Ladder 15. From radio transmissions it was clear that the firefighters were busily trying to quell two significant pockets of fire. Their goal was to clear an escape passage for people who were trapped above the 78th floor when United Airlines Flight 175 struck and entered the building. Many of the tower's office workers had been standing in this lobby, waiting for elevators, when the hijacked jet ripped through the structure, its wingtip injuring many-and killing many more.



Firefighter Bucca became a department legend in 1986 when he survived a five-story fall and returned to active duty one year later. His excellent physical condition and Special Forces training were credited with helping to save the life of the "Flying Fireman."

Palmer radioed Chief Edward Geraghty to let him know that they were sending a group of injured survivors to the 41st floor, site of the tower's only working elevator. Bucca, Palmer and the other firefighters then battled flames in the impact zone until 9:59, when the South Tower collapsed and imploded. And though his remarkable life was snuffed out during the worst attack ever perpetrated on U.S. soil, his legend has endured and grown as those outside the FDNY come to realize what an amazing individual he truly was.

HARD DUTY

It's been a long four years for the survivors of FDNY fire marshal Ron Bucca. His wife, Eve, and their two children, Jessica (27) and Ronnie (25), have had to soldier on bravely without their husband and father, although his memorable personality lives on within them, and everyone touched by his example and inspired by his complete pursuit of life.

Among the latter are visitors to Washington, D.C., who stop to honor the sacrifices represented at the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial wall. Due to an oversight, Ron Bucca's name was not originally recorded on the wall. However, when the National Memorial Committee learned that New York City fire marshals are also considered police officers, Bucca's name was added to the memorial.

That latter group also includes the men and women of Camp Bucca, who find themselves a long way from home, making the best of a tough situation during a very controversial war. The prison population here is usually around 2,500 (although during one crowded period, the facility housed some 8,000 detainees).

In a tribute to the enlightened figure whose name graces the camp, this prison has become the home of some progressive policies- including a focus on positive inmate education and access to recreational sports. Still, a January 2005 prisoner riot (in which four detainees were killed) shows that even the most sensible and charitable prison conditions can't change the sad fact that war is still war.

The soldiers charged with watching over Camp Bucca's various "guests" understand this, and they've felt the anti-Western heat from members of the inmate population. That same resentment toward all things American is what led to the first attack on the World Trade Center, back in 1993, and what propelled the intricate plot that unfolded on 9/11. Ron Bucca studied that first attack and feared the follow-up attack he felt sure would happen. Right up until Sept. 11, he was studying blueprints of the building that he knew would serve as the site of a terrible return attack. To the end, Ron Bucca was pushing himself, always preparing for that next battle. **FQ**

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