

Conclusion

Making New Instincts

IN EVERY DISASTER, buried under the rubble is evidence that we can do better. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, there was the story of the U.S. Coast Guard, which rescued thirty-four thousand people without waiting for orders from anyone. On 9/11, there was Rick Rescorla.

Rescorla was head of security for Morgan Stanley Dean Witter in the Trade Center. He was one of those thick-necked soldier types who spend the second halves of their lives patrolling the perimeters of marble lobbies the way they once patrolled a battlefield. You can find them in any high-end, landmark office building, whispering into walkie-talkies and nodding curtly to the executives who pass by in clicky shoes. They are generally overqualified for their jobs.

But Rescorla was the wisest investment Morgan Stanley has ever made. Born in England, Rescorla joined the American military because he wanted to fight the communists in Vietnam. When he got there, he earned a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, and a Purple Heart in battles memorialized in the 1992 book by Lieutenant General Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young*. The book is considered required reading for Army officers. That's a picture of

Rescorla on the cover, clutching an M-16 rifle and looking wary, exhausted, and most of all, young.

Although he eventually moved to New Jersey and settled down into the life of a security executive, Rescorla still acted, in some ways, like a man at war. Morgan Stanley occupied twenty-two floors of Tower 2 and several floors in a nearby building. After the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, Rescorla worried about a terrorist attack on the Trade Center. In 1990, he brought one of his old war buddies up to New York City to take a tour of the towers. He wanted to know how his friend, who had counterterrorism expertise, would attack the building if he were a terrorist. After his friend saw the Trade Center's garage, he pronounced the task "not even a challenge," as James B. Stewart writes in his 2002 biography of Rescorla, *Heart of a Soldier*. If he were going to attack the Trade Center, he would drive a truck full of explosives into the garage and walk out.

Rescorla and his friend wrote a report to the Port Authority explaining their concerns and insisting on the need for more security in the parking garage. Their recommendations, which would have been expensive, were ignored, according to Stewart. (The Port Authority did not respond to repeated requests for comment for this book.)

Three years later, Ramzi Yousef drove a truck full of explosives into the underground parking garage of the World Trade Center, just as Rescorla had predicted. After the bomb went off, sending vibrations through the tower, Rescorla stood in Morgan Stanley's large, open trading floor and shouted. Everyone ignored him, just as they had when he had tried to run fire drills before the bombing. So he stood on a desk and yelled, "Do I have to drop my trousers to get your attention?" The room quieted down, and he handed out flashlights and directed the employees down the darkened stairways.

After the 1993 bombing, Rescorla had the credibility he needed. Combined with his muscular personality, it was enough to get Morgan Stanley employees to take full responsibility for their own survival—something that happened almost nowhere else in the Trade Center. He understood the danger of denial, the importance of aggressively pushing through the denial period and getting to action. He had watched the em-

employees wind down the staircase in 1993, and he knew it took too long. He had made sure he was the last one out that day, so he saw the stragglers and the procrastinators, the slow and the disabled.

Rescorla also had an unusually keen sense of dread. He knew that the risk of another terrorist attack did not diminish with each passing, normal day. And he knew it was foolish to rely on first responders to save his employees. His company was the largest tenant in the World Trade Center, a village nestled in the clouds. Morgan Stanley's employees would need to take care of one another.

From then on, no visitors were allowed in the office without an escort. Rescorla hired more security staff. He ordered employees not to listen to any instructions from the Port Authority in a real emergency. In his eyes, the Port Authority had lost all legitimacy after it failed to respond to his 1990 warnings.

Most impressive of all, Rescorla started running the entire company through frequent, surprise fire drills. He trained employees to meet in the hallway between the stairwells and, at his direction, go down the stairs, two by two, to the forty-fourth floor. Not only that, but he insisted that the highest floors evacuate first. As the last employees from one floor reached the floor below them, employees from that floor would fall in behind.

Only someone with an advanced understanding of human behavior in evacuations would know to do this. Without specific training, people become bizarrely courteous in an emergency, as we've seen. They let those from the floors below them enter the stairwell in front of them. The end result is that people from the upper floors—who have the farthest to walk and therefore face the most danger—will get out last. Training people to resist this gallantry was smart and wonderfully simple.

The radicalism of Rescorla's drills cannot be overstated. Remember, Morgan Stanley is an investment bank. Millionaire, high-performance bankers on the seventy-third floor chafed at Rescorla's evacuation regimen. They did not appreciate interrupting high-net-worth clients in the middle of a meeting. Each drill, which pulled the firm's brokers off their phones and away from their computers, cost the company money. But Rescorla did it anyway. He didn't care whether he was popular. His military training had taught him a simple rule of human nature, the core lesson

of this book: the best way to get the brain to perform under extreme stress is to repeatedly run it through rehearsals beforehand. Or as the military puts it, the "Eight P's": "Proper prior planning and preparation prevents piss-poor performance."

After the first few drills, Rescorla chastised the employees for moving too slowly in the stairwell. He started timing them with a stopwatch, and they got faster. He also lectured employees about some of the basics of fire emergencies: they should always go down. Never go up to the roof. Ever.

Rescorla did not grant exceptions. When guests visited Morgan Stanley for training, Rescorla made sure they all knew how to get out too. Even though the chances were slim, Rescorla wanted them ready for an evacuation. He understood that they would need the help more than anyone else. Like the patrons in the Beverly Hills Supper Club fire, they would be passive guests in an unfamiliar environment—a very dangerous role to play.

After the 1993 bombing, Rescorla wrote another report, this one warning Morgan Stanley executives that terrorists would stop at nothing to take down the towers. He even sketched out another possible attack scenario: terrorists might fly a cargo plane full of explosives into the Trade Center. Rescorla had the imagination that the government lacked, and it stalked him with hypotheticals. Finally, Rescorla recommended that Morgan Stanley move its headquarters to a low-rise campus in New Jersey. But the firm's lease didn't end until 2006. Partly as a result of Rescorla's findings, Stewart writes, Morgan Stanley decided to sue the Port Authority to win damages from the bombing—and to be released from its lease. (The lawsuit was ultimately settled in April 2006 under terms that Morgan Stanley agreed to keep confidential.)

Rescorla's drills went on for eight years, even as the memory of the 1993 bombings faded. "He used to say, 'They're gonna get us again. By air or by the subway,'" remembers Stephen Engel, who, as facilities manager, worked closely with Rescorla. When he hired security staff, Rescorla looked for more-sophisticated candidates than Engel had seen in those kind of jobs before. "He got people with a computer background, rather than a retired beat cop looking to add to his pension."

Rescorla still relied upon fire marshals, but he had more of them, and

he rotated the jobs often. "He was very serious about making sure everyone came out to the drills. We used to say, 'Well, it's the sergeant doing the drills again. It was kind of repetitive,'" remembers Bill McMahon, a Morgan Stanley executive. "There were times when I just sat in my office and the fire marshal would come by and say, 'No, you gotta go.'" Rescorla also made the fire marshals wear fluorescent orange vests and hats. "You'd make fun of the marshals: 'Oh, you got your hat? Where's your vest?'" remembers McMahon. "But in retrospect, thank God."

Meanwhile, Rescorla's own life changed dramatically. He fell in love with a woman he met while jogging in his neighborhood, and they got married. He was also diagnosed with cancer. He underwent painful treatments and gained weight. He didn't look like a soldier anymore. But he kept coming to work every day at 7:30 A.M. in a suit and tie, and he kept his people ready.

Rescorla was disciplined in everything he did, even his hobbies. He took up pottery and made a flowerpot for his friend Engel. "One day, he decided he was going to take up wood carving. A couple months later, he comes in with this duck. It was beautiful!" says Engel, laughing. Rescorla loved to watch old westerns, and he read voraciously. "If you mentioned something, martial arts or old movies, he would know something about it."

In 1998, Rescorla was interviewed by a filmmaker named Robert Edwards, whose father had fought alongside Rescorla in Vietnam. The documentary focused on the nature of warfare. Watching the footage now, it is clear that Rescorla thought about terrorism a lot—and not just the way it might impact his own office. He warned that the nature of war had changed, and America's leaders had not adapted. "Hunting down terrorists, this will be the nature of war in the future. Not great battlefields, not great tanks rolling," he said. "When you're talking about future wars, we're talking about engaging in Los Angeles. Terrorist forces can tie up conventional forces; they can bring them to their knees."

There were moments, truth be told, when Rescorla's job felt too small for his imagination. In a September 5, 2001, e-mail to an old friend, Rescorla spoke about *kairos*—a Greek word for an existential or cosmic moment that transcends linear time. "I have accepted the fact

that there will never be a kairos moment for me, just an uneventful Miltonian plow-the-fields discipline,” he wrote, “a few more cups of mocha grande at Starbucks, each one losing a little bit more of its flavor.”

“A Voice Straight from Waterloo”

On the morning of 9/11, Rescorla heard an explosion and saw Tower 1 burning from his office window. A Port Authority official came over the public address system and urged everyone to remain at their desks. But Rescorla grabbed his bullhorn, his walkie-talkie, and his cell phone and began systematically ordering Morgan Stanley employees to get out. They already knew what to do, even the 250 visitors who were taking a stockbroker training class and had already been shown the nearest stairway. “Knowing where to go was the most important thing. Because your brain—at least mine—just shut down. When that happens, you need to know what to do next,” McMahon says. “One thing you don’t ever want to do is have to think in a disaster.”

On 9/11, a handful of people might not have died if they had received Rescorla’s warnings. But they did not work at Morgan Stanley. About 50 percent of Trade Center employees did not know that the roof would be locked, according to the Columbia survey of survivors. In the absence of other information, some remembered that victims had been evacuated from the roof in helicopters in 1993. So they used the last minutes of their lives to climb to the top of the towers—only to find the doors locked. They died there, wondering why.

As Rescorla stood directing people down the stairwell on the forty-fourth floor, the second plane hit—this time striking about thirty-eight floors above his head. The building lunged violently, and some Morgan Stanley employees were thrown to the floor. “Stop,” Rescorla ordered through the bullhorn. “Be still. Be silent. Be calm.” In response, “No one spoke or moved,” Stewart writes. “It was as if Rescorla had cast a spell.” Rescorla immediately shifted the evacuation to a different stairwell and kept everyone moving. “Everything’s going to be OK,” he said. “Re-

member," he repeated over and over, as if it were a tonic unto itself, "you're Americans."

Morgan Stanley employees had seen what had happened in the other tower after the first plane hit. They had a clear view of the flames scaling the building and people—people just like them—jumping out of windows, their ties flapping in the wind. So when the second plane hit, they knew exactly what was happening in the floors above them.

Rescorla had led soldiers through the night in the Vietcong-controlled Central Highlands of Vietnam. He knew the brain responded poorly to extreme fear. Back then, he had calmed his men by singing Cornish songs from his youth. Now, in the crowded stairwell, as his sweat leached through his suit jacket, Rescorla began to sing into the bullhorn. "Men of Cornwall stand ye steady; It cannot be ever said ye for the battle were not ready; Stand and never yield!" One of his security employees brought out a chair for him. But Rescorla chose to keep standing.

Later, U.S. Army Major Robert L. Bateman would write about Rescorla in *Vietnam* magazine. In this passage, he was describing Rescorla on the battlefield. But he could just as well have been writing about Rescorla in the Trade Center:

Rescorla knew war. His men did not, yet. To steady them, to break their concentration away from the fear that may grip a man when he realizes there are hundreds of men very close by who want to kill him, Rescorla sang. Mostly he sang dirty songs that would make a sailor blush. Interspersed with the lyrics was the voice of command: "Fix bayonets . . . on liiiiine . . . reaaaaa-dy . . . forward." It was a voice straight from Waterloo, from the Somme, implacable, impeccable, impossible to disobey. His men forgot their fear, concentrated on his orders, and marched forward as he led them straight into the pages of history.

On 9/11, between songs, Rescorla called his wife. "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."

Moments later, Rescorla had successfully evacuated the vast majority of Morgan Stanley employees out of the burning tower. Then he turned around. He was last seen on the tenth floor, heading upward, shortly before the tower collapsed. Rescorla had his *kairos* moment. His remains have never been found.

People who knew Rescorla well knew he would not have left the towers until everyone else was out. "When the buildings went down, I never thought for a second that he wasn't inside," says Engel, the facilities manager. "Rick would want to go out in a blaze of glory." No one knows exactly what happened, but Engel believes that Rescorla heard about a few people who had been left behind. In particular, a Morgan Stanley senior vice president had not left his office. The executive was last seen talking on the phone, even as everyone else evacuated. "Knowing Rick," says Engel, "he'd go up and coldcock him and carry him over his shoulder."

Self-sufficiency was a religion for Rescorla. He once told a friend that every man should be able to be sent outside naked with nothing on him. By the end of the day, the man should be clothed and fed. By the end of the week, he should own a horse. And by the end of the year, he should have a business and a savings account.

Rescorla taught Morgan Stanley employees to save themselves. It's a lesson that had become, somehow, rare and precious. When the tower collapsed, only thirteen Morgan Stanley colleagues—including Rescorla and four of his security officers—were inside. The other 2,687 were safe.