

Rolling on

By: [Mercerspace](#)
October 2, 2015



Illustration by Eliane Gerrits.

By Pia de Jong

It is Sept. 11, 2015 as I write this. On a sunny, late summer afternoon, I sit in the bleachers at Princeton High School, waiting for the first soccer game of the season to start. This morning, my son shoved his clean jersey with No. 16 into his bag, put on a clean shirt with a tie, and went to school. On the day of every home game, he and his teammates wear ties to class, a sign of team pride.

The boys are juggling balls on their toes, warming up. The team from Trenton is on the other side. The stands are bustling with parents, grandparents, sisters and brothers. The team's alumni from far away come for this game. Now it's time for the national anthem. Everyone stands with their hands on the chest. The last phrase echoes through the stadium: O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

"This is particularly important we stand today," says my neighbor. "This is Sept. 11, and Drew plays today. Look, there's his mother, Lisa, in the stands."

Drew is the son of Lisa Beamer. A petite blonde, Lisa looks like a typical soccer mom. Like all of us, she enthusiastically cheers for her son and his team. Unlike all of us, though, her husband cannot be here. Todd Beamer was one of the passengers on the famous United Airlines Flight 93, the fourth hijacked plane.

Fourteen years ago, he had driven at 6 a.m. to Newark Airport to catch the first flight to San Francisco. After his meeting, he planned to take the redeye home that same night. He wanted to get back as quickly as possible. His wife Lisa was five months pregnant, and he wanted to help her with their two young sons, 1 and 3 years old.

Todd Beamer gives real meaning to the overworked word, hero. The plane with 37 passengers on board was just underway when the two towers of the World Trade Center went down in piles of rubble. Half an hour later, the hijackers took over Todd's plane. Over the intercom they announced they had a bomb.

Beamer saw the pilot and co-pilot lying on the floor, apparently bleeding to death. He noticed that the plane had reversed course and was heading east. He called 911 and told the operator he and a number of other passengers were planning to storm the cockpit. His last words were: "If this fails, call my wife and tell her how much I love her and my family."

Then the operator heard Todd say, resolutely, "Okay, let's roll."

Shortly afterward, the plane crashed into a remote farm field in western Pennsylvania. All aboard perished.

On this day, a monument is opened to the public in that same field for the victims. But Lisa Beamer will not be there. Nor did she go to the memorial services one year after the attack. "I'm busy doing the things that you simply do with a family with small children," she said then, in an television interview with Larry King.

One of the things she does is sit in the stands, rooting for her son in his first game of the season, a son who cannot remember his father, but who tries his best on the day of his death. Trenton is defeated. The boys and their parents are happy.

On this Sept. 11, a small band of teenage boys with sweaty faces and muddy shirts become their own kind of monument to heroes.

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