Angel Patriots

The Crash of United Flight 93 and the Myth of America

Alexander T. Riley
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii
1. Flight 93 and 9/11: American Mythology in the Making 1
2. Death, Horror, and Culture: Making Sense of the Senseless in Memorials 35
3. The Sacralization of Shanksville: The Emergence of the Temporary Memorial Site 68
4. Flag Bodies: Commemoration in the Flight 93 Memorial Chapel 111
5. The Permanent Memorial: Symbolic Work and Conflict in the "Bowl of Embrace" 156
6. The Cultural Narratives of the Books on Flight 93 192
7. The Cultural Narratives of the Films on Flight 93 219
8. Myth in Practice: Visitors at the Temporary Memorial Site 258
9. What Flight 93 Tells Us about America 281

Notes 289
References 305
Index 311
About the Author 317
The Sacralization of Shanksville

The Emergence of the Temporary Memorial Site

Shanksville is situated in Somerset County, Pennsylvania, near the Allegheny Mountains in the southwestern part of the state. It is approximately an hour's drive from Pittsburgh, two miles north of the Pennsylvania Turnpike/Interstate 76/70, and just under 20 miles north of the Maryland border. Somewhere in the vicinity of about 250 people live in this tiny community of a few streets, a post office, and a general store. In the language of Pennsylvania state governmental administration, it is a borough, the rough equivalent as a form of municipality to what many other American states call towns, too small to be classed as a city. All Shanksville's streets placed end to end would add up to under a mile in length.1 “Quiet” is an understatement to describe these streets. In all the many trips I have made into and through town, on my way to the two memorial sites I studied or to pick up food and supplies at the town grocery, I do not recall ever seeing anyone actually walking the streets of Shanksville.

The top industry in Somerset County is recreation, and state parks, resorts, and outdoor-life opportunities abound. Agriculture is the number two industry, and coal production has been of significant importance historically here.2 But these days job opportunities in Shanksville are scarce, and the population is overwhelmingly older, as younger natives steadily migrate out for work. This is Red State America. Evangelical churches are everywhere along the various roads leading to Shanksville, bearing aggressively and unapologetically conservative Christian messages, e.g., “Jesus is Lord!” and “Go forth and sin no more!” One of the first indications to otherwise uninformed travelers headed east along Route 36 that this is the part of the country where Flight 93 went down is a billboard outside Stoystown at a fork in the road. It features a plane, coming directly at the viewer, on a field of stars and stripes, with Jesus standing below. The first several times I saw the billboard, he too donned the colors of the American flag, though he now sports entirely yellow garb. The message on the billboard ties the moral meaning of Flight 93 to that of abortion: “Flight 93 Born Hero’s [sic] Gave their Lives to Save Lives Life is a Precious Gift Save God's Unborn Hero’s [sic] America Must End the Terror of Abortion” (figure 3.1). It is readily apparent here that one is well outside of Manhattan and Washington, D.C., both physically and ideologically. And while one might chalk it up to an idiosyncratic editorial decision, it is also reflective of something important when the first interviewee cited in Quiet Courage, a book about the response of Shanksville to the crash written by a local physician who was involved in the recovery and rescue effort, describes what she was doing when the crash occurred: “I was reading the Bible that morning” (12). It is not difficult to imagine numerous residents of the area emulating this morning activity on that and subsequent days.

The first time I visited Shanksville, one object struck me immediately by its omnipresence. American flags were draped seemingly everywhere, on front doors, hanging on fences, and providing the color of ornate patriotic decorations dangling from porches and planted in front yards. The country store, Ida's, where over the several years of my research I have bought innumerable sandwiches and soft drinks, boasts a large flag on the front door. Mailboxes frequently bear the name of
the local newspaper, the Daily American, although the word “Daily” is so small as to be invisible from a distance and what one sees while driving down a Shanksville street is a line of mounted mailboxes proudly announcing “American.” When I learned of the name of the local paper, it seemed to me an almost inevitable fact. It is idyllic small-town Americana patriotism in ideal typical form. During the time I was doing my research there, roadside signs bearing an image of a flag stretched across a red, white, and blue countryside pointed visitors in the direction of the crash site. Frequently, other flags were visible as background to these signs. The overall effect was hypnotic; even when there was no flag in my line of vision, I had a tendency to imagine it there nonetheless. Flags are the center of much of the symbolic and mythological work around Flight 93, as we will see in this and the several chapters to follow.

On our initial trip to Shanksville, as my wife and I passed Hauger’s Auto Shop and Sales on Lambertsville Road heading out of town, we encountered a hand-drawn sign with a crude image of an airplane bearing the number “93” that informed us that we were now very close, less than two miles away. The first time through town, in late 2004, we were almost entirely reliant on the signs, and thus I had a good, practical reason to pay careful attention to these details. But these signs are also an important textual trace of the event of September 11, 2001, that in the vision of some commentators turned this sleepy Pennsylvania borough (or, more correctly, the airspace above it) into the first battlefield in the War on Terror.

On that first visit, it was raining and foggy as we arrived, in the dusk of early evening. We had left Lewisburg, 180 miles away, later than anticipated, and we had gotten lost along the way. There was a chill in the air as we stepped out of the car in the parking lot of the temporary memorial. In the shrouded twilight, we walked up to the Park Service staffer on duty and asked where the plane had hit ground. He led us to a spot just in front of a collection of mounted red, white, and blue angel figures and pointed into the distance to what he said was a large flag a few hundred yards off in the mist-cloaked field. I learned later that the flag could be easily seen in the light of day, but we could not make it out at all that evening. We stood there in front of these angels, which I did not yet know would be the inspiration for the title of this book, and looked into the gloomy distance for what seemed a very long time, to the place where the plane had flown into the earth at nearly 600 mph, so hard and so fast that a nearby home suffered structural damage akin to that caused by an earthquake, even though no debris struck it. My camera registered the photos I took of that scene with a ghostly fog cloaking all the images as the steady drizzle continued and the dissipating light grudgingly but inevitably gave way to night. I very clearly remember thinking that the scene could scarcely have been more conducive to stimulating thoughts of the spirits of the dead, somewhere off in the field, hidden in darkness and drifting brume, dispassionately and silently watching their human seekers, even had it been prepared by a movie or stage crew to just that end. In his book Field Notes from Elsewhere, Mark Taylor writes, in language I can well understand, of his first visit to the World Trade Center site after the 9/11 attack, accompanied by his son, who was in the American Express building just across the street from the towers on that day and who left the area when he saw people leaping to their deaths from the crippled towers:

We had repeatedly heard that TV and film could not do justice to the scene and that was right. It was not merely that screens are too small and camera angles too limited; rather, the reality confronting us was not only visual but, more important, visceral. The only word to describe my response to what we saw: awe. Contrary to every expectation, a strange religious atmosphere pervaded Ground Zero. There had been much talk about the role of religion in this conflict but very little understanding of what religion really involves. . . . While religion often gives people a sense of meaning and purpose in times of personal and social crisis, its symbols, stories, and rituals also carry people to the edge of life, where unmasterable power always threatens to erupt. Throughout history, religion has been associated as much with terror and anxiety as with love and peace. For a few brief moments on September 11, the veneer of security was torn to reveal a primordial vulnerability that neither defense departments nor advanced technologies can overcome. For me, and, I believe, for Aaron, the encounter with this awesome power was a religious experience that left nothing unchanged.3

If such was the atmosphere at Ground Zero, which, though certainly grim, was nonetheless populated within a relatively short time after the
attack by the banal, comforting sounds of automobiles and people rushing along on their morning commute, and with the urban comfort (for the cosmopolitan viewer, in any event) of omnipresent concrete and blacktop, buildings still intact and human commerce humming along at its everyday clip, how much more amplified this mystical sense of dread of the primordial enemy, death, in this hillside field, which was empty but for the whispering trees in the distance and what could well have been ominous, phantom visitors out in the gloaming? And yet in recounting our emotions in such times and places, it is difficult to avoid falling into clichéd stylings. Did I feel wonder and awe? Yes. But I cannot say how much of that might have been driven by my sense that this is what I was morally obligated to at least try to feel in such a theatrically perfect spot. For I had already been prepared, prior to my visit, as every other American who had read a newspaper, watched the news, or consulted a webpage that discussed the fate of Flight 93, for a certain kind of experience of the site and of the commemoration of the event. Indeed, as an American, the preparation for how to respond to this hillside where Flight 93 crashed had been going on for the entirety of my life. When the plane crashed and the first efforts to narrate the event got underway in Shanksville and elsewhere, there was no clean slate on to which the story was written, but rather a well-annotated document of already-existing frameworks of meaning into which any narrative of Flight 93 had to fit.

"The End of Serenity": A Frame for the Picture

A photo taken by a woman from nearby Indian Lake (a borough actually slightly closer to the crash site than Shanksville) of the immediate aftermath of the crash has achieved iconic status in the cultural narrative of Flight 93 through its wide distribution in mass media and on the Internet and, in a more limited fashion, via direct sales of copies of the photo by the photographer herself. As Val McClatchey, a local real estate agent, tells the story, she had been watching the Today show and learning of the events in New York City when she heard the plane roar overhead, ran out to her front porch, and snapped one shot. She quickly copyrighted the photo and gave it a title: "The End of Serenity." The image evokes a picturesque country scene from a mythical American rural past, a red barn and a smaller red building (perhaps a tool shed) on a gently sloping green hillside, woods visible in the background, below a clear blue sky. The only contrast in this idyllic scene of pastoral harmony and calm is the menacing black cloud that dominates the center of the photo, the aftermath of the crash of Flight 93. The photo looks like a country postcard gone horribly awry, the bulk of the visual elements conveying peace, tranquility, hearth, stability, and rural tradition, and the one blemish effectively throwing all of that peaceful order into radical doubt and chaos.

In endeavoring to understand the symbolic material that makes "The End of Serenity" work, we are operating at the level of what the mythologist Gilbert Durand called anthropological archetypology, which consists of cultural work at a stratum even below that of myth, one wherein the objects that will become the elements in myths and rituals are formed. Durand writes that anthropological archetypology has the task of "identifying, in all human manifestations of the imagination, these groupings or constellations where images converge around an organizing nucleus." A central narrative structure from the American social imaginary, the opposition rural/industrial, is paramount in making sense of the photo. The machine-in-the-garden trope in the American cultural memory is what enables the image to be instantly placed into a broad mythic structure of the American collective consciousness in which a pastoral aesthetic and ethic are challenged by the machinery of industrial America. The threat in this narrative is not radical Islamic terrorism; it is contemporary technology and industry in the danger it poses to an imagined traditional, rural order of American society. Seen in this register, the narrative of Flight 93 takes on a rather different hue than that of some other 9/11 narratives, generated as they are overwhelmingly by the attack on the World Trade Center. The chief images of the latter, which are aesthetically centered on the explosion of United Flight 175 as it crashed into the South Tower, evoke a purely modern, technological holocaust. Here, we have the machine menace of the plane-turned-bomb plowing into the gigantic symbol of American technological and financial accomplishment, that is, a modern technological apparatus in opposition to another modern apparatus bearing testimony to engineering and technical prowess. But a more complex narrative of America's past and her present is evoked by "The End of
Serenity.” It calls on a profound set of basic mythical oppositions in the American imaginary: rural heartland/alienated city; natural/technological; simple/complex; farm work/big business. Any culturally competent American viewers of the photo are able to implicitly and instantly place it within those oppositional structures.

The narrative power of “The End of Serenity” is such that it nullifies any effort to present the events of 9/11 as, in an adaptation of the claims of the terrorists that is sometimes invoked by indigenous critics of American international politics on both left and right, originating in a critique of American technological, business, and military power. If the attacks are directed solely against American icons of technological (the World Trade Center) and military (the Pentagon) power, then the terrorists can potentially be understood as defenders of some more primal, pastoral, “natural” way of life that is threatened by that alienating, technocratic, militarist power. “The End of Serenity” has the symbolic effect of making the events of 9/11 into an attack on far more enduring, deep-rooted American cultural traditions: the farm homestead, the pastoral countryside, the pure and independent American life of the frontier. It matters little that the myth of pastoral purity that is tapped here is fictional, an imaginary plenitude unrealizable in reality, a “myth of the rural middle landscape,” or that the attack on that pastoral purity was unintended by the terrorists (who were aiming for a decidedly non-bucolic target, the Capitol Building or the White House). The narrative power of the image draws on forces stronger than those of logic.

Alternative narratives concerning Flight 93 have also taken up “The End of Serenity” in their own efforts at meaning-making. A number of bloggers and authors of conspiracy-laden books about 9/11 have suggested that the photo is evidence that the official narrative about the flight cannot be true. The form of the cloud of smoke, they argue, is inconsistent with a plane crash; the mushroom shape of the plume is closer to that of an ordnance blast. Some have endeavored to demonstrate that the photo reveals in its details that it could not have been taken from the location claimed.

These attempts at alternative narrative construction rely on elements of the American social imaginary rooted in populist distrust of official and state power. Similar conspiratorial beliefs hover around other significant events in American history, e.g., the Kennedy assassination and the moon landing. Such beliefs have arisen concerning other elements of 9/11 and their purported visual evidence as well. There exists, for example, a narrative about the attack on the Pentagon that interprets the visual evidence as indicative of a missile strike rather than the crashing of American Flight 77. These conspiratorial narrative structures are in basic ways not wholly unlike the “rumor of Orléans” analyzed by Edgar Morin in the book of the same title. He showed how a widespread urban legend in Orléans, France, that circulated virulently for a brief time in 1969–70 concerning the alleged kidnapping of young women while they were in clothing stores trying on new fashions and the subsequent selling of the women into prostitution in exotic locales was actually a hidden discourse related to fears of liberated female sexuality and anti-Semitic sentiments (all the involved stores were Jewish owned). 9/11 conspiracies also frequently emerge from an unstated set of cultural debates that exist somewhere underneath the actual events at issue. We might, for instance, note the ways in which the conspiratorial narratives surrounding the events of 9/11 frequently intersect with critical narratives about Jews and Israel. Some of the narratives explicitly present the attacks as the work of an Israeli force, e.g., the Mossad, working to provoke the U.S. into a war with Islamic foes or as the product of a radical pro-Israel group inside the United States. These narratives tap into deep elements of the social imaginary having to do with fears of shadowy outsiders (government officials, Jewish or Israeli agents) working in American society to destroy it from within. They do not need to directly invoke all the elements of those narratives in order to bring them into play in the meaning-making of readers. More, even in the face of considerable counterevidence, they are often attractive narratives for significant numbers of people. A Zogby poll of August 2004 showed that fully half of New York City residents surveyed believed that at least some American political leaders “knew in advance that attacks were planned on or around September 11, 2001, and that they consciously failed to act.”

I will return to conspiracy theories in more detail in the discussion of the Flight 93 permanent memorial design in chapter five. But, before we can talk of the planned permanent memorial, we should first turn our attention to the commemoration process that took place at the crash site for nearly ten years prior to the start of its construction.
The Temporary Memorial: Gifts, Flags, and Angel Patriots

Almost immediately after the fate of the plane became widely known, local memorialization work began. Some Shanksville residents used their own homes and front lawns as sites for small, spontaneous memorials in the immediate aftermath of the crash. One of these is still on display, although not at its original site but at the Flight 93 Chapel a few miles away (figure 3.2). It consists of a poster board perhaps 12 square feet in size containing a simple message of thanks to the passengers of Flight 93 and signatures and salutations from dozens of individuals who attempted to approach the crash site in the first hours and days after the plane’s impact. It was erected, along with numerous other similar poster boards, a large flag, and a cross, in the yard of a local family who lived in a Shanksville home located near the police barrier that was set up in the immediate aftermath of the crash to block traffic to the site. In addition to signing their names to the boards, visitors who were thwarted in their efforts to get to the crash site left flowers and other items in the yard. This is perfectly in keeping with what we know about how spontaneous memorials have come about in other such situations. In a book on the Oklahoma City Memorial commemorating the bombing of the Federal Building there in 1995, Ed Linenthal describes the same practice: “Immediately after the bombing, people gathered at the safety perimeter several blocks away, at Sixth and Hudson, and made offerings of poems, cards, flowers, stuffed animals.”112 Similar memorial objects appeared in other Shanksville yards or along streets traveled by workers at the crash site. One local woman used bed sheets as giant thank-you notes to rescue workers and volunteers.13 As Jay Sather-Wagstaff has argued, these spontaneous memorials or “commemorative folk assemblages” can be understood as “intentionally arranged formations and displays of material culture . . . that emerge at sites of death or other public sites of mourning [and constitute] a means for publicly paying respects to the dead while producing numerous social effects . . . including participation in imagined communities of mourning, belonging, closure, and spiritual or emotional healing.”114 The origins of this practice are difficult to trace, but academic interest in it dates back only about a quarter of a century, and the emergence of the phenomenon as a widespread, global practice in the face of traumatic death is certainly a recent phenomenon.15 It seems clear that the radical individualization of many contemporary societies has something to do with the rise of spontaneous, grassroots memorialization, along with the criticisms of traditional institutional forms of ritualization of death, both religious and secular, in much of the Western world that have accompanied this individualization.16 In Shanksville, as I will show in the remainder of this chapter, we see evidence of an ongoing process of incorporation of spontaneous, individualized memorialization, which often represents a way of speaking back to formal state and church memorial efforts, into more traditional state-driven memorial processes, and in a later chapter we will see how the plan for a formal, permanent memorial, driven in large part by institutions of the American state, has nevertheless endeavored to directly incorporate elements of the ground-level, spontaneous memorialization that was evident in the temporary memorial to Flight 93. We also see, although this vision requires some theoretical decoding of the practices that produced the temporary memorial, that what appears hyperindividualized in some respects is nonetheless deeply tied to collective cultural and symbolic needs of a primordial variety.

By the day after the crash, something of a small city of a few hundred people sprang into existence on the hillside overlooking the crater. This

Figure 3.2. "Shanksville salutes the heroes" poster board. Photo: ATR.
city was populated by a revolving team of search and recovery workers, police, agents of various government agencies, and media. Two citizens of this new city, Rick Lohr, the director of the Somerset County Emergency Management Agency, and Bill Baker, the 911 addressing specialist for that same agency, assembled what became known as the "straw memorial" at the command center of the rescue mission. In their account, this began with something like a dozen bales of straw as a base to support flowers, flags, stuffed animals, candles, poster boards, and other items left by inhabitants of the temporary city on the hilltop. As the memorial items grew, so too did the number of bales of straw on which the former were stacked. Within a few days of the crash, families of the passengers began to arrive in buses escorted by state troopers, and they brought personal items that were left at the straw memorial as well. A large flag was mounted at the site, and later a local pastor, James Vandervort of the Christian Missionary Alliance Church, and a few of his congregants took a wooden cross they had constructed and decorated with a white cloth up to the site to post. In Vandervort's account of the event, there was a brief conflict as to whether it would be permitted. State police supported the erection of the cross, while FBI agents at the site initially balked on the grounds of religious diversity, telling Vandervort this Christian symbol might be read as exclusionary by visiting passenger family members who were not Christian. One FBI agent invited him to contact the Somerset rabbi to attempt to broaden the religious symbolism at the site. Vandervort told him there was no rabbi in Somerset. In short order, American religious sensibility, in its dominant Christian guise, won the day over any commitment to by-the-book secular public policy: the FBI agents relented and permitted the cross to be erected.

Once the search-and-recovery mission was completed and the area (with the exception of the actual crash site) was made accessible to the public again, the memorial was moved several hundred yards up the hill to Skyline Drive. As the land is privately owned, property owners were asked permission to place the memorial. Flight 93 National Memorial Curator Barbara Black, who has been closely involved with the Shanksville memorial from the very early days, told me that the environmental resource management group who were consultants to the excavation of the plane and helped in the recovery effort selected the original site of the temporary memorial because it had a direct sightline down the hill to the point where the plane hit. They negotiated with landowners to designate the space for the memorial and then turned responsibility for the site's management over to the county. The site initially sat on the side of the road nearest the crash, but some years later, in September 2008, the entire memorial was moved to the other side of Skyline Drive when the original landowner, a coal company that had established an agreement with the National Park Service for yearly renewable leases, decided for unknown reasons to end the agreement. The Families of Flight 93 then came to an accord with a second coal company that owned much of the land on the hillside and purchased enough property on the other side of the road to house the temporary memorial. During the time I studied it, prior to its removal in the late summer of 2011 as construction for the permanent memorial got underway, the temporary memorial was situated in a dirt and gravel lot of several hundred square feet, bounded by a wooden fence a few feet in height. Among the first objects visible after turning off Skyline Drive into the parking lot were two poles, perhaps 20 feet tall, bearing the U.S. flag and the Pennsylvania state flag, and the same wooden cross that was initially placed by the Christian Missionary Alliance Church, some ten feet in height and draped with the white cloth that in many Christian denominations signifies the risen Christ.

An opening in the fence adjacent to the parking lot permitted entry by visitors. Situated just a few yards to the left of this entryway was a small wooden shelter in which the Park Service representatives and local law enforcement on duty could retreat from inclement weather. The building, which featured a deck area from which Park Service staff frequently delivered the short lectures on the history of the crash that they provided as part of their service, also held a guestbook, a large book of photographs related to the crash, a notebook containing the official transcript of the voice recording of the last minutes of the flight, and information regarding the permanent memorial project, including some graphic designs provided by the architect.

Around the perimeter of the memorial site were arranged a collection of large monuments and plaques created and donated by various organizations and individuals. Many of these were at the site from the first year or two after the crash, although newer ones could be seen...
there too. The United States Federal Air Marshal Service, an educators’ delegation to a university in Maryland from South Africa, various car clubs, at least one Boy Scout Troop, a local elementary school, and the United States Judo Association were among the many groups represented in these memorial objects. The messages they bore were of thanks and warning. A stone sternly cautioned: “The heroes of Flight 93: never forget them lest we be attacked again”; a plaque mounted on the large cross and bearing several Marine Corps badges read, “Civilians cannot and will not understand us because they are not one of us. The Corps: we love it, live it and shall die for it. If you have never been in it, you shall never understand it”; a sign left by a local Johnstown Catholic school announced that schools in the Johnstown diocese have offered over 8,500 rosaries for the victims of 9/11.

At the other end of the memorial site area sat a row of benches, which, viewed from the rear, did not seem at all extraordinary and might have been imagined as merely practical in purpose. When large groups visited the site, Park Service staff sometimes presented their informational lectures from the front of these benches while the group listened comfortably seated. When one moved around to view the benches from the front, their central memorial feature stood out: the names of each passenger and crew member of Flight 93 were carved into the wood of the back supports. The benches were made and donated by students from a cooperative religious community in Farmington, Pennsylvania, the Spring Valley Bruderhof; according to the Park Service volunteer Ambassador coordinator, Donna Glessner, “They adopted the site early on as a place where people could use comfort.”

Moving back toward the staff building, on the side of the building opposite the entrance to the memorial, one found what was perhaps the central element of the temporary memorial, if not physically then certainly in terms of its effect on visitors to the site. This was a steel fence 40 feet in length, perhaps ten feet high, on which were draped myriad objects associated with the flight and with the symbols of the national imaginary (figure 3.3). Barbara Black told me that the original purpose of the fence was eminently practical, to “attach things to so they wouldn’t blow away, as it’s always windy up there,” but over the years it became an essential part of the temporary memorial. Hanging from the fence, mounted in all manner of ways, were thousands of objects and images. There were religious medals and icons, firefighters’ and emergency workers’ uniforms, other items of clothing bearing messages of sympathy and identity with the passengers and crew, as well as many, many American flags, some sporting the traditional red, white, and blue stars and stripes, some with augmented symbolic banners and messages related to Flight 93, the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and other 9/11 symbols. The range of material was startling, and the basic aesthetic effect a wash of widely varied colors, textures, and sizes. All of these items were donated by visitors to the site or others who had them delivered there precisely that they might be made part of this participatory public aspect of the temporary memorial.

Gifts to the Heroes

In addition to the fence, objects were frequently left at other sites at the temporary memorial. The ground at the foot of the large cross and the collection of flag angels mentioned earlier in this chapter was often
covered with objects left by visitors, and several large plaques and monuments with flat surfaces were covered with small trinkets (figure 3.4). The objects left by visitors that were present at the memorial at any one time represented only a small percentage of the entirety of such objects that were left at or sent to the site over the years since the crash. There is a storage room in the Somerset office of the Park Service that overflows with such material, and a larger Park Service storage space nearby houses still more. Park Service employees swept over the site with some regularity to remove objects that would be damaged easily by weather or that might be carried off by the wind, and they were deposited in the Somerset office. The sheer volume and diversity of these objects is breathtaking. According to Barbara Black, the Park Service placed very few restrictions on what people could leave: “Nothing permanent or long-lasting, so no huge monuments. [and] they couldn’t plant things because we didn’t own the land,” but beyond these minimal rules, gift-giving visitors were given wide latitude. In the storage facility can be found entire boxes of toys: dolls, figurines, rubber balls, plastic army men, and many toy jets. Other boxes contain sports items: balls, helmets, caps, and jerseys, and one set of red, white, and blue boxing gloves bearing the inscription “America Fights Back!” Still others bear collections of CDs filled with music related to Flight 93 and 9/11, e.g., Bruce Springsteen’s “The Rising,” and many homemade and self-titled discs with titles such as “The Day the World Stood Still.” There are boxes of religious medals and pendants, religious icons (angels, crosses, and saints of all sizes and shapes, rosaries, bottles of holy water), and Bibles and other religious books (often with handwritten notes of dedication to the passengers of Flight 93); boxes of military objects, license plates, framed objects, handkerchiefs, bandannas, and glassware; boxes of ribbons (mostly red, white, and blue), patches (frequently bearing the name of some local fire or police department), coins and commemoratives, hats and caps (often with messages and identities scrawled on them), stuffed animals and tote bags, signs and banners, and plenty of T-shirts and personal items of clothing, one of the most common fetish items in our culture.

Many of these objects bear text, and a good number of the objects collected at the Somerset archive are in fact written messages of one variety or another. The archive contains reams of written material from visitors and others from around the world. Note cards were provided at the site for those who wished to leave a personal note, and these were routinely collected. Visitors frequently left, without explicit prompting, handwritten notes or more elaborate texts they prepared in advance of their visit to the site. Most of these are brief and highly formulaic, expressing one or more of a very common set of three themes: (1) giving thanks to the emergency services workers or to the deceased passengers themselves; (2) a religious blessing given to same, to their families, and/or to the U.S. as a whole; and (3) a promise never to forget the event. The passengers are sometimes thanked in very personally invested terms, as though but for their action the note writer him- or herself would have perished: “We are alive today because of you”; “Thank you for saving everybody!” Some writers even look forward to the day when they will be able to thank the passengers face-to-face: “I hope to meet you in heaven.” “Looking over the site where you heroes lie, I just want to reach out to that spot and give you all a big hug and tell you thanks for everything you all did that day. Jesus is doing it for me. I will die
someday and then I will be able to hug you. Thank you, Thank you for everything.”28 A sample from one randomly selected day, November 13, 2006, gives a sense of the great degree of conformity of the notes to these few central themes and tropes: “May we never forget the lives that were lost”; “May you all be happy being with our Lord”; “Dear God, We thank you for our brothers and sisters of Flight 93 . . . who’s [sic] gracious gifts and ultimate sacrifice will never be forgotten.” The phrases “Never forget!” “We will never forget!” and similar formulations (e.g., a particularly emphatic “I WILL NEVER FORGET ANY OF YOU!!!!”) with several underlines, on a note dating from early 2002) are omnipresent, almost as though the writers understand how difficult a thing collective memory actually is to preserve and are crying out against that looming and inevitable darkness of oblivion.

The uniformity of the vast majority of the texts makes those that differ even slightly from these norms stand out jarringly, even though they also adhere to various narrative blueprints. One writer made explicit what was certainly understood by many others who left messages at the site, i.e., that their notes would themselves become part of the memorial: “I feel very special and honored that I will be a part of this honorable memorial.”29 Direct political commentary is rare, although an implicit nationalist politics in support of the war efforts in Afghanistan and, later, Iraq is frequently encountered. Of those messages expressing views on the politics of war more explicitly, almost all are on the prowar right, and, although I could not read every card in the archive, I could not find even one that outwardly questioned the two wars that have emerged from 9/11. One of the very few messages I found that expressed any criticism of the Bush administration’s response discussed the Patriot Act, as well as the cultural politics involved in the selective media attention given various passengers on Flight 93:

When word first came of the passengers who fought back, we heard of Mark Bingham. He played rugby, he was a big guy. His mom spoke proudly of him. As the days went by, we heard less and less. Todd Beamer’s wife was all over the news. But what of Mark’s partner? I am glad Melissa Etheridge wrote “Tuesday Morning” on her Lucky CD to preserve his memory. Now our country wants to pass an amendment [sic] to deny our rights. So much harm has been done in the name of freedom these past years. May our country turn back and preserve our freedom, save us from the Patriot Act.30

Most of the stronger prowar sentiments I found in the archival collection were by writers who pointedly identified themselves as military veterans or currently in military service. One representative such writer, who identifies himself as a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force, put his thoughts thus: “You thwarted the evil effort to destroy our government, institutions, and way of life.”31 Another wrote: “George [Bush] has gone after the wrong country—He should have gone after Saudi Arabia until it is a glass bowl—no nation building!!!32 There are also many notes that allude to the military service of a family member: “Our son joined the Army and fought in Iraq to defend our country as did all in Flight 93—God Bless you and keep you”;33 “My husband went away for 2 years to help the freedom cause”34 “My husband is serving in Iraq in 2008 for Operation Freedom.”35 Especially in the first year or so after the crash, but later as well, writers who lend their support to military efforts in the Middle East use symbolically charged terminology such as variations on the phrase “Let’s roll!” e.g., “Thank you, Flight 93, and let’s keep rolling.”36

Some of the notes endeavor to make a still closer personal connection to passengers on the plane. One soldier claims to have fought in Iraq with a close friend of passenger Jeremy Glick: “They were the first to fight in this new war, they will not be the last, En Avant!”37 Another asserts a relationship with Andrew Garcia: “A tribute to Andy from a friend . . . I knew Andy during the 1960s–1970s and had not seen him since. He was someone who you would always remember. I salute his part in taking down Flt 93.”38

There is little in the way of explicitly anti-Islamic sentiment in the messages visitors left, and indeed, somewhat to my surprise, I found anger only rarely expressed, as in a note that read: “To hell to those bigheaders [sic].”39 Some writers do delve into the more radical religious cultural narratives of the Christian right to describe the events of 9/11. In several such cases, religious pamphlets or other published writings with a warning that the 9/11 attacks were something of a signal from God that America has strayed from the proper path were commented on by the visitor in the margins, then left at the site. One visitor left a
copy of an essay, published in a local newspaper, by Robert Lind entitled “Where was your God on Sept. 11?” The piece responds to those who doubt the goodness of a God who could permit such atrocities to take place by claiming God’s presence that day in preventing some people from boarding the planes, keeping some others away from the towers, and holding the buildings up long enough after the plane strikes for some people to escape. The essay ends with this passage: “[God] cried that 19 of his children could have so much hate in their hearts that they didn’t choose him, but another god that doesn’t exist. Now they are lost forever.” Another visitor left a copy of a pamphlet “The Twin Towers” from a series titled “Moments with the Book” (apparently published in Bedford, Pennsylvania): “I believe God has been saying for a long time ‘WAKE UP, AMERICA! You are pushing Me aside and forgetting who I am. You are representing Me as a permissive God who is tolerant of evil. You “call evil good, and good evil” (Isaiah 5:20). If this terrible tragedy causes us to stop and hear His voice, then at least some good can come from it.” Many notes express belief in the miraculous presence of the Christian God at the crash site: “When I heard that a bible was not destroyed, when Flight 93 went down hear [sic], I quickly thought the bible had a shield perfect [sic] by God.”

There are many boxes of art and messages left by children, most of whom apparently visited the sites with their school classes. Most of these innumerable hand-drawn American flags are essentially identical. Some come with messages: “I love that flag”; “God bless America”; “Keep going, we’re right behind you, you’re doing great”; “No one scares USA.” Like the adult notes and messages, many of the children’s messages are explicit words of thanks for emergency responders and the passengers. Some starker child art depicts such images as planes on the verge of crashing into the towers. Fictional culture heroes such as Captain America (accompanied by a text reading “Hero’s [sic] of Flight 93, rest in peace”) appear as well. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of this collection of children’s memorial art and letters is its moral and aesthetic uniformity. Doubtless some of this has to do with the fact that most of these are individuals who were producing their work under conditions that could reasonably be described as coercive: i.e., teachers or parents bringing children to the site whether they would choose to come independently or not and assigning them a more or less formal task to complete as part of their visit. But it undoubtedly owes a good deal also to the deep well of cultural mythos that even young Americans dip from when they fill their expressive jugs. As we have already seen, similar conformity to unwritten symbolic and narrative rules is present in the materials adults left at the site as well. There are for example many poems written by visitors that read as variations of the same meta-text. The basic framework consists of a brief description of the passengers uniting in the fateful final moments and acting as one, tragically failing to save their own lives, but succeeding in their true goal of saving national symbols and the lives of others and living on in a heavenly existence and in the eternal honor and memory they are rewarded by those still living. One representative poem reads:

Dear Heroes, Everyone is born with a purpose. No matter how large or small, When your purpose was presented, You united in the face of fear, You took the hands of strangers, and fought the fight of your lives, for the goodness of man, the love of life, and the right to freedom, You each laid down your own life, for the lives of so many others, Although we can’t tell you now, please know we are grateful, Even though I didn’t know you, Your actions make me proud, You’ll be forever in my prayers, and you will always be my example . . . of true American Heroes.

Gift Exchange and Heroic Sacrifice

Why would visitors to the site leave objects there? What sorts of motivations could they have, and what meanings are they attributing to their action? Some possible explanations are psychological in nature and perhaps rather less than flattering to those who engage in this practice. Ed Linenthal cites the account of a local official who recalled how, in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, the city council was bombarded with calls by people “who would call and read a poem. It was very, very important to some people that we listen to their poem. It was not enough for them to send it. They wanted us to hear it.” It is hard not to detect a kind of narcissism in such reactions; such callers seem convinced that their contribution to the mourning of the tragedy offers something so uniquely important that it cannot be permitted the pedestrian treatment given to the contributions of others. It seems likely
that some of what drove gift leaving at the temporary memorial and the Flight 93 Chapel has to do with a desire visitors felt to tie themselves to the sites in some way. Alphonse Mascherino, the late founder of the Flight 93 Memorial Chapel, told me he thought some people left objects and then took photos of them at the temporary memorial site as testimony to their presence and therefore to their very personal connection to the place: as he put it, they were thinking, “Look, it’s my little Army man, or my hat at the Flight 93 memorial!” This style of commemoration may have simply become the “thing to do” by sheer weight of history. Much like folk epigraphy, or the popular practice of scrawling messages directly on public memorials in a kind of commemorative graffiti, this begins somewhere, in the wake of some such traumatic event. The practice is then reported in the press and by word of mouth, and it is visually obvious at the site as well. It gets a response from archives and historians and then trickles into the public consciousness as the accepted process for interacting with the memorial.

The giving of thanks and gifts to the heroes at the temporary memorial and the Flight 93 Chapel can be best understood as deeply implicated in the cultural need for ritual. Though the death of the Flight 93 passengers is obviously not an act of sacrifice in the purely religious historical sense (i.e., with a victim offered according to specific rules to achieve religious goods), we might well call it an act of “auto-sacrifice.” The passengers are here placed carefully into a framework of meaning wherein they become willing martyrs for a set of values which, in death, they come to symbolically represent in material form at the memorial. They move from their initial status as profane, unremarkable, quotidian individuals to become sacred entities through their own violent destruction. In so doing, they symbolically evoke one of the central sacrificial myths in American society, which originates in American Christianity but which has spread outside the confines of that religious community, and indeed outside of religion proper and into the American civil religion. The passengers willingly give themselves as necessary sacrificial victims in an act mirroring, if still structurally inferior to, the founding act of Christianity, i.e., the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Although they are heroes and not gods, and therefore cannot be physically resurrected, they nonetheless symbolically rise again in the memorial and thereby remain in relations with the rest of us. We see the power of this Judeo-Christian narrative of heroic self-sacrifice in the symbolism of a number of patriotic narratives of American political history, e.g., the fall of the defenders of the Alamo, or the martyrdom of the Civil War dead.

The leaving of gifts for the heroes is an important element of the ritual interaction with them, and still other ritualistic elements of the relations between the martyred heroes and the members of their grateful cult are apparent at the Flight 93 Chapel, which I examine in the next chapter. The gift giving cannot be seen as part of a literal sacrifice, wherein the victim bestows a boon on the surviving celebrants of the sacrifice in his destruction and they are therefore called to treat the victim with certain ritualistic respect before his immolation and pay homage to him afterward, but it certainly is an action that adheres to all the central definitional elements of ritual: it is formulaic, repeated, and collective, and it is connected to a set of symbols and narratives that can reasonably be classified as the ritual’s governing myth. The act is spurred by the action of the auto-sacrificed passengers, who are, according to the terms of the myth, understood to have given the rest of us a great gift in bringing the plane down short of its goal, and it constitutes a fulfillment of an obligation to return the good deed and pay homage to it in whatever limited way possible.

The relations between the heroes and their cult are defined then in large part by the mandatory giving and returning of gifts. As the heroes have given the ultimate sacrificial gift, visitors to the memorial are called on to reciprocate with simple thanks or with more elaborate offerings. Structurally, the social imaginary is here calling on the same primitive human needs as were answered to by the Aztecs’ sacrificial gifts in return for the life giving of the sun. As we are given, so we must reciprocate, if we would avoid shame or worse. The role of the hero in the social order sheds some additional light here. The hero is, according to the historian Henri Hubert, “like the living symbol or emblem of a definite society”:

When a society gains consciousness of itself through its heroes, it feels that it takes its origin, its blood, its name from the prestige of their authority, their strength and their worth. . . . Divine symbols of societies, ideal actors of their histories, models of merit, examples of virtue, moral types and characters, heroes have passed by degrees from religion
to heroes of literature, in the evolution of drama and epic that originates in the feasts. All heroes, in whatever degree, as symbols and types, help individuals and groups become conscious of themselves. 48

In chapter six, I will have much more to say about the construction and functioning of the Flight 93 passengers and crew as cultural heroes; here, Hubert’s definition is perhaps sufficient to show us what the hero is for the society in which he emerges, and why the establishing of formal relations with him is therefore so important. The process of hero creation is part of the production and reproduction of cultural myths of the tribe, or the nation. The Flight 93 passengers who rose up and attempted to take back the plane once the intentions of the terrorists became plain are no longer mere individuals. They have become charged with a mythological significance that relates to deep cultural beliefs about being American, and this structurally changes them. They cease being primarily unique individuals with particular sets of traits both positive and negative, and they become the very representative form of fearlessness, practicality, duty, religious faith, selflessness, and patriotism that is present throughout a long tradition of cultural narratives about American identity.

The Flag as American Totem

We have already seen something of the importance of the role of the American flag, in both unedited and revised forms, in the symbolic world of the temporary memorial. The essential role the flag plays in the production of civil religious narrative in the American context has to do with its totem–like capacity. Recent (and ever–recurring) discussions in the realm of national politics about a constitutional amendment to ban the burning of the flag powerfully illustrate this. Is the flag merely a piece of cloth, paper, or other material that cannot be realistically considered in a class apart from other such raw materials, or is it rather something sacred, an essential piece of the narrative of the American civil religion that should be rigorously protected from profanation and degradation? Broad cultural concern with destruction or irreverent treatment of flags certainly suggests they might occupy a special place in our symbolic mapping of the world. In the last attempt to pass a flag desecration amendment to the Constitution, in the summer of 2006, the required two-thirds majority was easily secured in the House, and the proposal fell only one vote short in the Senate. Had proponents garnered this one additional Senate vote, the measure would then have been dependent on securing victory in two thirds of the states for passage, an entirely conceivable outcome. It is clear that there is significant feeling in the U.S. that the flag is deserving of special care and protection not generally provided to symbols of our political universe. We might do well to recall here that legally even the president can be insulted, and in the vilest terms, so long as his life is not threatened.

In an unfinished work on the nature of the nation as a collective body, Marcel Mauss directly compared the national flag to the primitive clan totem. As more simply organized societies had symbols that represented both clan members and the animal, plant, or natural phenomenon from which they believed themselves to have sprung, so more complex societies have symbols that serve as markers of national identity and collective historical origins. The former has its animal-god ancestors, while the latter has its cult of fatherland and each requires symbolic material to represent those mythical systems to members. 49 The flag’s use in the Flight 93 temporary memorial certainly suggests its sacred status. The memorial flags directly tie the national symbolism of the traditional stars and stripes into the specific events of 9/11. Similarly, the power of the totemic image in the society that worshipped it was formidable, as Émile Durkheim showed in his masterwork on religion, in which he described the process in primitive clan societies whereby the totem was regularly glorified and charged anew with sacred energy. During the intense ritual experience of the ceremonies dedicated to the celebration and regeneration of the totem, the totem animal or plant itself was present, and its emblem was everywhere. It was marked on the body with ink or some other substance, drawn on banners and on the costumes of celebrants, and even literally on the faces of clan members, who literally believed themselves to be materially of the same substance as the totem. In this symbolic form the totem was effectively an “emblem, a true coat of arms,” parallel in essence to the coats of arms that graced the castles, shields and swords, and other key possessions of feudal European nobles. 50 Members of totemic clans not only wore the image of the totem on their bodies in the form of drawings, tattoos, and scarings. They also sought to resemble it themselves, and hence
bodily modifications of a specific variety with that goal were often obligatory. When the totem was a bird, for example, the men might wear its feathers; in the tortoise clan, the men might shave their heads and leave six curls at appropriate angles to mimic the legs, head, and tail of the animal.\textsuperscript{81}

Durkheim provided several compelling examples of the sacred power of the totem image, largely drawn from the pioneering ethnographic work of Spencer and Gillen in central Australia. Clan religious life there frequently involved an object called a churinga; Durkheim noted that similar objects existed in northern and southern Australia—the nurtunja and wuminga, respectively—and the latter closely resembled a flag.\textsuperscript{82} The churinga were pieces of wood or polished stone, usually oval or oblong in shape. In some cases they produced noise when whirled through the air. The totemic group generally had a collection of these objects. They were kept in a special location, the erinatulunga, generally a cave in some remote location unknown to those considered profane, i.e., boys who had not yet been initiated into manhood, and women, neither of whom were permitted to touch or even see them.\textsuperscript{83}

The erinatulunga itself was made sacred by the contagious touch of the churinga, so a man in danger of any sort who sought shelter there was safe from harm. The nurtunja was kissed by initiates during their immensely exacting initiation ceremonies, and they thereby entered into relations with the totemic principle in it. This enabled them to endure the frightful ordeal of penile subincision without anesthesia.\textsuperscript{84} The churinga healed wounds and sickness by the merest touch, yet the only thing distinguishing it from other objects of wood and stone was the totemic mark it bore.\textsuperscript{85}

The relationship between the totem and the clan member was complex and demanding in specific rules of contact and avoidance. One could not ingest or kill the totem animal or plant of the clan.\textsuperscript{86} There were some exceptions and mitigations to this harsh rule. For example, in cases of extreme hunger, or imminent danger from the totem animal, the rule might be broken, but a subsequent propitiation for the offense was required to be made. In clans of the water totem, obvious difficulties were presented. Clan members would die without water, yet they nonetheless could not drink it unassisted but only from the hands of someone in another phratry.\textsuperscript{87}

This prohibition on contact with the totem might seem contradicted by the obligation of the clan member to wear the totem image. Still more complexity is seen in the fact that clans considered human beings by nature to be profane, and yet clan members were believed to be the sacred totem (totem myths frequently depicted original humans born surgically, by axe blows, etc., from animal ancestors).\textsuperscript{88} The seeming contradiction had its resolution in the fact that in totemic systems humans, though in general profane, were nonetheless understood to have sacred energy (the totemic principle) concentrated in certain parts of their bodies, especially the hair and the blood.\textsuperscript{89} During ceremonies, the nurtunja was anointed in human blood, and some clans drew the totem during religious rites on soil soaked in the blood of clan members.

In a key chapter in his book, Durkheim addressed the totemic principle, that is, the source of its sacredness and its power. It is important to understand precisely what was being claimed when, for example, a member of the crow clan claimed to be the totem. He did not mean he was literally a bird, but rather that both he and the crow were animated by the same fundamental source of power.\textsuperscript{90} Totemic societies saw the whole universe as powered by forces that with a few exceptions took the forms of animals and plants. This force that resided in the totem was a moral force, arousing both fear and respect. Durkheim summarized an account he cited from a member of a North American totemic group, the Dakota, regarding the nature of this "diffuse power," which the Dakota called wakan, as follows: "wakan . . . goes and comes through the world, and the sacred things are the places where it has alighted."\textsuperscript{91} As a general term, Durkheim adopted a Melanesian word for such power: mana.

The totem is thus essentially a representation or a symbol of something beyond it. What is the thing standing behind the totem? It is this power of mana, the totem being or god in its abstracted form, but it is also something else, Durkheim contended. The clan, that is, the social group, is also what is symbolized in the totem, which means the social group and the totemic principle are essentially one.\textsuperscript{92} We come now to perhaps the most famous of the key terms in Durkheim's analysis: collective effervescence. When human groups are assembled together and driven by common aims, they become filled up with a certain kind of energy. This kind of phenomenon can be transitory, for example, a man
exhorting a crowd, or it can be more sustained, such as during “some great collective shock,” e.g., the Crusades, or the French Revolution. Durkheim described a number of compelling scenes from aboriginal Australia in which clan members gathered together and engaged in various moving and physically exciting rites, some sacrificial, some mimetic or imitative, and some commemorative, all of them involving mythic narratives of their descent from the totem ancestor and the requirement to regenerate its principle within themselves and in the world if the clan were to have the power to sustain itself. In the midst of this overwhelming barrage of physical stimulation and symbolic information, the clan members were made literally ecstatic (from the Greek ek-stasis, meaning “to move outside oneself”).

Yet how does the idea of the emotional, collective power that is generated at collective ritual ceremonies get transferred to the totem symbol itself? The answer is not self-evident, since, as is made clear in Durkheim’s description, this energy is actually generated by the simple phenomenon of the collectivity in proximity, ritually focused on rhythmic and intense activity, i.e., by what might seem a purely material, physical set of facts. But for the member of the clan, the feeling of effervescence and the totem symbol are united by the omnipresence of the totem image at the moment of the experience of effervescence. The actual phenomenon that generates the force, that is, society itself and the experience of the intoxication of vigorous collective exertion, is a complex, difficult thing to comprehend. The symbol of the totem simplifies and crystallizes this complex reality, and in fact comes to replace it. Durkheim returned here to the idea he had earlier presented of the totem as an emblem. When a soldier at war is killed, he is often said to have “died for his flag,” by which we mean that he died for his country. We might think ourselves perfectly capable of sorting the two out and recognizing their distinction. After all, we know the flag is not the country, but only a scrap of cloth. And yet many a soldier in many a contemporary society has perished in combat while attempting to reclaim an actual flag abandoned in territory lost to the enemy, despite the fact that it is perfectly clear that the country will not perish if that one flag is lost, and the war will not be won simply because it is reclaimed. Just as the clan member with his totem, the soldier “forgets that the flag is only a symbol that has no value in itself but only brings to mind the reality it represents [and] treat[s it] as if it was that reality.”

The totem is a symbol of the whole society that can be thought of in the same frame of reference as a modern flag, and it is embodied by the members, indeed often literally inscribed on their bodies in the form of tattoos and scarifications in addition to its presence in their physical being as the totemic principle in the form of their hair and blood. Its power is generated through collective assemblies in which mythical stories of the relation of those present to the totem are told and reenacted, during which the symbol of the totem comes to be charged up with the residue of the emotional energy of the assembly. All this provides a penetrating lens for examining the workings of religious and national symbols, rituals, and collective identity and memory in modern societies like our own, distant as we are from these totemic groups in many ways. At the Shanksville temporary memorial, the sheer number of flags made it effectively impossible to avoid encountering the symbol at the site—it was literally everywhere one turned. Though explicit ritual effervescence of the type Durkheim described was generally not present at the temporary memorial site, i.e., visitors to the site were not engaged in the kind of strenuous physical action and collective mimicry and entrainment that produces what Randall Collins calls emotional energy, it was nonetheless visibly evident that visitors were frequently intensely marked by the symbolic energy produced by the omnipresent totem flag and other emotionally charged symbols. Text was directly added to the surface of the flag in order to make explicit the meaning of the events in national symbolic terms, and the mutation of the flag into a very specific symbolic statement of the events allowed for a funneling of the flag’s symbolic capital into new directions.

Augmented or alternative flag designs abounded at the memorial site. For some time, a plaque was posted to the fence with the design of a “9/11 flag” and an elaborate description of its symbolism. According to the text, this flag boasted a field of blue representing the sky, the medium of the attacks; three red stripes that represented the sites where the planes came to ground and spilled blood; two white stripes standing in for the two towers of the World Trade Center; and a large star, composed of 50 smaller ones, with a white center representing the Pentagon...
and a smaller red core representing Pennsylvania, the site where "the Brave Heroes" struck back. A number of these augmented, transformed flags also flew high above the fence at the memorial. These included an American flag with the field of stars transformed from rows in a sea of blue to a protective circle of 50 stars surrounding a huge "93" and the text "Our Nation will eternally honor the heroes of Flight 93" emblazoned directly on three lines of white stripes in the main body of the flag. This flag was both hanging on the fence and represented in a marble commemorative plaque near the entry way of the memorial (figure 3.5). Two other flags that were not alterations of the American flag but original creations to symbolize and sacralize the events of September 11, 2001, could be seen atop the fence: a red flag with text reading "Never Forget" and an image representing the two towers inside a pentagon, itself inside a larger circle, and four stars representing the various crash sites (one in each tower, one in the Pentagon, one at a point in the circle); and a blue and black tri-bar flag with four large stars representing the four planes (see figure 3.3).

Other American flags with text (e.g., "God Bless America") written directly on the bars could be found at the site. Some of the flags stretched the traditional civil religious narrative all the way into frank Christian American patriotism. Two such flags are collected at the Park Service office in Somerset. They aggressively proclaim the meaning of 9/11 as the response of an angry Christian God to a nation insufficiently fearful of him and as an opportunity for the nation to "come out in Jesus' name." Here, 40 crosses (one for each passenger) fill the blue field on the flag and the text on one of the two flags reads: "In this world we live in, many fail to claim, Our Father who art in Heaven, they use his holy name in vain. They fear no evil, in what they say and do, they take the precious gift of life for granted too." Still other flag imagery directly engaged other culture-war conflict and tension. One monument at the site juxtaposed the American flag with the flag of the Southern Confederacy, and seemed to directly equate the Flight 93 passengers to the rebellious soldiers of the South. These last few examples make an important point regarding the tenor of cultural symbolism at the memorial. As in any such site, completely monolithic meaning is impossible. Even though the bulk of the symbolic material at the site pointed to a common narrative of civil religious piety, some symbolic material there complicated that meaning structure, adding specifically denominational religious or political content that many who would readily pledge fealty to the civil religious narrative would perhaps reject.

Perhaps the most intriguing bit of flag symbolism at the memorial site was that found at the end of the site abutting Skyline Road. Just in front of the benches and next to the large wooden cross were a row of slate angels, created by a local business and mounted on small poles that raised them two to three feet off the ground. Each angel was emblazoned with the name of a passenger and they each featured the red, white, and blue design of the American flag on their breasts (figure 3.6). The Angel Patriots, as I have come to call them, which were a long-lived feature of the temporary memorial, offered a near perfect summary of the civil religious narrative. They bore the totem flag symbols,
colors, and patterns. They displayed the names of the heroic martyrs. They took on the shape of entities that, in the religious traditions of many faiths, including the Christian, are located somewhere between the realm of the gods and the world of humans, structurally the same location occupied by culture heroes, who are neither divine nor human but a mystical combination of the two arising from the powerful magic of their deeds. Those entities are winged, and thus ascend into the heavens; the miming of the movement of dead souls into the heavenly sphere of the plane the heroes rode on their final journey is here encapsulated with neat precision. There is one other powerful bit of meaning present in the Angel Patriots, a meaning that evokes dread but is nonetheless essential in that very horror to the civil religious myth, which I will explore in the next chapter. Here it is enough to put a name to the cultural process I will theoretically elaborate later: the Angel Patriots were funeral markers, but not of the human individuals whose names they bore. They were the totem body itself, flag hero corpses, slain in combat, in the interpretive understanding of members of the Flight 93 hero cult, and they were therefore symbols of the dreadful power of the American nation over life and death.

During their time of display at the memorial, the Angel Patriots were constantly adorned with various gifts left by visitors, which included everything from flags to flowers to personal trinkets. The ground below Honor Wainio’s angel was covered with seashells. Often the gifts showed some knowledge of the life of the passenger in question or of the media coverage of the crash. For example, someone placed an Ohio State University cap on the ground below Todd Beamer’s angel (figure 3.7), as one of the photos of Beamer that was featured in much media coverage of his death shows him in such a cap. Visitors who left such gift objects were both affirming their own personal presence at the memorial and enhancing the civil religious hero myth.

![Figure 3.6. The Angel Patriots. Photo: ATR.](image1)

![Figure 3.7. Gifts left to the Angel Patriots. Photo: ATR.](image2)
The Ambassadors

In addition to the material culture just described, another unforgettable aspect of the temporary memorial was the group of friendly individuals wearing bright red shirts that indicated their position as Ambassadors from the Park Service. During the existence of the temporary memorial, they were an essential part of the institutional face of the Flight 93 memorialization effort, but, like most other parts of this institution, they emerged essentially spontaneously and took on their ultimate shape only over time.

In the fall of 2008, I spoke with Donna Glessner, the volunteer coordinator of the Ambassadors, who was involved with the memorial since its inception, about their origins. A long-time resident of Shanksville, she recounted how, in the early months after the crash in the fall and winter of 2001, she began to realize the importance the site was going to take on. She recalled seeing someone in a car with an Indiana license plate taking photographs of a local fire truck in October and thinking, "I'd seen the first tourist":

A number of us came to this conclusion that there needed to be someone at the memorial, . . . a caring sympathetic ear. . . . [I saw] how frightened and anxious everyone felt, how lost. . . . [P]eople really just wanted to tell you about their experience. . . . [I]nitially there were no signs, no flag down in the distance, and people would stand in that bare field and not have any idea what they were looking at.69

Some early visitors would ask if the plane had gone down in a nearby pond or take pictures of the scrap yard at the top of the hill, believing that was the crash site. Troubled by the fact that there was no source of information and assistance to these uninformed but curious and emotionally invested visitors, Glessner contacted her friend Barbara Black, the Flight 93 National Memorial curator who was already in late 2001 beginning the labor of collecting and archiving material culture and oral histories related to the crash, and asked her if she thought there was a need for volunteers at the site. In a manner that tells much about cultural life in small town America, although, as Glessner makes clear, "not because we felt it was a religious mission or anything, but just because in a small town a church is a way to meet people," Glessner and a few friends announced in their church, Shanksville United Methodist, one Sunday that they were seeking volunteers to help out at the crash site and that a training session would be held in the days to come. A total of 17 volunteers were at that first training session on January 26, 2002, and among those present to instruct them on how to do the work they were setting out to do were Black and Terry Schaefer, the Shanksville fire chief. The individuals who would only later come to be called the Ambassadors learned logistical facts about the crash (where the plane went down, where and how wreckage was discovered) and were briefed on the kind of directions likely to be useful to tourists (where to find a local gas station and restaurant, how to get back to Route 30 or Interstate 76). They were also given a phone number for journalists to contact for press information. Initially, the crash site was staffed by these volunteers only on Saturdays and Sundays, when free time was easiest to find, and individual Ambassadors worked two-hour shifts. Many, though not all, of the Ambassadors were retired seniors with considerable volunteer time. From that first winter of 2002 through the following one, there was no shelter on the grounds for Ambassadors to use for protection from the severe elements up on the hilltop (bitter winter wind, merciless summer sun, and no trees) while waiting for tourists. One early Ambassador was a local pastor who was able to give the rest of the crew instruction on grievance counseling, a useful skill given the emotionally distressed state of more than a few visitors in the early days. Only much later were the Ambassadors officially approached by the Park Service, who offered them training in visitor rights, CPR, and first aid. Glessner told of rare emergency situations at the site involving tourists (cases of sunstroke, someone who fell and broke a leg) and explained "you feel responsible for these people." The Ambassadors were instructed to make entries into a log book concerning their shifts, and these are now collected in the Somerset archive. Most of the entries are no more than a few lines and give mundane details of the weather and brief accounts of the density of visitors for the day, e.g., "Beautiful day — warm — light breeze, few visitors (44)" from the 2:00–4:00 p.m. shift on August 17, 2004.

In May 2006, in what Glessner describes as a "peaceful coup," the National Park Service officially incorporated the Ambassadors and further institutionalized training. By the summer of 2008, the Ambassador
staff numbered some 45, most of whom lived in the Shanksville area, though at least one was making a three-hour commute to the site. Already, a sense of the identity of the group and of its mission was evolving, both through formal institutional mechanisms and more informal avenues.

The Ambassadors quickly recognized that they would have a not insignificant role to play in the maintenance of collective memory about Flight 93. Glessner noted that in the early days after the crash, tourists could be counted on to know basic facts about the plane from media coverage, but within a few years, it became obvious that memory concerning the events on Flight 93 and its place in the larger story of 9/11 was beginning to wane. Ambassadors were increasingly asked questions that revealed ignorance of even basic details of the event: Were there any survivors? What time of year was it when the crash occurred? Ambassadors were shocked to be asked whether they personally had been on board the plane. Some visitors had forgotten the significance of Todd Beamer’s “Let’s roll” phrase and asked about its ubiquity at the site. Glessner observed that it is perhaps understandable that memory has weakened, especially given that “there’s so much out there that’s incorrect.” Even in recent years, she told me, there was still interest, albeit relatively infrequent, among visitors in one of three main conspiracy theories surrounding Flight 93: (1) that the attack was a false-flag, inside job of the American ruling establishment; (2) that the plane was actually shot down by American jets; and (3) that the permanent memorial design is actually a mosque. Some critics were confident enough about their suspicions as to bring it up in the midst of Ambassador presentations to groups of visitors, which sometimes made for lively interchanges, but it was, Glessner said, much more commonly in one-on-one encounters with visitors, after formal presentations to groups, that these beliefs were articulated in hushed tones.

Glessner cited several of her colleagues among the Ambassadors in describing their own sense of their cultural work at the memorial: one man, retired from his job in the oil distribution business, told a journalist, “I used to be a businessman, but now I’m a storyteller,” while another described their work thus: “we’ve become historians.” Both are correct. The narratives communicated by the Ambassadors made up an important contribution to the ongoing construction of a Flight 93 mythology insofar as they were, during the time of the temporary memorial, the sole representatives of any official American institutions that visitors to the site encountered. Glessner soberly described the responsibility for such a role as “kind of scary,” and clearly understood the complex nature of this interpretive work. Initially, she described her own narrative stance as “nothing but the facts, just the facts,” but very quickly, certain Ambassadors began doing interpretation, in the Parks Service sense of the word. They were assigning values to things that happened, in the way of, like, this was the bravest deed ever, or this was like the second Pearl Harbor, those kinds of interpretive [things]. I really rebelled about that. I didn’t think that was right. I didn’t think it was our place to do that. But over the years, whether we’ve become more authoritative or what, but now we all sort of, even I tend to use some phrases like that, that go beyond just the facts. . . . [It feels okay now to do that. It does.]

As an example, she juxtaposed her own mode of noting that the plane was only 15 minutes from Washington, D.C. (“I just let that fact out there and let people think what that would have meant”), to that of other Ambassadors who would elaborate more emotionally (“just imagine the death and the destruction and the loss to our government”). The line between fact and myth is difficult and perhaps impossible to find, and indeed it may be misguided even to seek it: we are perhaps thoroughly inside myth as soon as we begin to communicate about such things at all.

The formal Ambassador addresses to gathered visitor groups were “in the Park Service plan” envisioned as in the range of ten to 12 minutes, but, according to Glessner, most tended to be about twice that in length, which is fairly close to the experiences I had listening to perhaps 15 or 20 different versions of the presentation over the time I spent at the memorial. She described the energy Ambassadors receive from this work in compelling terms: “Many Ambassadors will say, ‘I’m tired, I’m overworked, why did I agree to do this?’ and then you go out there and you feel so confident that you’re doing the right thing because people are so appreciative, and you come out feeling energized, you feel like you have done the greatest thing you could do for your country or your fellow man.” Though, according to Glessner, the average span of a
addresses charged up with the symbolic material they hoped would demonstrate to those they serve how fully invested they are in the American civil religion. Much can be learned about the resonance of the Flight 93 narrative in American political discourse from what was said by these exceptional visitors to the memorial during the commemoration of the day the plane crashed.

On September 11, 2008, I arrived early at the site, drawn by the scheduled appearance of Arizona senator and then Republican presidential nominee John McCain, at the time engaged in a furious, bitter struggle with his Democratic opponent, then Senator Barack Obama of Illinois, in which many of McCain’s supporters and fellow Republicans were launching controversial discursive attacks on Obama that accused him of sympathy with Islamic terrorists such as those who hijacked Flight 93. The national political discourse at the time was fairly cracking with intensity. I did not have to wait for Senator McCain’s turn at the podium for a speaker to present a reading of the symbolic meaning of the act of the passengers that went directly for the cultural jugular. The first speaker of the morning, Ken Wainstein, then director of the U.S. Office of Homeland Security under the Bush administration, in brief remarks of just a few minutes, bypassed the civil religious discourse and explicitly connected the act of the passengers of Flight 93 to that of “the Son of God 2,000 years ago.” The then governor of Pennsylvania, Ed Rendell, followed and marked the difference in Republican and Democratic political discourse of the season by steadfastly avoiding any mention of God in his remarks. However, the site’s civil religious energy still dictated that Rendell find a way to connect his message to its symbols and meanings. He passionately described Senator McCain’s time as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam and thereby brushed up against the American civil religion very deliberately. Here was a man who had nearly given his life, and had given his health and years of his life in captivity, for his country; how could his presence at this site of nationalist sacrifice and mythical nation-saving heroism be questioned as a mere campaign ploy? (It certainly had not escaped the notice of at least some visitors that the presidential election was at this point less than two months away.) Despite Rendell’s refusal to entertain the explicitly religious national language of the first speaker, which found symbolic sustenance at this memorial in that large cross standing next to the

Two September 11 Mornings at the Flight 93 Temporary Memorial: 2008 and 2011

Most days at the temporary memorial were, as the Ambassadors’ log entries attest, uneventful: in winter, very few visitors, and in other seasons, occasional spurts of tourist busloads framed by longer periods of a small trickle in which seldom were more than 20 people on the site at the same time. Around the anniversary date of the crash, the level of energy rose at the site. Politicians, recognizing the important role 9/11 and Flight 93 play in the cultural imaginary and in the narrative of American identity and mission, scheduled appearances to deliver
American flag at the entrance to the site, his remarks were yet drenched in the cultural narrative of the American nation with a mission that, if not from God, certainly exceeds merely secular explanation and bursts from the temporary memorial like a beacon.

Finally, after much anticipation, Senator McCain spoke. He wasted no time in aiming straight for the cultural binaries of peaceful, democratic heroes and militant, authoritarian antiheroes. He attacked “our depraved and hateful enemies” in no uncertain terms. McCain placed the Flight 93 passengers, personified by Mark Bingham, whom McCain mentioned by name,2 in a position of clear moral and patriotic superiority to that of the average citizen: “Few of us could say we love our country as well as he.” Toward the end of a fleeting but symbolically pregnant address, McCain turned to the same Christian sources invoked by Wainstein: “In the Gospel of John it is written: ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’” He then concluded with this remark about the Flight 93 passengers: “Such was their love, love so sublime that only God’s love surpasses it. I’m in awe of it as much as I’m in debt to it. May God bless their souls.” Sustained applause followed. McCain had managed to invoke the core elements of the civil religious narrative, patriot heroes whose death mirrored the axioms of Judeo-Christian religious principle, while also pointing to the explicitly Christian trappings that religious conservative Republicans favored. He did not mention Jesus directly, as Wainstein had, but only indirectly and yet in a manner that no Christian, or anyone else for that matter, could miss: by citing from one of the Gospels. One might note that McCain, who previously was recognized as a denizen of the more secular end of the Republican Party and rather sparing in his religious remarks, had already pragmatically moved more to the religious right during the presidential campaign in an attempt to shore up dissatisfaction with his candidacy on the right, and attempt to explain these remarks in that light. The cultural sociologist, however, might well conclude that the symbolic universe into which the good Senator had entered that September morning, ripe with such imagery and narratives, was of greater importance in the generation of this tone than any merely practical political considerations.

Three years later, on September 11, 2011, some things, significant and mostly physical, had changed, but the symbolic work being done at the site had remained largely the same. Construction of the permanent memorial, which is described in chapter five, had by this time been underway for some time and, although much work remained, the outline of the part of the memorial park centered on the crash site was becoming evident. The temporary memorial was gone now, the artifacts that had been there whisked away to storage in Somerset or elsewhere, and the ceremonies for the first time took place down the hill, much closer to the crash site, although now the black framing wall of the permanent memorial served as a distinct visible cue as to the line dividing the most highly sacred space from the rest of the memorial. On one side of the wall rested the stage and the seats that would hold family members and distinguished guests, while beyond the wall lay a golden field of bright flowers, glowing in the late summer sun, and a boulder decorated with gifts that represented the exact spot of the plane’s impact. Just the day before, the memorial had been dedicated in a ceremony featuring two former presidents and the current vice president. President Clinton had compared Flight 93 to the Alamo and the Spartan stand at Thermopylae, emphasizing the “deliberate” self-sacrifice of the Flight 93 passengers, who, he said almost certainly incorrectly, “knew they were going to die.” He expressed his hope that the narrative of Flight 93 would be remembered as long as the Greek stand against the Persians. He concluded with a pledge to push a concerted effort to raise the remaining money needed to finish the memorial. President Bush’s remarks centered on a note-for-note recapitulation of the simplest version of the mythology of Flight 93. He described calm heroes learning stoically of their planned fate, deliberating in a considered fashion as to strategy, setting up a vote, and then unflinchingly acting. As he had done in the wake of Flight 93’s crash, Mr. Bush leaned heavily on Todd Beamer’s “Let’s roll!” line, turning it into a trope not merely for the actions of the passengers on that plane, but for the broader American response in the wake of the crash. The binary cultural world of crisis was still powerfully operative in Bush’s mind, and undoubtedly, in the minds of many, many Americans, a decade later: “One of the lessons of 9/11 is that evil is real, and so is courage.” Vice President Biden followed them, and in a telling moment of his talk, he presented his summary of the two messages contained in the two presidents’ remarks. He recalled that President Clinton had noted that the Flight 93 passengers knew that
our common humanity is what most unites us, and touted the former president's work in that same regard. He then addressed President Bush as the man who "made it clear that America could not be brought to her knees [and] helped us stand tall and strike back." The remarks about Clinton aroused a bare smattering of a few seconds of restrained, polite applause, scarcely even discernible from where I was seated some 100 yards away from the podium. The statement about Bush, on the other hand, was met with sustained and much louder applause, punctuated with whistles and cheers, showing in no uncertain terms what the lessons of Flight 93 and 9/11 had been for America at least in this place, at this time, for these Americans: the recognition of common humanity takes the back seat to striking back against evil enemies. Biden went on, in the martial spirit that is unquestionably present in a good deal of the material culture and narrative work at the temporary memorial site: "They didn't board that plane to fight a war, but they knew it was the opening shot in a new war. They stood up and they stood their ground. That heroism is who they are. [The terrorists] cannot—they cannot—defeat the American spirit."

On the following day, the 11th, which fell on a Sunday in 2011, the political star power was significantly lessened. The keynote speaker was not a president, or a vice president, but John Hendricks, the CEO of Discovery Communications. He was chosen, apparently, because Honor Wainio, one of the Flight 93 passengers, was a district manager for his company at her death. His largely innocuous remarks were directed toward a vague promise to the families of passengers to complete the memorial. Republican Congressman Bill Shuster, like President Clinton, compared the deed of the passengers to that of the defenders of the Alamo, and also to "Lexington and Concord": in all three situations, he claimed, "Americans banded together and said, 'No, this will not stand.'" The grave historical difficulties in the comparisons are self-evident, as is the infelicity of the equation of the sovereign states of Mexico and Great Britain to an underground network of suicide bombers. It was neither the time nor the place, however, in which one could expect challenge to Shuster's statement.

Governor Tom Corbett, also a Republican, made the most symbolically pointed remarks of the day, and it was his speech that most clearly embraced the more powerful elements of the binary symbolic system at work in the mythology of Flight 93. Unlike his predecessors, who were eager to tie the events of Flight 93 to historically and symbolically similar examples in earlier American times, Corbett flatly refused to make any comparisons. For him,

the truth is that this place is like no other because the deeds aboard Flight 93 were like no other.... [I]t has no companion in history, in my mind.... [T]heir uprising marks the moment in history when Americans showed what makes us different. We refuse to be victims. We refuse to settle for the term "survival." Captivity will not suit us. We know that there are things more important than our own lives and chief among them is freedom. That truth rose like the smoke over this field ten years ago. Today our Capitol stands, the city of Washington is intact, the honor of our Republic is yet stronger, because of the strength of will and the sense of purpose of 40 American citizens who chose to be warriors, who chose to sacrifice themselves to protect their fellow Americans. They engaged in that battle armed only with the knowledge that they were right.

They did what they did, in Corbett's interpretation, "to stay the hand of tyranny." He then alluded to a vision of the world historical importance of the action on the plane almost identical to the neoconservative global vision articulated by President Bush in the wake of the attacks. The political end pointed to by the passengers of Flight 93 is, in this vision, nothing less than the transformation of the entire planet to conformity with a conservative American vision of democracy: "The breezes on this hillside whispers [sic] of an unfinished agenda, one of freedom at home and abroad. Of faraway peoples free from the yoke of dictators and bigots. It is filled with lives we must now complete on behalf of those who sacrificed their lives. . . . It is up to us to finish their journey."

The possibility, which is strong given the testimony of phone conversations from the plane and the biographical materials available on passengers, that the motivation of the passengers in the revolt effort might have centered less on any sense of patriotic duty than on their own more mundane and personal desires to survive and get home to their families is conveniently placed here into the shadow of an overarching cultural political ideology. The trope of "freedom," which, as I write this, is the calling card of the Tea Party and other right-wing critics of the
Obama administration’s efforts to address massive social problems created at least in part by the excessive freedom from regulation accorded Wall Street and corporate elites, can hardly pass the vision of any reader attuned to the political news without remark. What exactly do Corbett and the others who invoke the term in such simplified discourse mean by it? Corbett, who was elected in the same 2008 election widely interpreted in the political world as a major set of electoral victories for the Tea Party, almost certainly meant at least some of the same things meant by those people who carry the Gadsden flag, which has become something of a Tea Party banner, and the immediate context of the current American political climate almost certainly played a role in the contours of the symbolic terms and language that appeared at this ten-year anniversary ceremony. But much of this symbolic material goes back much further in American cultural history, and there is much in the existing Flight 93 mythology that relies on that same archaic set of cultural narratives and symbols, so the speeches made during this recent annual marking of September 11 easily find support in some of the cultural work that produced what we know as Flight 93. In the context of American mythology and civil religion, then, Corbett’s evocation of “freedom,” at this site, and in reference to this event, gathers narrative direction from the same mythical vision of the frontier and the rural heartland that is present in the “End of Serenity” photo.

4

Flag Bodies

Commemoration in the Flight 93 Memorial Chapel

About eight miles from the site at which Flight 93 struck ground, along a stretch of a sparsely populated country road dominated by farmland and woods, sits a small chapel dedicated to the passengers of Flight 93. It is eight miles, that is, if one is following the serpentine local roads, but only about half that as the crow flies. If however you are not possessed of the power of flight, leaving the crash site toward the chapel, you retrace your steps out to Lambertsville Road and head back through Shanksville. At the post office, you turn right on to Stuzmantown Road and follow its winding curves, through postcard-picturesque rural Pennsylvania countryside, for several miles until, at the intersection of Stuzmantown and Coleman Station roads, you find a small, nondescript white building, remarkable from the outside only because of the bell tower at its entrance that is taller than the building itself. To one side of the chapel, separated from it by Coleman Station Road, lies a small, plain country cemetery. The late Alphonse Mascherino, the first pastor at the chapel and the man responsible for its existence, once told me, in his assertive, theatrical voice, that he was occasionally asked by a visitor to the chapel, in hushed, respectful tones, if the passengers of Flight 93 are buried in that cemetery. On the chapel’s other side is the guesthouse, a modest one-story, four-room home that serves as the temporary dwelling for family members of Flight 93 passengers when they visit the chapel. During annual commemoration ceremonies, it also serves as a kind of group home for assorted members of the passengers’ families, invited speakers, performers, and other participants in the ceremonies at the chapel. Over the past several years, Father Mascherino frequently gave me the keys to the house during research trips to Shanksville. My family has accompanied me on nearly all of those trips, and, for a time, my young daughter was there so frequently that she referred to our own