

★ OFFERINGS ★


By Anne Madarasz, Museum
Division Director

They come to the site daily. Some days there are only a few, some days they arrive by the busload, but every day for the past 10 years, people have made the pilgrimage to the Flight 93 memorial site. Many leave an offering, a small token chosen in haste, a work of art that has been months in the planning. Many leave a flag of some sort. Each item reflects the visitor's thoughts and feelings about or understanding of the events of September 11, 2001.



*Angel-flags and morning moon
at Flight 93 Memorial.*

Black and white photographs by Richard Snodgrass.



★ **THE** flag also honors those who died that day, especially the passengers of Flight 93, who sacrificed their lives so others might live. You see that in the tributes left behind. ★

Wall at sunrise.

Richard Snodgrass has worked with the National Park Service to photo-document the Flight 93 site over the past decade. Ninety of his images will be found in *An Uncommon Field* published by CMU Press for the 10th anniversary of 9/11. Some of his photos, such as the black and whites seen here, will be featured in the flag exhibition.

Color photos by Brian Butko, 2006.

The last of four planes commandeered by terrorists on September 11, United Airlines Flight 93 crashed in a field near Shanksville, Somerset County, at 10:03 that morning. The site immediately became a federal crime scene open only to first responders, investigators, and victims' families. But the public came too—some to pay respects and honor those lost, some seeking answers to explain the seemingly senseless events of that day, and some just to see where it happened. Temporary memorials sprang up around the crash site and visitors began leaving written messages, photographs, objects, and flowers.

In the beginning, nothing happened with those offerings. Left outside, on the ground, exposed to the elements, they served as a silent tribute to the 33 passengers and seven crew members onboard Flight 93. On September 24, the FBI completed its investigation of the site and turned it over to the Somerset County coroner and the county commissioners. They fenced it off and began planning how to manage the site, calling together a task force, which met for the first time on October 10, 2001. That group included Barbara Black and Charles Fox, representatives from the Somerset County Historical Center. Also in attendance were Joanne Handley from the National Park

Service, the organization that now manages the site, and Pam West, an NPS curator in the National Capital Region known for being the person who first oversaw collection and management of materials left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C.

The group determined that the materials being left at the memorial sites should be saved; Barbara Black was charged with planning how to collect and store the tributes. Because the day following the meeting marked the one month anniversary of 9/11, the group determined that collection of these materials should begin October 12. On Pam West's advice, Black decided to leave all organic materials, such as flowers, at the memorial sites, as well as all plain, ordinary American flags: those without messages or special design elements. The county designated a single temporary memorial site on Skyline Road, and Stonycreek Township erected a gravel pad and a chain link fence for the tributes. Framed by flag poles, the fence, pulled out of storage, measured 40 feet long and 10 feet high—by chance corresponding to the 40 passengers and crew members who died.

On November 2, Black moved all tributes that could weather the elements to this single site. She visited each day, interacting with the thousands who continued to visit, even as fall turned to winter in the mountains around

Somerset. Overwhelmed by the outpouring of emotion she encountered, Black began working with a friend to train volunteer ambassadors, people who would listen compassionately to those who visited and offer information about the site and the events that transpired there. Those ambassadors still volunteer at the site, assisting the Park Service rangers. And Black, now also a Park Service employee, continues to collect offerings left by visitors and to catalog and interpret them.

Most often the objects are patriotic (often flags) or religious. In addition to the insights these tributes provide into how Americans feel about 9/11, what is most striking is the sheer volume of material. Black and her staff have cataloged more than 10,000 artifacts just from the first two years. Most are left anonymously, but some, especially children's artwork and personal messages, are signed. There are objects one might expect—rosaries, religious statues, flag pins—but also tributes that show great thought and the investment of time and resources such as painted artwork, signs crafted from wood and metal, and quilted pieces.

Some are very personal, such as a plaster cast painted red, white, and blue, bearing the handprints of a family's children and a message from the parents. It, like other similar works, is forward looking, thanking the passengers



of Flight 93 for their bravery, for the lives they likely saved that day when they brought the plane down before it reached its intended target, and for making the world safer for their children. The message is one of thanks, but also one of hope. Other visitors share their personal journey, from their experience of 9/11 to their visit to the site, in tributes written in notes and on photographs, objects, and the message board posted at the site.


Many of the offerings include flags in their design or are actual flags, reminding us of the role the flag played in the days following the tragedy. The flag became a symbol to rally around, a source of strength and unity. It became the most visible symbol of who we are as a nation—a sign of perseverance at a time of tragedy and an enduring symbol of America and our will to survive. The flag also honors those who died that day, especially the passengers of Flight 93, who sacrificed their lives so others might live. You see that in the tributes left behind. Hard hats with American flags, ball caps with written tributes and flag patches, beaded flag pins, motorcycle sculptures with flags attached – simple, everyday objects related to those who owned them, but also to those they honor. And from visitors who

came empty handed but felt moved to leave something, there are even car air fresheners with flag motifs.

Some are moved to create something once they arrive, like the family who left colored stones in the shape of the flag on the ground. Others plan far ahead, such as Suzi Bird, who reached out to friends around the country on September 12, 2001, asking each to create a quilt square in response to 9/11. She then fashioned those into three quilts—one for the World Trade Center, one for the Pentagon, and one for Shanksville. Featuring flags and squares in red, white, and blue, the Shanksville quilt includes a handwritten message from a captain in the Los Angeles fire department that reads, “A common field one day. A field of honor forever.” That message has become the mission statement for the Flight 93 Memorial site.

The families of the passengers and crew of Flight 93 visit the site as well. Barbara Black finds their offerings at the memorial site and also on the crash site. Many have used flags to honor their loved ones. The family of Thomas Burnett left five flags, each with a personal message, one from his parents, one from each of his two sisters, one from his wife, and one from a close family friend, a Monsignor. The

messages on those flags capture the family’s love, respect, pride, and longing. “Tommy you have always been my hero, Love, Mom.” They demonstrate the power of the flag to serve as a blanket of comfort to a nation, a family, a mother, in trying times.

In the 10 years since September 11, each of us who witnessed the events of that day has tried to make sense of what happened. The flag has been a constant: we hung them on our homes, planted them along roadsides, brought them to the sites where tragedy occurred. The flag has been, as President Wilson said so eloquently on Flag Day in 1917, **“the emblem of our unity, our power, our thought and purpose as a nation. It has no other character than that which we give it from generation to generation. The choices are ours. It floats in majestic silence above the hosts that execute those choices, whether in peace or in war. And yet, though silent, it speaks to us—speaks to us of the past, of the men and women who went before us, and of the records they wrote upon it.”** 



Angel-flags with sunrise.

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