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No Ordinary Day - 9/11 Hero Noel Sepulveda

By Toni Lee Robinson

It should have been just an ordinary day at the office for Noel Sepulveda. Sepulveda was an Air Force Master Sergeant. Usually, he worked at Kirtland Air Force Base in New Mexico. In September of 2001, he was helping out in Washington, D.C. He was heading up a reserve program for the Air Force Strategies Office at the Pentagon.

Sepulveda was born in Puerto Rico. He came to the U.S. as a child and joined the Air Force in 1969 at the age of 19. During his six years of active duty, Sepulveda may not have had many ordinary days. In 1972, he was in Vietnam serving as a medic with a helicopter crew. On a mission to rescue a downed American soldier, the chopper flew low over a group of people huddled around a stretcher on the ground. Sepulveda, looking down, saw some things that made him wary. "I don't like what I'm seeing here," Sepulveda said to the pilot.

Suddenly, the "patient" pulled a weapon from beneath his body. From the brush, mortar shells exploded. The helicopter's tail rudder took a hit. Sepulveda was standing in the open door of the aircraft at the time. He'd neglected to fasten his safety harness. When the mortar hit, he was jolted from the helicopter.

Trees and brush broke his fall. Still, one hand, one leg, and part of Sepulveda's ribcage were smashed up in his plunge from the sky. As it turned out, he was the lucky one. Just as Sepulveda fell, the chopper blew up. The medic who fell from the aircraft was the only one of the crew who lived.

Another helicopter in the squadron rescued Sepulveda. It took a year in various hospitals before he was back on duty again. He served another four years on active duty. His medical skills were called upon again during Operation Desert Storm. In all, Sepulveda had 26 years of service behind him when he was called to work in Washington.

On this particular morning in September, Sepulveda was hurrying to the Pentagon. He was late for a 9:30 appointment. As he sprinted toward the building, he phoned ahead. A secretary told him that everything had been cancelled due to the drama going on in New

York. It was suspected that the events in New York were part of a terrorist attack. The Pentagon was locked down-on red alert, she told him.

Then Sepulveda noticed a plane coming in over the area. It came low over the top of a hotel, not following the usual flight pattern. As he watched, the plane dropped even lower. Electrical poles snapped like toothpicks as the plane blasted through them and veered toward the Pentagon. Frozen in place, the sergeant saw the plane crash into the building, burying the fuselage up past the wings. A second later, it exploded in flames. The blast picked Sepulveda up and slammed him back against a light pole.

Before he could think, the medic inside took over. Sepulveda dashed to the nearest opening in the ravaged building. Flames and smoke were boiling out of the wreckage. "Is anybody in here?" he shouted, searching frantically for those who might need help. People were screaming and staggering about, trying to get out. A man stumbled toward him, his clothes hanging in rags, his face and chest badly burned. Sepulveda pulled him out. He found others and led them out, too.

A Pentagon policeman joined in the task. The men worked together to drag the dazed and injured people to safety. At one point, the policeman handed Sepulveda an armful of dirty rags. When he held it, Sepulveda realized there was a baby inside. The little body was way too still. Quickly, the medic began CPR as he raced to hand the child to paramedics. With great relief, Sepulveda finally heard the infant cough and begin to cry. He placed the battered bundle into the waiting arms of a paramedic and went back to bring out the baby's young mother.

Later, Sepulveda seized a spot in a nearby tunnel. He set up a triage (TREE ahj) area like he had in combat zones. To make it easier to treat the injured he used a color system, ranking the injuries according to their urgency. Still, the chaos around him was overwhelming. Sepulveda grabbed a bullhorn and leaped up to the edge of a street above the scene. He calmed the crowd and began directing medical efforts.

He was gathering people with medical skills from the crowd when a voice behind him demanded to know what he was doing. Sepulveda realized he was being questioned by no less than the Air Force Surgeon General. "Great!" the General boomed as the sergeant finished explaining his plan. "You're my onsite medical commander. You will coordinate military efforts with the civilian health care



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system."

Before Sepulveda could say "Yes, Sir!" the General was gone. The medic who had become a commander went on with what had to be done to get people to treatment. It was days before he slowed down enough to be aware of his own injuries. When he was examined later, it was found that Sepulveda had taken such a blow to the back of his head that blood was pooling inside. In spite of his own injuries, Sepulveda stayed at his command post for the next couple of weeks.

Six months after the tragedy, the Air Force recognized Sepulveda's great contribution. The Surgeon General commented, "Master Sergeant Sepulveda is one of the real heroes of 9/11. He did exactly what he needed to do at exactly the right moment. He created order out of chaos. He behaved as all airmen are trained to behave, as a real leader, making all of us proud."

Many heroes emerged from the tragedy of 9/11. Other people were recognized for their efforts as well. But Sepulveda's instant and selfless response to those in need saved many lives on that day. Sepulveda was the only person awarded the Airman's Medal, the highest honor that can be given in a non-combat situation. He was also given a Purple Heart. These days, Sepulveda runs an Air Force fitness clinic. The Pentagon is still his office, but perhaps, every once in a while, he enjoys having just an ordinary day.

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Questions

1. Describe the skills and duties of a combat medic.

_____ 2. Puerto Rico is _____.

- A. a part of Cuba
- B. a province of Mexico
- C. a Spanish colony
- D. a territory of the United States

_____ 3. Sepulveda honed his medical skills serving in two different conflicts. They were:

- A. The Vietnam War and Operation Desert Storm
- B. The Korean War and the Vietnam War
- C. The Vietnam War and the Iraq War
- D. WWII and the Korean War

4. Explain why Sepulveda spent a year in hospitals when he was in his early twenties.

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5. How did Sepulveda learn of the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York City?

_____ 6. Sepulveda never made it to his 9:30 appointment on 9/11. What happened instead?

- A. He went to the Surgeon General's office to arrange medical care for people who had been hurt when a plane crashed near the Pentagon.
- B. He went to his office where his work was interrupted by a plane smashing into the Pentagon building.
- C. He went to New York to help people who were trapped in the Twin Towers.
- D. He watched a plane smash into the Pentagon building and ran to help people get out.

_____ 7. In a triage area, medical personnel would _____.

- A. evaluate patients according to the urgency of their need for care
- B. scrub up for surgery
- C. perform emergency surgery
- D. prep patients for surgery

8. Air Force Surgeon General Paul Carlton said that Sepulveda had "created order out of chaos" on 9/11. To what was he referring?
