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The ambassadors of Flight 93



By Rachel Clarke
BBC News Online in Shanksville, Pennsylvania

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If Flight 93 had to come down anywhere on 11 September, 2001, the outskirts of Shanksville might be its best possible resting place.

Members of this tiny community have taken it upon themselves to honour the brave passengers and crew who fought the hijackers who wanted to use the plane as a missile, probably against a building in Washington DC.



It may be years before a permanent memorial is ready

There is no permanent memorial yet on the hillside in Pennsylvania - the land still has to be bought, designs have to be agreed and implemented - and it may be years before one is ready.

But townsfolk like Don Landis saw how many people were travelling to see the crash site and decided to take action.

Now they have gathered as ambassadors for the crash site and all that it stands for.

The community group deploys what it calls ambassadors at the windblown hill, the site of a former strip mine, to educate and inform visitors.

"It's doing a little something that we can do that is really nice for the people who come here," Mr Landis told BBC News Online.

Local knowledge

The volunteers believe it is a necessary interim job until a permanent commemoration is established, probably by the National Park Service.

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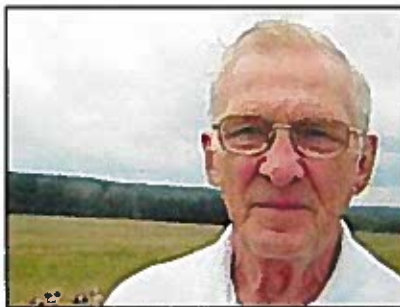
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"We discovered that there were people coming here who didn't have the faintest idea where the plane came down," Mr Landis said.

Now ambassadors with their decades of local knowledge and photographs of the area are at the memorial site where flags flutter beside messages of thanks and support from across the nation and where 40 small angels are dedicated to the crew and passengers.



“ If these people had not done what they did, it could have been thousands of people dead ”

Don Landis

They indicate the basics of the flight's final moments but also tell the story of the bravery on board and the good fortune of those on the ground - whether they were in Shanksville or Washington, where the White House or the Capitol Building were believed to be targeted for the same devastation meted out at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

"We do remember what good came out of this," Mr Landis said. "If these people had not done what they did, it could have been thousands of people dead."

Overwhelming response

Mr Landis, 80, was involved with the tragedy of Flight 93 almost from the beginning.

The impact of the crash could be felt in Shanksville, but Mr Landis was a few miles away, waiting for his wife to finish an appointment at a beauty parlour.

As soon as the news came on the radio, he hurried his wife back to the car, knowing that he and the town's other volunteer firefighters would be needed.



Forty small angels are dedicated to the crew and passengers

By the time he reached the site, the State Police had already secured the area and there was no rescue to be made. But Mr Landis and his colleagues still had an important role to play.

And in true small-town spirit - added to the national desire to do something after the attacks - whenever the word went out that something was needed, whether it be shovels or snacks,

the workers were overwhelmed by the response.

Mr Landis said that was always the type of town Shanksville was, with people ready to help their neighbours in need.

Some residents have complained about media intrusion and even suggested that it is time to move on and away from the crash of Flight 93.

But for Mr Landis, it is important that the town remains a proud custodian to the memory and bravery of those who died.

He even feels that his home town has been blessed.

In a very minor way, he no longer needs to explain exactly where Shanksville is, as he had to do years ago when posted away from home in the army during World War II.



There are messages of thanks and support from across the US

But much more deeply, Mr Landis is grateful that the plane crashed where and when it did, missing the local school - and a generation of the area's children - by just a few seconds.

In addition to the heroism of those on Flight 93, Mr Landis also points to the July 2002 rescue just a short distance away of nine miners after three days trapped down a flooded coalmine, from which many thought they would never escape.

"I really believe that when you realise what happened right here, that nobody was killed on the ground and you see what happened with the miners, if you are not a believer in a supreme being when you come here, you will be when you leave."

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