

The Flag Run

by John Farrow

September 11, my daughter was one of those ash-covered ghosts walking out of New York's financial district following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. November 4, 2001, I was running the flag across the country in the Americans United Flag Run.

I had been to Ground Zero and seen the destruction for myself. I was moved to tears by the outpouring of grief and strength and support for both the victims and the rescuers -- the flowers, photos, remembrances and personal vignettes -- and came away resolved to do what I could to support the effort to see that this does not happen again.

Socorro, New Mexico, 75 miles south of Albuquerque, is one of those little towns that you whiz past on the Interstate, maybe stopping for gas or a hamburger or the bathroom. Originally a stop on the railroad line, it has seen better days. But with the exception of adobe houses and the green chile on your food, it is Smalltown, USA.

The flag arrived just after noon and was received by the local Scout troops at the bandstand in the town's plaza. After a few informal words from the mayor and the singing of God Bless America and the National Anthem, everyone wanted to hold the flag and walk it around the plaza.

Our group was assigned to run the flag from Socorro to Magdalena, New Mexico, about 26 miles climbing out of the Rio Grande Valley to an elevation of 6,540'. And it soon dawned on me that I had never carried the flag before - for anything. Yet there it was. Running with me was an American Airlines pilot from Miami who had come to New Mexico just for the Flag Run. He knew someone on one of the planes that had gone down.

As we headed through town, people came out to cheer and wave. Truckers saluted us with their horns. People stopped their cars to take pictures. We were both amazed and very moved.

West Central New Mexico is extremely rugged, both in its mountains and its awe-inspiring emptiness. The remains of an old railroad line could be seen off to the side of the road, and here and there were the remnants of someone's failed

attempt to scratch a living out of this hard land. A leaning building here, a rusted tractor there, stock pens

whose boards had long fallen down.

Magdalena is an old, weathered place once made prosperous by mining and cattle. A substantial structure in the center of town says "Bank" in the brick facade, but it is now a café. Many other buildings are boarded up. High in the mountains nearby is the ghost town of Kelly, whose silver mines were once some of the most prolific in the world.

Although it was dark and the cool air pungent with the smell of wood smoke, the streets were lined with what appeared to be a substantial portion of the local residents. We handed off the flag to a group of police officers and ran with them to the town's livestock show barn, where a huge pot-luck buffet of home-made chile and stew and tamales and tortillas and apple cobbler awaited. Again, the flag was passed from hand to hand among those who had gathered -- everyone wanted to hold it, if only for a moment. Nearby, the town's oldest veteran danced to the music of a fiddle and guitar.

Overhead, the constellations shimmered brilliantly in the dark night sky, unhindered by city lights. Soon the flag continued on its journey westward into the night, carried along on a wave of emotion and pride and determination.

This one's for you, Babe. May you never have to see those sights again.□

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