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Testimony of Pamela Tokar-Ickes
Somerset County Commissioner

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House Bill 3917

Presented to

Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands

2:00p.m.

July 9, 2002

Good afternoon Chairman Radonovich and esteemed members of the Subcommittee. I am Somerset County Commissioner Pamela Tokar-Ickes and on behalf of my colleagues James Marker and Brad Cober, and the residents of Somerset County, I wish to express our strong support for House Bill 3917, introduced by Congressman John Murtha, as an appropriate and fitting means to forever honor the legacy of the passengers and crew members of United Airlines Flight 93.

As I testify before you today, I can assure you that the events of September 11th have done nothing but strongly reinforce my personal belief that history is not the domain of academics, it belongs to us all. Because we have not only been witness to a literal turning point in our nation's history- every man, woman and child who will have recall of those events profoundly experienced them. It may be recorded by scholars, but the history of September 11th is being written by us all. That date has entered our collective imagination as one of those moments you will never forget, one that for many has not been experienced since November 22nd, 1963. I am forty years old, and I cannot tell you what I was doing when President Kennedy was shot because I was only two, but I will never forget the blur of events during those fateful two and half hours on what began as a beautiful, crisp autumn morning that changed our nation, our world, and Somerset County.

At about 10:10a.m. with the knowledge of the planes hitting the World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon, the Somerset County Commissioners were preparing for our bi-weekly public meeting, when we received a call from our emergency operations center. The exact words of our emergency management director were, "We have a report of a jetliner down in Buckstown. It's big. This is the real thing guys." I remember looking at the other Commissioners in stunned disbelief and saying to the speakerphone, "Our Buckstown?" The reply, "Yes, Buckstown, Pennsylvania. They think there are 400 on board."

From there, we just responded, determining shortly thereafter that there were only several dozen people on board. But we would not know until much later in the day that the crash in that remote field was linked in any way to the events in New York City and Washington, DC. We just responded.

And then, in the days to follow, came the stories from family members, telephone operators, and emergency dispatchers, about a series of phone calls that came from the individuals on that plane. And the eyewitness accounts of residents throughout Western Pennsylvania who had noticed the low flying and wavering jetliner in its final moments. Piece by piece the puzzle came together and we soon realized that the smoldering crater in an abandoned strip mine in Stonycreek Township, marked more than the scarred earth of a plane crash. It cradled the remains of individuals who exemplified the highest of human ideals. And that whether by fate or destiny, Somerset County, Pennsylvania holds a unique place in American history, linked forever to one of the most poignant and valiant acts in its pages.

We have become the caretakers of the story of these seemingly ordinary people who, unknowingly when they boarded United Airlines Flight 93 in Newark, New Jersey on that beautiful day, were to become the nation's first civilian soldiers, to fight the first battle in what we now know as the war against international terrorism. What a huge responsibility we now shoulder for not only their survivors, but for the generations who will follow.

As the enormity and reality of the events began to set into the nation, the Office of the Somerset County Commissioners was inundated with calls and donations and letters from throughout the world, imploring us to establish some type of permanent memorial to the 40 passengers and crewmembers of Flight 93. Those calls began as early as September 12th, when most of the country, most of the world, was simply trying to wrap its mind around what had happened.

There were letters from Cub Scout groups who held car washes, and children who emptied their piggy banks. One woman sent three hundred dollars she had earmarked for Christmas shopping- at the request of her children. Another wrote that enclosed in her card was the first check her 14-year old daughter had ever written, and signed it simply, "A proud mom". A senior citizen sent two dollars, "not much," she

said, but “from the heart”. Corporations called telling us that they were setting aside hundreds of thousands of dollars in endowment funds that would be available when we were ready. To date, more than one million dollars has been committed. That number reflects the unsolicited contributions, with I have no doubt, millions more available for the asking.

And then came the ideas, literally hundreds. Scribbled on the backs of napkins and scraps of paper, intricate drawings that were carefully sketched by their creators after inspirational moments or dreams. Architectural firms who commissioned professional designers and artists to produce their own renderings and offered their services free of charge.

A man named Herbert from Guatemala, who called to tell me he was having a marble plaque designed and shipped at his own expense, and asked if I could guarantee that it would be used for the memorial. I told him that I could not, but I promised I would personally see it was sent to the site and kept until further decisions were made. I did not hear from Herbert again until two months ago when he called to tell me he didn’t forget about his promise, he simply didn’t like the first plaque and had it redone, this time in green marble with gold embossed lettering. A 70-pound crate arrived in my office later that week, and was, as promised, taken to the temporary memorial. Herbert called again to see if we liked the plaque and said simply “Thank you, I needed to hear that,” when I told him it was beautiful, and then, he hung up.

What was most extraordinary though was what began to occur almost immediately near the impact site. Temporary memorials sprung up as close as people could get, even as recovery efforts continued. They brought flowers and pictures and letters, and quilts and patches and angels, even a flight attendants uniform. But they did not come to see the crash site as voyeurs; they came on more of a pilgrimage, seemingly drawn there by need. To simply get close to the place where this event occurred. As the professional historians would soon tell us, it is a phenomenon referred to as “the power of place.” They still come daily, sometimes by the hundreds, just to pay their respects and see firsthand how this story, which belongs to us all, began.

The items they bring now fill two entire rooms at the Somerset Historical Center, the home of the Historical and Genealogical Society of Somerset County which has been appointed by the County to collect, catalog and archive the artifacts that are being left behind, which, individually and collectively, have become an important part of the historic record.

Last December, in response to the groundswell of support for the creation of a permanent memorial, a Town Meeting was held in Shanksville in which those who participated identified key stakeholder groups that must be represented on the soon to be appointed Flight 93 Memorial Task Force. In addition to every family member that wishes to participate, they told us the Task Force must include representatives of the community, emergency responders, educators, veterans, and historians.

In January, the Somerset County Commissioners formally requested that Congressman John Murtha introduce legislation that would create a national memorial to the passengers and crewmembers of United Airlines Flight 93 under the auspices of the National Park Service, the nation’s curator, to ensure its proper administration long after all, who now remember, are gone.

At a meeting in February, surviving family members representing 37 of the 40 individuals who perished on Flight 93 reached strong consensus that a permanent memorial should be constructed. The location they said had been selected on September 11th, when, after the fateful struggle in the skies of Pennsylvania, their loved ones reached their final resting place. As Jennifer Price, a young woman who lost both of her parents on that plane so eloquently told those who gathered at the National Press Club last in March when the legislation was publicly announced, “It is the place where we will go to say hello and goodbye.”

House Bill 3917, The Flight 93 National Memorial Act, will ensure that the crash site of Flight 93 is held in perpetuity with the dignity and honor it deserves. The legislation provides a unique framework that will meld the grassroots input of the Flight 93 Task Force with the necessary support and oversight provided by the federal Flight 93 Advisory Commission to make a national memorial a reality. And although the

members of the Advisory Commission will be appointed by the Secretary of the Interior, the bill specifies that the appointments come from recommendations of the local Flight 93 Task Force, ensuring that the voices of the families, and the community this crash affected, remain central to the memorial process.

The crash of Flight 93 is significant to our nation's history, and its importance in no way diminishes the sacrifice of those who died at the World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon. But what happened over the skies of Western Pennsylvania was different. These forty individuals, our newest American patriots who count among their ranks nationals from Japan, Puerto Rico and Germany, fought to overtake the plane, and in so doing, gave their lives to save countless others. It is their courage that flamed the fires of freedom in the shadow of September 11th, and served to inspire a nation that needed to find its way out of the darkness.

On behalf of the community that now cradles them as its own, the county in which they find their perpetual rest, the state to which their destiny was linked and the country for which they died to defend, I respectfully ask the members of this subcommittee, and the Congress of the United States to honor these extraordinary individuals so that their sacrifice will be remembered for generations to come. Thank you.

Follow-Up Address

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