



# Strong of Heart: Life and Death in the Fire Department of New York

*Thomas Von Essen*

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*How will we ever get through this?* is the question I ask on the night of September 11. *How?*

Maybe the answer is here, all around me. Not just in the cleanup, not just in the purpose demonstrated by all who came and labored all these months.

The answer is in the enduring spirits of all assembled here. That, for me, is the miracle in all of this: having looked horror in the face, we bear the pain without losing heart.

--Thomas Von Essen

Thomas Von Essen, New York City's Thirtieth Fire Commissioner, had seen just about everything during his thirty-one-year career in the fire department: building collapses, raging infernos, heroic rescues, and power struggles. But nothing could have prepared him, or the fire department, for the devastation that occurred on September 11, 2001. In just 102 minutes, the mighty twin towers were reduced to rubble, and the Fire Department of New York had lost 343 men. Many of them were Von Essen's friends and colleagues, men whose exemplary lives had contributed mightily to his love of the department.

From his time as a young firefighter at the "Elephant House," or "La Casa del Elefante," as it was known, in the hectic South Bronx, to his embattled and controversial years as president of the Uniformed Firefighters Association, to his term as fire commissioner under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Von Essen drew lessons from his courageous peers about the value of self-sacrifice in the service of others. *Strong of Heart* is a testament to the amazing and often unsung acts of heroism that the Bravest perform every day. Von Essen recounts the inspiring story of Chief of Department Pete Ganci, who once plunged into a raging inferno to save several trapped children; how Father Mychal Judge, an FDNY chaplain, showed his deep compassion and faith again and again as he tended to the families of fallen firefighters; and how Ray Downey, the head of special operations, raced tirelessly from one emergency scene to another, to provide his expertise in every kind of disaster.

From the memories of these men and others, Von Essen drew strength and a sense of duty that helped carry him through one of the darkest periods in FDNY history. In this moving memoir, he provides an insider's look into the harrowing days after September 11, from learning about which men were missing, to working closely with mayor Giuliani and other officials in planning the countless funerals for those who made the ultimate sacrifice. He describes the daunting challenges of moving forward without some of the FDNY's most knowledgeable and beloved leaders, of trying to comfort grieving widows, and of facing criticism of the difficult decisions he and other city officials made. *Strong of Heart* is the haunting yet uplifting tale of one man's search to rise above tragedy, to begin the painful process of rebuilding, and to find hope in the legacy left behind by the great men of the Fire Department of New York.

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