

After 9/11, public 'hero' moves on to private, true heroism

By Dave Kindred

The morning of Sept. 11, football player Pat Tillman came to work at the Arizona Cardinals' training facility. That morning, like everyone else, he did no work.

For hours, Tillman watched televised reports of what the world had done to itself.

"Like everyone else, Pat was mesmerized," said Paul Jensen, the Cardinals' media-relations director. "And he was moved."

Unlike anyone else, Patrick Daniel Tillman that day began a journey last taken by professional athletes during World War II. Seven months later, at age 25, after four seasons in the National Football League, Tillman walked away from celebrity — walked away from millions of dollars — and toward a U.S. Army recruiting station. There he enlisted.

Hero's stuff, this is.

The strongest, fastest athletes have always been heroes of a kind, meeting our innate need for beauty and excellence. But if the terror of Sept. 11 taught us anything, it surely taught us the difference between heroes and real heroes.

Heroes hit 73 home runs.

Real heroes climb to the 78th floor of a skyscraper on a mission into hellfire defined by literal life-and-death boundaries: Save those people or die trying.

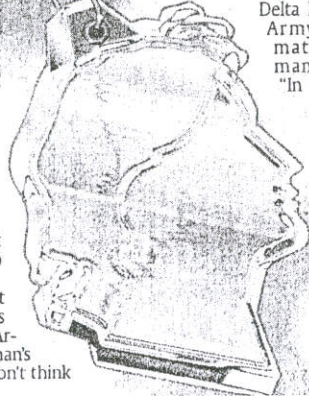
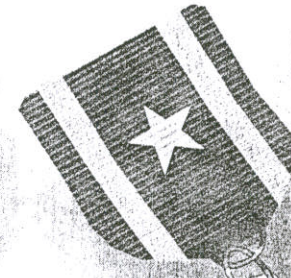
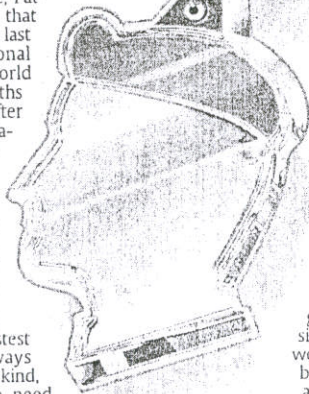
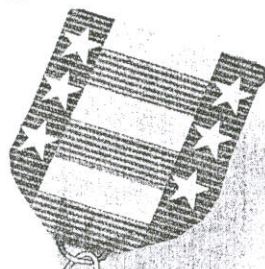
Heroes win Super Bowls.

Real heroes say, "Let's roll," and move on terrorists who would fly an airplane into the White House or the Capitol.

Heroes sign contracts for \$3.6 million to play for three years in the NFL.

A real hero makes a three-year deal with Uncle Sam for about \$350 a week and the chance to begin nine weeks of basic training in the furnace heat of summer in south Georgia, where on the second, third and fourth days of week five, he learns to handle a rifle.

The first day of that week, he had listened to the sweet imprecations of a Fort Benning drill ser-



graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy, serves four years in the Navy, some of it on the rivers of Vietnam, and then, already an aging athlete, begins a pro football career that puts him in the game's Hall of Fame.

"Like Staubach, Tillman can come back to football," says Grange's son, David L. Grange, who is himself a retired general, a Ranger and member of Delta Force, the Army's ultimate commando unit. "In this 'me,

physical and psychological tests so demanding that some candidates — sleep-deprived and disoriented in swamps and mountains — come to believe that the trees speak to them.

"Even the toughest guys fold," says James E. Shelton, a retired Army general. "But Tillman's some kind of guy. I don't think he'll fold."

giant. The sixth day, he would clamber over, around and through obstacles designed to

raise the levels of his agility, strength and resolve. At week's end came a foot march followed by collapse into a barracks bed.

That same week, Tillman's old football teammates worked in the mountain coolness of northern Arizona. Around and between four hours on the practice field, they ate kings' banquets three times a day. They slept in college dormitory rooms.

We treat our heroes well.

Real heroes treat us well.

Tillman wants to be a Ranger, one of the Army's elite, high-risk, special-operations infantrymen.

The Cardinals' defensive coordinator, Larry Marmie, says, "This is a highly motivated guy, a *summa cum laude* college graduate who has always marched to his own drummer. He's 5-11, 200 pounds, undersized even for a safety in this league. But he did it. Now, a Ranger? He'll do that, too."

It'll be a year before Tillman can apply for Ranger school, with its

me, I, I' culture, the character he's shown will give him more clout than ever."

Marmie, for one, needs no primer on Tillman's character.

Though he wanted the decision kept private until enlistment, Tillman first acted on the Cardinals' need to know: they might use the college draft to find a new safety.

So early in April at a coffee shop near the team's training facility, Tillman told Marmie he'd be leaving.

The coach said he asked the questions a surprised man might ask, the last about Sept. 11. Did that day shape Tillman's thinking?

"At first, Pat sat there," Marmie said. "Finally, he said, 'Yes, it has something to do with it.' The way he said it, I thought it had a lot to do with it."

Surely, it did.

Heroes win games.

Real heroes win our hearts.

Dave Kindred is a columnist for The Sporting News. He also is a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors.

By Suzy Parker, USA TODAY