



uncommon courage

By Robert C. Yeager

# to catch a terrorist

one mother's crusade

For Shannen Rossmiller, balancing work, community service and family life was part of her everyday existence. Then she took a night job **and became a cyberspy.**

In 1988 Shannen, cheerleader and honors student, peered over the edge of the observation deck.

Below—a heart-stopping 110 stories, or more than 1,300 feet, below—she and her fellow high-school senior trip-mates watched pedestrians crawl like insects at the base of New York's World Trade Center. To the Montana teenager the world seemed almost as small and warm as the souvenir lapel pin she clutched in her right hand—a tiny silvery replica of the Twin Towers.

More than a dozen years later, on a rainy September Tuesday in Conrad, Montana, Shannen watched in horror as clouds of black smoke billowed from those same—life-size—Twin Towers.

Someone sitting near her in the city manager's office cried. Shannen felt her stomach clench and wondered what her kids were seeing at school. Her husband, Randy, was working at their farm, nearly 30 miles outside this small town in the state's sparsely populated



Shannen Rossmiller enjoys the wide open spaces of Montana.

**FamilyCircle**

Andrew Gelger



north central region. Had he heard the news?

Shannen stared in disbelief at the small TV screen. In 1988, when her senior class visited, the Trade Center had seemed like a city unto itself. Who could guess that a structure — so tall that from its roof you could see 45 miles in any direction, so vast it contained 600,000 square feet of plate glass windows and more than 200 elevators — could collapse so quickly? Who could imagine the evil that had made it happen?

Then Shannen started crying. Like herself — as Conrad's municipal judge — many of the 9-11 victims were public servants. Many had devoted their lives to helping others. They'd done nothing to deserve their fates. They had kids, spouses, and sweethearts.

*You're 31 years old*, the slender 5-5 blonde told herself, *get a grip!* But her shoulders shook, her stomach lurched, and hot tears poured down her cheeks.

She was still having crying jags when, with Randy and their children — ages six, nine and 12\* — the family gathered that night in front of the television set. By now, they must have seen the film of the airplanes striking the towers a hundred times, Shannen thought.

"You usually have a bath to relax," Randy suggested. "Why don't you go take one now?"

Shannen was getting out of the tub when a slip changed her life.

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"You've fractured your pelvis," the doctor said the next day. For the coming six weeks, she would need to lay flat, using a walker to get to and from the bed, a living room recliner and the bathroom. She'd need several months of physical therapy. In other words, from now until New Year's, she'd more or less be an invalid.

Randy moved the recliner so she could see television. With the walker, and later a cane, she could hobble into the room he'd converted to an office — he was starting a computer business — and get on the Internet.

In the days ahead, Shannen's green eyes filled with endless repeat images of 9-11 — the planes plowing into the towers; hapless victims leaping to their deaths; police and fire personnel rushing to help; relatives carrying photos of loved ones; the grisly body search in still-smoking rubble. Just as upsetting were the stories of school kids who'd boarded the hijacked planes on a class trip, or doomed passengers using cell phones to say last goodbyes to their families.

