

NEVER FORGOTTEN

Williams was eating half a bagel at his home in Armonk, New York, about 25 miles north of the Bronx along the Connecticut border. Two days shy of his 33rd birthday, he had overcome a slow start to the season to produce another typically strong campaign. He was named to his fifth straight All-Star team, carrying a .321 average to the Midsummer Classic in Seattle, and when his ninth-inning home run cleared the wall at Fenway Park on Sept. 1, leading to a 2-1 Yankees win, it had extended a season-long hitting streak to 16 games.

Flipping through the channels after watching *SportsCenter*, Williams struggled to make sense of what he was seeing. An explosion at the World Trade Center. Reports that a plane had crashed into it. He called his family into the room. At first, he was in disbelief. But then he phoned teammate Tino Martinez, who could see the Twin Towers from his window.

“Yeah, it is [real],” Martinez told him. “It is happening.”

After seeing the first tower collapse on TV, Williams frantically started calling everybody he knew, trying to gather any information he could as to what was going on. “Then, I thought it was a replay, but it was not; it was the second tower collapsing,” Williams says. “And at that point, I was like, ‘We’re under attack.’”

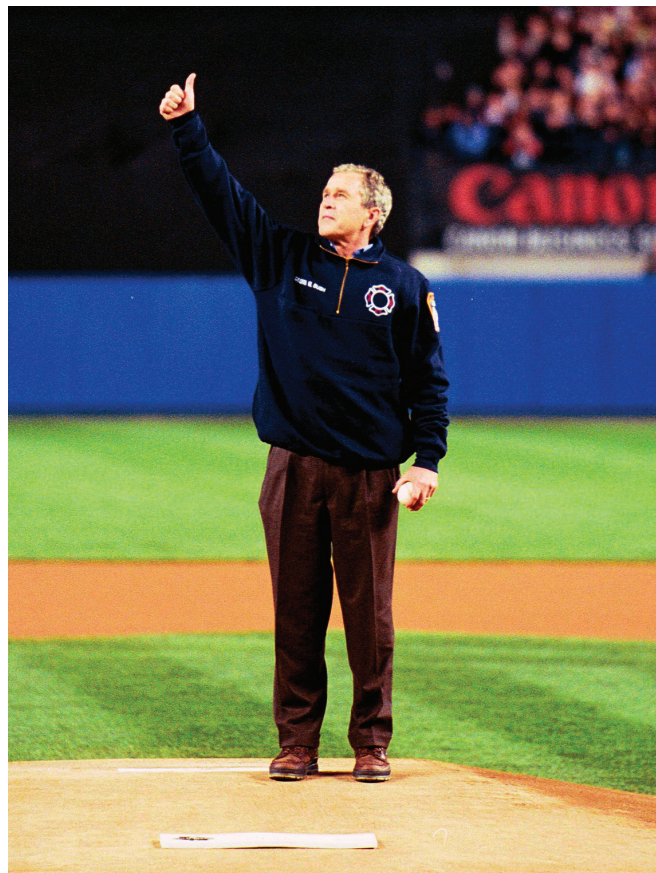
It was the single deadliest terrorist attack in human history. Almost 3,000 people were killed, including 2,763 at the World Trade Center — among them, 343 firefighters and paramedics, 23 New York City police officers and 37 Port Authority police officers attempting to evacuate and rescue civilians.

In the days that followed, shattered families searched — mostly in vain — for their missing loved ones. First responders formed bucket brigades to clear the estimated 1.8 million tons of rubble at the smoldering site dubbed Ground Zero. The hunt for those behind the attacks commenced immediately. “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them,” President Bush declared.

Baseball was the furthest thing from anyone’s mind. Between the uncertainty over additional attacks, travel restrictions, heightened security and an overall sense of unease, “My initial mindset was that we were going to cancel the whole season,” Williams says. “I just didn’t see any reason whatsoever why I would be out there playing a game and having fun while the country was going through this.”

But just as it had done six decades earlier during World War II, Major League Baseball pressed on in the hopes that it could in some way aid in the healing process. Stadiums became a gathering place for fans to be near their fellow Americans; games were a small respite from the weight of the new world everyone was living in. You didn’t have to know the person in your row to know that you were feeling the same raw emotions.

On Saturday, four days after the attacks, the Yankees gathered at the Stadium and tried to chart a course forward. They knelt in a circle in the outfield, a flag at half-staff drooping in the background, and contemplated how to resume their season in a way that was



Before Game 3 of the 2001 World Series, President George W. Bush climbed the mound at Yankee Stadium and delivered a perfect strike. After the Yankees lost the first two games of the Series in Arizona, Williams would score the winning run that night on a two-out single by Scott Brosius in the sixth inning.

respectful. In a matter of days, they would lace up their cleats and continue their pursuit of a fourth straight world championship. But would their focus ever return?

“Hopefully, our resolve is no different,” manager Joe Torre said. “I’m not sure we’ll have the same elation. You certainly feel helpless. Maybe we can lift New York’s feelings a little bit.”

Not only did they lift New Yorkers’ spirits, but the Yankees also, somehow, became America’s team. In once-hostile opposing ballparks, fans held up signs showing support for New York. Letters poured in to the Yankees, such as the one addressed to Derek Jeter from 10-year-old Brielle Saracini, whose father, Victor, was the pilot of hijacked United Flight 175. Jeter called the girl directly and invited her and her family to Yankee Stadium on Sept. 26, bringing a much-needed smile to Brielle’s face when he handed her and her sister a batting glove each as he walked out to the on-deck circle in the eighth inning, then proceeded to double down the left-field line.