



“Reclaiming the Sky” Resiliency Project- 2025 Essay Competition

**(Sponsored by SSP America, in partnership
with Airports Council Int’l -NA)**

**First Place, 2025
- Susan M Baer Award -**

Tori Carroll

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As there are many lessons to be learned throughout this book, shown through the stories told, I want to focus on one concept that has stayed with me after I finished reading. The power of quiet resilience. It doesn’t have to be loud to be heard or bold enough to be seen. Sometimes, it’s quiet, steady, and found in the everyday choices to keep going.

I’ve always related more to that kind of quiet strength, carrying a lot inside even if it is not always obvious on the outside. At times I have questioned whether that kind of presence really matters, especially when it feels overshadowed by louder or more dominant voices and actions. What this book reminded me is that it does matter. The smallest, most unassuming acts, like noticing, being present, and kind words, are often the ones that hold life together. They may not draw attention, but they leave an impact that speaks louder than we realize.

Andy Malberg, a cousin to Kenny Lewis (a flight attendant on AA FL 77,) talked about the relationship between Kenny and their grandpa, James Dowdy. James was described as not a powerful man in the world’s eyes, just a “poor dirt farmer”, but the way he carried himself spoke volumes. He was gentle, he respected people, and he never spoke badly of anyone. Because of that, others respected him. Kenny learned by simply watching him, and it shaped who he became. That story stood out to me because it proved that you do not have to be loud to have an impact. Influence does not always come from speeches or dramatic actions. Sometimes it comes from living humbly with integrity, compassion, and consistency.

Resilience, courage, service, compassion, and perseverance were the core values highlighted through these stories. Although each one matters, together they form a kind of map for how people endure hardship and find a way forward. As I read, I realized how much those values connect to the kind of life I want to live and the kind of lessons I want to pass on to my son, Boone. Like Grandpa Dowdy, I want to be the example for my son. To learn these values early on, the way Kenny did.

One day, when Boone learns about 9/11 in school, he will get the main points. The planes, the towers, the visuals shown in history books. But what he will not get from a textbook are the quieter lessons, the ones rooted in the stories Tom Murphy collected. They were not about recognition or grand gestures, but about the determination to show up, to keep working, and to keep caring for others when it would have been easier to turn away.

I think many tragedies could be looked at this way. Maybe that is the key to life. Strip away the noise and what remains is what matters most. They could not erase courage. They could not silence compassion. They could not break resilience. Those are the lessons I want Boone, and his generation, to carry. Not just the history of tragedy, but the inheritance of strength. I know the best way I can teach that is not only through words but by how I live. Quietly, steadily, leading by example.

Just like Grandpa Dowdy.

Second Place
- Ken and Jennifer Lewis Award -
Matthew Hall
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Reclaiming the Sky is unlike most books written about 9/11. It tells the human side of the tragedy through stories of gate agents, flight attendants, airline supervisors, and airport personnel who found themselves at the epicenter of the

attacks and still chose to carry on. What impacted me most wasn't just what they endured, but how they responded with humility, resolve, and quiet strength.

One story that deeply resonated with me was that of Sue Baer, who worked at Newark Airport. United Airline's Flight 93 departed from Newark. Sue Baer lost colleagues that day in the World Trade and she carried the weight of knowing the terrorists had passed through her terminal. She could have walked away, broken and overwhelmed. But instead, she returned, not because she had to, but because she felt it was right. That act of showing up when everything in you is telling you to retreat is true resilience. Her decision reminded me of my uncle, who returned to work at the Pentagon after surviving the attack there. Neither sought recognition. Both embodied a deep, quiet sense of responsibility.

That link between resilience and responsibility became one of the lessons I took from the book. In both Baer's and my uncle's stories, resilience wasn't about bouncing back instantly or pretending everything was fine. It was about making a conscious choice to face the aftermath with the integrity to keep going not for applause, but because others were counting on them.

In my own life, especially in my career, I've found that when challenges arise, reminding myself of that responsibility helps me press forward. Whether leading a team through change or supporting someone during a difficult time, I try to show up, even without all the answers. I've begun to measure strength by presence and not by perfection.

Another lesson came from Jeanette Gutierrez, a flight attendant who lost friends on 9/11. Her healing didn't follow a straight path. She wrestled with grief, fear, and survivor's guilt. But over time, she found purpose by mentoring others and speaking about mental health in aviation. Her story reminded me that healing isn't forgetting, it's transforming pain into purpose. I've learned that acknowledging emotion, not hiding it, is part of real resilience. After 9/11, I remember hearing we needed to "be strong," but no one explained how. Gutierrez helped answer that by showing that strength can mean helping others through their pain, even while carrying your own.

A third theme that stood out was community. Many aviation workers leaned on each other to make it through. They cried together, supported each other, and created spaces for grief. I saw that same spirit in my neighborhood after 9/11. People who barely spoke before were checking in on one another. Classmates cried together. Teachers showed quiet compassion. It reminded me that resilience is

something we build together. Whether managing a stressful project or helping a friend, I've come to value the strength that comes from community.

Perhaps the most lasting message from *Reclaiming the Sky* is that resilience isn't a moment but a process. It looks different for everyone. Some return to work quickly. Others need time, therapy, or spiritual guidance. What matters is choosing to move forward. The aviation workers in the book weren't famous. They didn't wear capes. But they kept our country moving when the skies were literally grounded. That, to me, is heroism.

This book gave me a deeper appreciation for the quiet, lasting strength of everyday people. Their stories have become a guide for how I want to live: showing up, staying grounded in purpose, and leaning on others when the weight feels too heavy to carry alone.

Third Place
- Marianne MacFarlane/Jesus Sanchez Award -
Allison Gilbert
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Metropolitan Airports Commission
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The tragic attacks on 9/11 have shaped the aviation culture and brought people together. While I was still young when 9/11 happened, I can still recall the impact of that day, and the incredible unity that followed. Across the country, people came together to support one another in ways that still inspire me today.

Reading *Reclaiming the Sky* by Tom Murphy is filled with powerful stories of resilience, courage, and quiet heroism from aviation professionals who stood strong during and after that tragic day. From leaders like Susan Baer to bold decision-makers like Ben Sliney, these stories show how we can lead with compassion, courage, and purpose in times of adversity and how they had bravery and compassion, without clear direction or certainty.

They weren't just doing their jobs; they were holding each other up and helping many people in crisis or need in these hard times. They adapted, supported one another, and found strength in their shared purpose.

It reminded me that resilience in HR isn't about bouncing back, it's about helping people rise in the face of adversity. It's about being present, adaptable, and human in the moments that matter most. Just as these aviation professionals demonstrate emotional intelligence under pressure, we need leaders today who don't just manage performance but lead with presence and compassion. I'm building programs that train managers to listen deeply, check in consistently, and support their teams not just when it's easy, but especially when it's not.

One of the most impactful lessons for me came from Susan Baer, the former General Manager of Newark Airport. In the wake of 9/11, Baer said: *"When you are hurting, look for something you can do for someone else, no matter how small—and do it. That will move you forward."*

That mindset is something I strive to embody in my day-to-day HR practice. Whether it's helping someone navigate a tough career decision, implementing wellness initiatives, or simply creating space where people feel seen and supported, I believe service is a path to healing. In high-stakes environments like aviation, where stress and pressure are constant, small acts of compassion go a long way in keeping people grounded and resilient. In this moment, Baer illustrates not only a way to help others but a mechanism for healing oneself. Promoting this culture has helped my teams and I stay resilient during industry disruptions, labor challenges, and personal hardships.

Another core lesson from *Reclaiming the Sky* is what Murphy refers to as "soldiering on," the idea of pressing forward with resolve even when one's emotional resources feel depleted.

This theme is evident in the countless aviation professionals who returned to work just days after the attacks, knowing that their presence, competence, and leadership were essential to restoring public confidence in air travel. As someone responsible for workforce morale and productivity, I have often reflected on this concept during difficult times. The idea of "soldiering on" reminded me that showing up, consistently and compassionately, can itself be an act of leadership. I saw this firsthand while working in HR at a hospital during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During this time, it was my role to help frontline staff navigate burnout, fear, and constant change. Like many others, I didn't always have the answers, but I learned that showing up consistency and with empathy was itself a powerful form of leadership. Today, I carry that lesson with me as I support teams in staying resilient through industry disruptions, labor challenges, and personal hardship.

The book also highlights the extraordinary courage of people who were, in many ways, ordinary professionals. Ben Sliney, the FAA National Operations Manager on 9/11, made the bold decision to ground all flights in U.S. airspace, a decision that undoubtedly saved lives. His ability to act decisively under pressure is a compelling example of leadership in crisis. As an HR professional, I take this as a call to recognize and empower leadership at all levels. I've prioritized developing decision-making skills and emotional intelligence in emerging leaders within my organization. By fostering environments where team members feel confident stepping into difficult situations, we build a more resilient workforce, capable of navigating both expected and unforeseen challenges.

Resilience isn't just about recovery, it's about rising. In HR, we are often the first to respond to personal crises, organizational change, and collective trauma. *Reclaiming the Sky* reminded me that resilience lives in human connection, purposeful service, and steady leadership. By helping others, showing up with heart, and preparing people to lead, my role is to not just keep operations moving, but to strengthen the soul of the organization.

This book not just a great tribute to the heroes of 9/11, it is also a call to action. A call to action for anyone who wants to lead with empathy and purpose, especially in high-pressure, high-impact industries like ours. In honoring their legacy, we build something lasting: workplaces rooted in humanity, resilience and hope.

*For full details on this resiliency program, visit ReclaimingTheSky.com.
Contact Tom Murphy at Tom@Edge4Vets.org*

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