

A TRIBUTE TO ARLAND D. WILLIAMS JR.

I am indebted to Trey Gowdy for focusing attention on the heroism of this uncommon man. On January 13, 1982 Air Florida Flight 90 took off from Washington National Airport and crashed into the 14th Street Bridge. Four motorists were killed on the bridge. The plane then continued into the icy Potomac River. Only six of the 79 people on board survived the initial crash. They could not last long, however, in the freezing waters of the ice choked river. Arland Williams was one of the six survivors.

Thankfully a U.S. Park Police helicopter arrived as soon as possible. According to the five survivors Arland took the rescue line in his hands, but repeatedly passed it to others. After transporting two victims to the shore one at a time, they attempted to use two lines and haul three victims at the same time. Two of the three fell back into the icy waters.

As fatigue set in, one of the survivors was too weak to grab the line again, so bystander Lenny Skutnik, stripped off his coat and boots, and dove into the icy waters to help. Paramedic Gene Windsor stood on the skid of the helicopter with no safety harness and hoisted one woman out of the water by her clothing. The additional weight caused the skid and passengers to temporarily dip into the river. Pilot Don Usher quickly corrected and transferred the freezing woman to safety.

Now five of the six victims were safely on shore, but when the helicopter returned for Arland he had succumbed to fatigue and cold and drowned. One minister of the Gospel later observed: *“His heroism was not rash. Aware that his own strength was fading, he deliberately handed hope to someone else, and he did so repeatedly. On that cold and tragic day, Arland D. Williams Jr. exemplified one of the best attributes of human nature, specifically that some people are capable of doing ‘anything’ for total strangers.”*

Gowdy made his emotional reference to Arland D. Williams Jr. while lecturing at Liberty University. As a congressman he made many trips to Washington D.C. but said that instead of focusing on famous politicians whose pictures and statues abound in our nation’s capital, his mind repeatedly returned to this common man with uncommon courage. We salute Trey Gowdy for remembering.

While Thomas Paine appreciated the service of powerful leaders like George Washington, he recognized that victory could never be achieved without the selfless sacrifice of brave men and women who remain anonymous. He wrote this following tribute to heroes whose names and faces have long been forgotten: *“These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated”*.

While no one knows the exact number, astronomers estimate that there are a septillion stars in the universe. That’s a one with 24 zeros. This means that there are more stars in the heavens than there are grains of sand on the earth. God, however, not only numbers the stars but has given to every star a name (Ps. 147:4) This means that no person is nameless or faceless to God. The heavens declare the “glory” of God (Ps. 19:1) but only man is created in the “image” of God (Gen. 1:26). Everyone on earth is therefore very important to God. God not only knows your name but has determined the exact place where you should live (Acts 17:26). No one created in God’s image is obscure or unknown to God. Recognizing this truth adds a new dimension to every life.

History books invariably highlight the lives of famous world leaders who are not mentioned one time in the Bible. The Bible, by contrast, highlights the lives of common people who are never mentioned in secular history. Jesus, for example, made famous a poor widow who gave only two small coins to God (Mk. 12:41-44). We can therefore be confident that not only does Trey Gowdy remember Arland D. Williams Jr., but God remembers him too! Furthermore, neither will your work of faith, labor of love, and endurance inspired by hope be forgotten by God either (1 Thess. 1:3).