

Instant Hero

Blaine Harden from the **Washington Post**

5 On January 13, 1982, Air Florida Flight 90 struck the 14th Street Bridge after taking off from Washington, D.C.'s National Airport and plunged into the icy Potomac River, killing seventy-eight people. Hundreds of commuters, heading home early because of a rare Washington blizzard, stood on the river's banks and watched the torturous rescue attempts. Lenny Skutnik was one who suddenly stopped being a bystander and went into the river to save a life. "Nobody else was doing anything," he later said. "It was the only way."

Lenny Skutnik, who dove into the ice-choked Potomac River Wednesday to save the life of a drowning woman following the jetliner crash in the Potomac, has had little experience in the hero 'business.

10 Skutnik, twenty-eight, whose full name is Martin Leonard Skutnik III, is experienced in less exalted matters. He's been a meatpacker, house painter, furniture-plant worker, hamburger cook, and strip-and-wax man at Ralph's supermarket in Simi Valley, California.

15 Skutnik now works for the Congressional Budget Office, where he runs errands, delivers mail, and makes \$14,000 a year. A big night out, Skutnik says, is taking his wife, Linda, and their two sons to Brothers Pizza near their \$325-a-month rented town house in Lorton, Virginia. "Every once in a while we'll close our eyes and blow a couple of bucks," he says.

20 The only other time in his life that he had a chance to be a hero, Skutnik says, he flubbed it. He was anchoring a relay team in a high school race and he could have won the race, but he pooped out and stopped. The coach yelled at him: "You quit, Skutnik. You quit."

25 Late Wednesday afternoon, as one of hundreds of homeward-bound commuters drawn to the banks of the Potomac by the crash of Air Florida Flight 90, Skutnik, who's never taken a life-saving course, saved a woman who was too weak to grasp rescue rings lowered from a hovering helicopter. Television spread pictures of his valor to the nation.

30 President Reagan, in a speech yesterday in New York, spoke of Skutnik's bravery: "Nothing had picked him out particularly to be a hero, but without hesitation there he was and he saved her life."

Interviewed yesterday at his home twenty miles south of the 14th Street bridge, Skutnik could offer no fancy explanations for risking his life. "Nobody else was doing anything," he said. "It was the only way."

35 The woman Skutnik rescued apparently was Priscilla Tirado, whose husband and infant son perished in the crash. Skutnik was sure yesterday he had rescued Kelly Duncan, an Air Florida stewardess, because a woman who identified herself as Duncan's roommate called from Florida to thank him. However, an Air Florida official said last night she had talked to Duncan, who remembers being pulled to shore by a helicopter. Tirado's father said family members recognized his daughter on television
40 as the one Skutnik pulled to safety.

After the rescue, as he waited in an ambulance that had run out of blankets,

Skutnik gave his coat to Joseph Stiley, a survivor of the crash who had two broken legs and was shivering. Shirtless and shivering himself, Skutnik, who lost his watch and a cap in the river, was taken to National Hospital for Orthopedics and Rehabilitation in
45 Arlington for treatment of hypothermia. He didn't want to go.

"I'd heard all these horror stories about hospitals and all the forms. The first thing I said when I got there was, 'Is this going to cost me anything?' "said Skutnik, who's described by his colleagues at CBO as an exemplary worker.

50 He was dispatched, free of charge, to a hot tub in the hospital to soak for forty minutes and warm up. When Skutnik got out of the tub, he faced reporters - scores of them, frenzied and facing deadlines. They pushed and shoved to ask him what "it felt like." He had never met a reporter before. He told his story again and again.

55 Skutnik's instant celebrity began Wednesday afternoon near the 14th Street bridge when traffic in the express lane he was car-pooling home in came to an abrupt stop. Skutnik followed scores of stalled commuters down to the river, where there was a rumor that someone had been hurt. He said he didn't hear the metallic crash of the plane.

60 From the shore, Skutnik said he saw the partially submerged plane with a half dozen passengers clinging to it. He saw one spectator tie a rope around his waist and attempt a rescue.

The man who tried to swim out to the wreckage was Roger Olian, thirty-four, a sheet metal worker from Arlington, who was drawn to the accident after getting caught in traffic near the bridge on his way home from work.

65 "I went in with a makeshift rope that kept getting stuck on the ice," Olian said yesterday. "I was about five feet from the plane when the helicopters arrived. But by then [he'd been in the water more than fifteen minutes] I'd just about had it. I nearly sank, but they pulled me in."

70 Later, when it became obvious that a helicopter could not save the drowning woman, Skutnik said he didn't have any profound thoughts. "I just did it," he said. "When I got out of the water, I was satisfied. I did what I set out to do."

Word Count: 890 Flesch-Kincaid Score: 9.0

Taken from: Bennett, William J. *The Book of Virtues*, Simon and Schuster, 1993, page 505-507.

Vocabulary Check

1. commuter(s), line 3 – regular traveler, from home to work
2. exalt(ed), line 11 – praise, acclaim, pay tribute to, sing the praises of
3. perish(ed), line 35 – die; to die, for example, because of harsh conditions or accident
4. hypothermia, line 45 – dangerously low body temperature caused by prolonged exposure to cold
5. exemplary, line 48 – excellent, ideal, commendable, perfect; setting an example so good or admirable that others would do well to copy it
6. dispatch(ed), line 49 – send somebody away to do something, to instruct somebody to go somewhere to carry out a task; to send something off, for example, a letter or package to a particular destination

- 7. frenzy, (frenzied), line 51 – agitation, fury, passion; out-of-control behavior, burst of energetic activity
- 8. abrupt, line 54 – sudden and unexpected, rushed, quick
- 9. profound, line 69 – deep, philosophical, insightful; showing great perception, understanding, or knowledge

Extended Response Question:

What motives do you think Blaine Harden had when he wrote this article? What words and details from the article lead you to this conclusion?

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