



Bingham, Mark (1970-2001)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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Mark Bingham, San Francisco businessman and rugby enthusiast, is believed to have participated in the attempt to retake control of United Airlines Flight 93 on September 11, 2001. While details of that event can never be known for certain, e-mail records and personal testimonies provide a substantial account of Bingham's life and character and they corroborate the likelihood of his heroism.

He was born Gerald Kendall Bingham in Phoenix, Arizona on May 22, 1970. His parents separated shortly afterward and his mother, Alice Hoagland, struggled to support the two of them. After eight years in Miami, they arrived in northern California with little money. At one point they lived out of Hoagland's car.

During these times of adversity, mother and son developed a close bond. When he was ten, she let him rename himself. He chose to be Mark.

By the time Mark started middle school, he and his mother had settled into a cabin near Los Gatos, California. Eventually, Hoglan landed a career as a flight attendant. In his early teens Mark was more interested in Dungeons and Dragons than sports, but in high school he blossomed into physical and social confidence when he went out for rugby.

With growing self-assurance, Bingham entered the University of California, Berkeley in 1989 as a psychology major. He was elected president of his Chi Psi fraternity chapter. He became an exuberant partygoer, fond of college pranks, pickup basketball, social drinking, and camaraderie. An accomplished jock, Bingham, 6'5 " tall and weighing 220 pounds, excelled in rugby, helping the Berkeley rugby club win national championships in 1991 and 1993.

Having sensed his attraction to other males since he was 12, Bingham in college also began a cautious exploration of his gayness. Robustly masculine, he eventually found reinforcement for his identity within the bear subculture.

Unwilling to lead a secretive double life, Bingham began coming out, first to his mother and then to his buddies, impelling all of them to reevaluate their notions about homosexuality.

Bingham had a series of three primary relationships, the longest being six years with businessman Paul Holm, who afterward remained a close friend. He continued playing rugby and in 2000 helped inaugurate a gay-friendly amateur team, the San Francisco Fog.

After college, Bingham worked in public relations and in 1999 started his own firm, The Bingham Group, designing promotional campaigns for San Francisco high-tech companies. The dotcom boom enabled a jet-setting lifestyle made all the more attractive by memories of hard times as a child.

A gregarious traveler, Bingham acquired friends wherever he went. They frequently described him as "larger than life" and "a big whirlwind of fun." In July 2001, his spirit of adventure induced him to don a red

bandana and run with the bulls at the legendary *Encierro* festival in Pamplona, Spain--not once, but twice.

On September 11, 2001 Bingham was the last passenger to board his flight in Newark. What we know about subsequent events comes from cockpit recordings and passengers' calls to loved ones. Mark called his mother twice to convey his love. From those conversations it is clear that he was aware of the other collisions and hijackings that day.

Bingham's mother and friends are certain of his involvement in the struggle against the hijackers, and cite numerous examples of his gumption. Once, unarmed, he fought off two muggers, one of whom had a gun. On another occasion he waded into a bar brawl to help a waiter beset by rowdies. Many recall his protectiveness, his physicality, and his love of being in the action. As seatmate of passenger Tom Burnett, whose call home confirmed a plan in progress, he would have been well situated to participate.

At any rate, almost certainly due to the passengers' opposition, the hijackers failed to slam Flight 93 into a populated landmark. The hijackers' target may have been the U.S. Capitol or the White House. At 10:06 a. m. the plane crashed in an empty field in Somerset County, Pennsylvania. There were no survivors.

Post-9/11 conspiracy theorists have claimed that the government shot down the plane, but these speculations have been credibly rebuffed. Records indicate that NORAD--the North American Aerospace Defense Command, the binational U.S.-Canadian defense group charged with monitoring North American airspace--did not get word of Flight 93's situation until after it crashed, and the debris pattern was consistent with a craft that was still intact upon impact with the ground.

Flight 93's fate has inspired several film and television reenactments. Because these depictions of individual heroism relied heavily on ex post facto assertions from passengers' families and friends regarding their loved ones' composure under duress, the media were accused of engaging in mythmaking at a time when the nation hungered for any kind of positive imagery surrounding the day's horrendous events.

Their portrayal of Bingham as a courageous gay man certainly nourished the gay community's need for heroes as well.

But these discussions, though important and unavoidable, overlook a much more profound aspect of Bingham's contribution to the national dialogue.

At 31, Bingham had reached a turning point. He and friend Amanda Mark had discussed a mutual desire to create a meaningful legacy, and writing was an option he found appealing. His response to a 1989 personals ad now reads as an insightful reflection on the necessity and risks of coming out. Correspondence with a friend doing volunteer youth work in Africa also reveals a fervent desire for a vocation of service.

A lengthy e-mail message to his rugby teammates could serve as a model of encouragement to all underdog contenders. In this message, he recalled the fears of rejection he had when he first began playing rugby, and then added, "As we worked and sweated and ran and talked together this year, I finally felt accepted as a gay man and a rugby player. My two irreconcilable worlds came together."

All of these communications are preserved in the 2002 biography by Jon Barrett. Because Bingham expressed these views with stunning clarity, they leave us a poignant and inspirational testament of an examined, if tragically shortened, life.

Bingham's mother has emerged as an articulate advocate and public speaker for airline safety, glbtq equality, and inclusiveness. At the time of the hijacking Bingham was returning to California to participate in a Muslim friend's wedding, a point Alice Hoagland emphasized when responding to anti-Muslim sentiments

in the wake of 9/11.

Bingham is the subject of Melissa Etheridge's song "Tuesday Morning" (on her cd *Lucky*, 2004).

Friends and colleagues of Bingham have established the Mark Bingham Leadership Fund to provide University of California, Berkeley tuition and expenses to young men and women who reflect Bingham's qualities of leadership, scholarship, and sociability. The University of California, Berkeley Alumni Association has also established an award to memorialize Bingham. The City of San Francisco renamed the gym at the Eureka Valley Recreation Center in Bingham's honor. The International Gay Rugby Association has honored Bingham's memory by naming its biennial tournament the Bingham Cup.

Many of the friends who carry Mark Bingham's torch in 9/11 memorials and scholarship fundraising come from his once "irreconcilable" worlds of sports jocks and fraternity brothers, on the one hand, and gay friends and partners on the other. Such a feat of amity is a true hero's legacy.

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About the Author

Ruth M. Pettis is the Oral History Project manager for the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project in Seattle and editor of *Mosaic 1: Life Stories*, a collection of stories from the project's oral history collection. She has contributed articles and fiction to a number of gay and women's publications. She has an A.B. in anthropology from Indiana University and an M.L.S. from Simmons College in Boston.