

Brother-in-arms to yesterday's heroes

If the spirit of a missing hero can go to war, then Firefighter David Fontana was whooshing with our armed forces through the Afghan night.

"He would probably sign up," his wife, Marian Fontana, said yesterday. "I think he really would have loved the fervor of the country right now. He was just very passionate about the flag."

Fontana was the nephew of a soldier killed in the Battle of the Bulge, and he had made it his mission to honor the 33 New York City firefighters who died in combat during World War II. He spent at least two years digging through military archives, tracking down veterans and contacting relatives.

"He just thought they should be remembered," Marian Fontana said.

Last March, David Fontana organized a firehouse ceremony to honor two firefighters who had worked at Ladder 122 in South Brooklyn before heading off to fight the Nazis.

Eugene Steffens had been a co-pilot with the 838th Squadron of the Army Air Corps. Fontana had even managed to locate men who had been flying alongside Steffens on Aug. 5, 1944, when his B-17G bomber exploded during a raid on an aircraft factory in Magdeburg, Germany.

John Leary had been a first lieutenant

with the 17th Airborne Division. Fontana established the smallest details of Leary's bravery, interviewing soldiers who had been in the 11-man patrol he had volunteered to lead across a river into Germany on Feb. 8, 1945.

Leary had been wounded and, like a true New York City fireman, he had insisted on staying behind to cover his men while they retreated. He was listed as missing for five years, when a German farmer notified authorities that he had found some dog tags.

Fontana also managed to track down Leary's family members, and he invited them to the memorial. Leary's daughter, Carolyn, expected only a brief, modest ceremony. She arrived to see a huge crowd at the firehouse where her father had long ago sat her on the bumper of the rig.

Like family

Then, from out of the throng came big, smiling David Fontana.

"I said, 'You're an incredible person, you're just a wonder man. What possessed you to do this?'" Leary recalled. "He said he just had to do it. He felt my father hadn't gotten the recognition."

This fireman she had never seen before

seemed like family.

"I said to myself, 'This guy is related to me somehow,' the spirit he had," she remembered.

Afterward, Leary was unsure how to thank Fontana. She finally decided to send him a Waterford clock.

"Let this serve as a reminder of the time you gave to all of us to get to know our father and celebrate his deeds," Leary wrote in the accompanying letter.

Leary tried to convey exactly what Fontana's efforts had meant:

"Dave, I was a baby when my father was killed and never mourned his loss. My brother and I never knew him. Of course, there were times I wept because I did not have a father. Making Father's Day cards was never part of my experience, and in high school the father-daughter dance was very painful.

"You gave me the chance to mourn the loss of a great man, and for this I am eternally grateful. You gave my brother and I the opportunity to rejoice in the memory of a hero. We learned things about his death that we never knew, and you gave us a chance to get to know him through his heroism."

Fontana and his wife both cried when

they read the letter. He continued to research the heroism of other soldier-firefighters, and he made sure not to miss the premiere of "Band of Brothers" on television.

He answers call

The next morning, Fontana left his wife and their five year-old son Aidan to work a 24-hour shift at Squad 1. He was just coming off duty and preparing to join her in celebrating their eighth anniversary when the first plane flew into the World Trade Center.

Fontana hopped on the rig and rode off, as brave as any soldier ever was. Word that he was missing reached Leary through a nephew who is a Fire Department EMS worker. Leary wrote a second letter, this one to Marian Fontana.

"I am convinced that Dave was welcomed in heaven by my father. . . . I am also convinced that he is safe and being cared for with great dignity."

Fontana was still missing yesterday, when word came that our armed forces had begun to strike back against those who had murdered thousands in downtown Manhattan. We can be sure that the kindred spirits of Firefighters David Fontana and John Leary are riding with our pilots, soldiers and sailors.

"We've got to show them what we're made of," Carolyn Leary said.

