

Interview With An Unlikely Hero

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NEW YORK - Meeting the late Thomas Burnett Jr. last Friday, I would not have marked him down as a hero. Thoratec's chief operating officer was just another of the many executives who insist on stopping by *Forbes'* Los Angeles bureau to rhapsodize about their products in hopes of getting some ink. In his case, Burnett was here to tout the company's primary product, a ventricular-assisted device used to replace heart valves in congestive heart failure patients.

As it turns out, Burnett, 38, has emerged as one of early heroes in Tuesday's catastrophic terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Before the hijacked United Airlines Flight 93 made its deadly plunge into an empty field near Pittsburgh, he reportedly called his wife four times. During the last call he made before perishing with 45 other passengers and crew members, Burnett said that he and several others would try to overpower the hijackers and avert more carnage. They succeeded, but at the cost of their lives.

But that early Friday morning, sitting in a conference room with Thoratec Chief Executive Officer D. Keith Grossman and a company spokeswoman, Burnett didn't appear to be a man of action.

He was certainly affable in a Midwestern sort of way: Along with Grossman, Burnett spent most of the time answering questions about inventories, amortizing the cost of their recent merger and shrinking the size of the bulky titanium devices. He even handed me one, and after I mentioned that I should have cleaned my hands, he joked that he'd clean it off and place it into a patient anyways.



Thomas Burnett Jr.

Grossman, who was Burnett's friend since working together at another Irvine, Calif., medical-device maker 14 years ago, knew a different man. During a conference call after the plane crash, Grossman described Burnett as a "patriot," a hunter and military history buff who died with "honor, principle and dignity." Grossman related that Burnett admired the Founding Fathers; his office was lined with busts of Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt and Winston Churchill.

When I told the little contingent that they had only 20 minutes to make their case, Burnett joked that "we'll start with ten minutes and you can kick us out after that if you want." To save time, Burnett and Grossman skipped the PowerPoint slides and spent most of the meeting explaining why they thought they had a competitive advantage in their niche of the medical-devices business. They were gone 30 minutes later. Burnett, jovial and athletic looking, left little of a lasting impression otherwise.

Afterward, I went back to my office to help close another edition of *Forbes* magazine. Burnett would later board several planes on a scheduled business trip: first to Minneapolis, next to Edison, N.J., to meet with an executive at a newly acquired division. He then caught an early flight out of Newark, N.J., so he could go home to his wife and three young children.

Ironically, Burnett joked that he was often stopped at airport security every time he carried his curious products with him. But it's now become apparent that the metal detectors on Burnett's final flight never caught the box cutters and knives that the terrorists reportedly brought on board.