

A Giant cause

Martin walks for Ground Zero victims; Fine 15, more

Posted: Monday December 17, 2007 9:44AM; Updated: Monday December 17, 2007 1:55PM

BRUCETON, Tenn. -- "Ladies and gentleman," the Northwest flight attendant intoned last Wednesday evening, "our scheduled flight time from New York to Memphis today is two hours and 39 minutes. And if you're one of our valued WorldPerks members, you'll be credited with 986 miles for this flight."

That's when it hit me: My God, **George Martin** has walked this. All of it.

You may remember Martin as a 14-year New York Giant, an athletic defensive end who had a few moments of fame, including his sack of **John Elway** just before halftime of Super Bowl XXI; the safety started the G-men on a run of 26 unanswered points that opened the door to a 39-20 win. Martin is doing something slightly more important now.

I'm taking a detour from the games and the stars (and I promise, **Jamal Lewis'** resurgence and piling onto **Bobby Petrino**, and the Dolphins breaking the schneid and other news of the day is coming) to start the column this week with a message from the real world, way out here in rural west Tennessee.



Peter King, right, joins former New York Giants DE George Martin, left, for a portion of Martin's 3,300-mile walk to raise money for first-responders to Ground Zero.

Rahul Rohatgi

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Martin began walking from New York to San Francisco in September, and on Thursday, with me and an HBO crew in tow, he walked the 1,000th mile of his trip just outside this little town. (You can see a profile of Martin's walk Wednesday night on HBO's *Inside the NFL* show. You can even see me keeping up with him for all of Thursday's 18 miles. And let me tell you, the man can walk.)

Martin is walking to raise money and awareness for the mental and physical health problems that first-responders to the terrorist attacks at Ground Zero have suffered. Martin has raised \$1.5 million of his \$10 million goal; matching donors at three New York-area hospitals will boost the count to \$3 million. Approximately 40,000 firefighters, police, EMS and volunteers have been affected by the inhalation of toxic contaminants from the pulverized buildings -- and have contracted lung disease and even cancer -- because most worked without protective masks. Even worse, some of those workers don't have health insurance, and a majority have inadequate health insurance to deal with the onslaught of new treatments they must use to stave off disease. At least eight first-responder deaths, including one of a nun, have been directly connected to Ground-Zero poisoning.

"Have you watched film of that day?" Martin asked when we met on this morning. "Watch the scenes of all the people running from the site. Thousands of them. Then watch the people who are actually running toward the site, and watch the firefighters running into the buildings.

"It astounds me. It's so counter-intuitive. But have we forgotten the events of that horrible day? Have we grown tired of the aftermath? If so, shame on us. When the first fatality came, it barely caused a whimper in the media. But I was touched deeply."

He had to do something. But what? Run a golf tournament to raise money for the second wave of 9/11 victims? A banquet?

I covered Martin late in his Giants career. The lithe defensive end was 32 when I met him, and the most mature man in the locker room. Some young teammates called him Pops. He was the cool head. **Bill Parcels** always thought if he coached one player who was going to save the world, it would be Martin. He started to, with the Giants, partnering with Fairleigh Dickinson University to get players to earn the degrees they never did at their original colleges; 16 teammates completed their schoolwork because of that program. The son of a South Carolina sharecropper, he lived the first 12 years of his life with a heavy sense of wanderlust tied to a 25-acre plot of ground; the family later moved to California, and he was a basketball and football player at Oregon before getting drafted by the Giants in 1975.

"I was an impressionable kid," he said. "I grew up in the time of the Kennedys. And I was really struck by two things they said. President Kennedy said, 'Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.' Bobby said, 'Some men see things as they are and say why? I dream of things that never were and say why not.' I met people, healthy people in their 40s and 50s, who can't walk up stairs anymore, who have to decide whether to spend the money they have on medicine or food but sometimes not both. If I didn't do something to help this issue, then I wasn't the man I thought I was."

These people need money, Martin thought, and not just \$200,000. They need big money. He thought, "I've got to do something big" and then, "This country needs to be reminded of the suffering of these heroes, and we've got to urge those in government to not forget them."

So he took a leave from his job as a vice president at AXA Equitable in New York to walk 3,300 miles -- from the George Washington Bridge to the Golden Gate Bridge, via the southern route because he'd be walking in the fall and winter. He decided he would do every interview, talk to everyone he met along the way about the issue, and stop at schools to spread the word. In essence, he set out to do something Kennedyesque.

Which brings us to Tennessee last Thursday. We started in Camden, in Benton County, on state highway 641 south just outside the Faith Christian Fellowship Church, on day 56 of his walk (he has taken some days off for personal events, like his son's wedding).

There was nothing momentous about our walk. We just walked, the two of us, and talked. "If I wrote a book about this," he said, "I'd have a chapter called 'Road Kill.' I've seen it all out here. Deer, possum, armadillo, snakes, squirrel, skunk. In Virginia, we were walking and all of a sudden out of the brush ahead of us comes this giant thing. It just wanders into the middle of the road. We get close enough to see it, and it's a hog. A 400-, 450-pound hog. Traffic stops. An 18-wheeler has to brake to stop from hitting it. The thing just sniffs the air for a while, doesn't smell anything like food, and goes back where it came from."

That was the conversation much of the day. Anything goes. Ten times he found some reason to come back to the cause. "The people have been amazing," he said. "The heartland is amazing. I'm walking one day, and an 18-wheeler stops and pulls over and the driver leans out and says, 'You're George Martin.' I said, 'Yes I am, sir.' He says, 'I heard about what you're doing. Do you take donations?' And he gives me one right there. A couple of days ago, a pickup pulls over and the guy gets out, tells me how proud he is



George Martin missed just six non-strike games in his 14-year NFL career.
Al Messerschmidt/WireImage

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of what I'm doing and gives me \$20. A while later, the same guy comes back -- I guess he was ashamed of his original donation -- and gives me \$100 more. These people understand sacrifice, and they don't forget what makes this country great."

This is how much we walk: A reporter from a paper in Benton County pulls over on the side of the road a mile into the morning's walk, just after we turn onto U.S. 70, and asks Martin what he's doing. That afternoon, around 4, a reporter from the next county's paper, in Carroll County, is waiting by the side of the road where another impromptu interview happens.

He talks about the impact of Bill Parcells a lot. "Every day I think about him, and about the lessons he taught me about so many things," Martin said. "Sometimes I'll be out here on the road and he'll call me. The other day he called and said, 'Hey Martin, you gotta get out of Tennessee! Winter's coming.' Bill's been great. He's the one who made the donation that got us over \$1 million."

Parcells gave \$10,000. **Jim Fassel** and **Mark Bavaro** have also given.

At one point on this 41-degree, raw, slate-gray day, Martin and I walk for at least four miles without seeing any man-made structures. We're walking through the woods, on a ribbon of asphalt. For an hour. And Martin loves it. "I haven't regretted the decision once. Not one time," he said. "I really consider it a blessing." And his health is good. It's amazing, but he has no strains, no sore back, nothing.

Martin travels with a medical technician to make sure that he's properly hydrated, a former New York City cop who walks with him and provides security, and an advance man to help with publicity and the scouting of the routes. On this day, **Lee Reeves**, the advance man, has arranged for Martin to meet the police, fire and EMS workers in Bruceton (pop. 1,554), a railroad burg on the Big Sandy River, then to speak an impromptu school assembly at the K-12 school in town.

The school principal has downloaded Martin's theme song, "Walk a Mile in My Shoes," and it's playing when he walks into the gym. When Martin takes the mike, you can tell he's done this before. He tells the kids people have called him a hero, but he never saved anyone's life or taught classes how to read. Those are the heroes, he tells the kids.

And he has the kids give ovations to the police and fire and EMS workers, and another one to the teachers. The kids are rapt. And he tells them why he's making the walk, to help people like the ones who protect them every day.

Then he takes the police, fire and EMS folks out to lunch at a Mexican place. He's in no hurry. The mayor comes by to say hello. By 2:15, he's stretching again, then back on the road, where he sees an Amish family clip-clop by in their horse-and-buggy. "I don't know there were Amish people here," he said. "You find out a lot you didn't know by taking this walk."

Late in the afternoon, we pass a little ranch home, well-kept, with a pond in the front yard and a swing set on the side of the house. Martin stops on the side of the road and motions to the house. "See, something like this, it's beautiful," he said. "I've seen places like this a thousand times on this trip, but never one exactly like this. It's all new to me. I love it."

Martin is looking for a hotel sponsor, to house his small crew along the way. He's looking for a gas sponsor for his two support vehicles. I asked Martin how the people who read this column could help his cause.

"People are in awe of the feat, of someone walking from New York to California," he said. "But that doesn't help us achieve our objective. Tell people to go to ajourneyfor911.info and please help the people who put their lives on the line for us --and are paying so dearly for it now."

'Tis the season.

If you believe in what Martin is doing, or if you love where you live, or both, ajourneyfor911.info should be your first stop today. Click on the donate bar. One man can make a difference. And you can help him prove it.