

## A Product of Patriotism

An Interview with Bill White,  
President, Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum

**EDITORS' NOTE** Bill White also serves as President of the Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund. In March 1991, White established Operation Support, a volunteer charitable organization that raised more than \$400,000 for the families of military personnel killed in the Persian Gulf War. White came to the Intrepid in 1992, before which he worked in the family restaurant and real estate business. White obtained his B.A. from Fordham University, and he holds a culinary arts degree from



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The French Culinary Institute. He is a member of the board of trustees of the Intrepid Museum Foundation, the Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund, the Intrepid Relief Fund, the Fisher House Foundation, the Fisher Center for Alzheimer's Research Foundation, the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, the New York's Finest Foundation, and the Science Barge and is on the board of NYC & Company. He served as a member of the Auxiliary Corps of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta and as a volunteer firefighter from 1985 to 1993. The Atlantic Fleet awarded White the Meritorious Public Service Award in recognition of his outstanding support of the U.S. Navy. In 2003, the President of Italy bestowed on him the title of "Cavaliere della Repubblica Italiana del Merito." A year later, he received the Meritorious Public Service Award for extraordinary service from the U.S. Coast Guard.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** The Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum ([www.intrepidmuseum.org](http://www.intrepidmuseum.org)) is one of America's leading historic, cultural, and educational institutions. Opened in 1982, the museum has welcomed more than 10 million visitors. The museum is centered on the aircraft carrier Intrepid (CVS-11), one of the most successful ships in U.S. history and now a national historic landmark and one of the most unique attractions in New York. The museum features a range of interactive exhibits and events from thrilling historical recreations such as Kamikaze: Day of Darkness, Day of Light to new interactive displays. Visitors also can ride in the A-6 cockpit simulator, visit the Virtual Flight Zone, and tour the inside of the world's fastest commercial airplane, Concorde. The museum also hosts the annual Fleet Week celebration in honor of our military personnel.



### Will you give an overview of the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space museum?

It all began with Zachary Fisher, a Brooklyn-born son of a Russian Jewish immigrant who never finished high school, but who worked in the construction business as a bricklayer. Later, he and his family became a pre-eminent development builder family in New York, the Fisher Brothers. While he never served in the military, many of his buddies went off to World War II and didn't come back or came back screwed up. Then in 1976, he walked

onto the Intrepid's flight deck at the bicentennial in Philadelphia and learned that the ship was going to be scrapped. She had survived five kamikaze attacks, and he wasn't having it. He eventually put up \$50 million of his own money to save this ship, and then he brought it to New York. Today, the Intrepid's product is patriotism, service above self, and the sacrifice for freedom. Our board, now led by Charles de Gunzburg, Richard Santulli, and the Fishers, has donated or raised more than \$400 million for the efforts that come from within the Intrepid.

The product has evolved in that we've had 10 million visitors, and we're one of the top five tourist attractions in New York. We've hosted 150,000 troops for Fleet Week over the course of almost 20 years. We are expecting to have President Barack Obama as our special guest this year, and we just came off a \$115 million renovation, which we raised all the money for.

### What other initiatives have been carried out under the Intrepid name?

The Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund is one of those initiatives. As recently as three years ago, after a soldier was killed in Iraq, his wife would get a check for \$6,000 from the U.S. government, half of which was taxable. She would be thrown off the base within 90 days with her kids, and her kids didn't have dental coverage. That policy had to be changed. So we went to John McCain, who sits on our board and served on the Intrepid in 1961, and Hillary Clinton, who was one of the finest senators to ever serve on the armed services committee, for help. The policy was changed so that the family can stay on the base for a year, and their kids get dental care. We also raised \$42 million in six months, and gave it all out: \$11,000 to every surviving spouse, male or female; and \$5,000 to every dependent child, all 3,000 of them.

Another focus is on multiple amputees, which is a big group. In nine months, we raised almost \$90 million for 600,000 Americans and much of it went to the Center for the Intrepid at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, the world's finest state-of-the-art physical rehabilitation center. Over 1,000 multiple amputees have not only gotten limbs back, but they get a lot of their lives back. They get taught how to work with the prosthetics in a \$3 million 3-D simulator – the only one on the planet that's 3-D. They can also learn how to fire a weapon, ride a horse, water ski, or surf.

The remainder of the \$90 million went to Fisher Houses. Zachary Fisher built the first Fisher House at Bethesda in 1991 to house family members visiting wounded soldiers. This has been built up to 42 houses, supported by \$40 million in contributions, which has helped 100,000 families by providing more than one million nights of lodging, and now, with \$2 billion in frequent flier miles donated, we've flown 18,000 families of troops.

The latest program of the Fallen Heroes Fund is to build a traumatic brain injury center. This is the signature wound of the war. Almost 300,000 troops that have some form of what Bob Woodruff experienced. Some can't even remember the names of their own children. So we're contributing \$50 million into a \$65 million project for a state-of-the-art facility in Bethesda. We anticipate it will be up and running in one year.

### How did your interest in charitable efforts come about?

After a suggestion from John Cardinal O'Connor, who happens to have been a two-star Navy Admiral as well as the archbishop of New York, that I needed to get involved in charitable works, I started a charity to help the families of the troops who were killed in Desert Storm and Desert Shield. And that's how I met Zach Fisher. Meeting him would change anybody's life. This man is quiet and unassuming, and he always remembers where he came from. In addition, he is one of the most generous men on the planet.

For me, this is the greatest job in the world. I am so honored every day to work with our amazing board and supporters. For us it's about the troops, it's about owing them. Anything we can do to be supportive of them and show our gratitude is key. So for me, that's what it's all about. ●

Center for the Intrepid board members and veterans helped by the Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund at the Center's ribbon cutting ceremony