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Twin Towers

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Three times over the years, Joe Vigiano, a New York policeman, was shot while in the line of duty. Each time he was rescued by members of the elite Emergency Service Unit, known as the department's "special forces." So it's little wonder that Mr. Vigiano eventually signed up with the unit.

In early 2001, Dick Wolf and some of his collaborators behind "Law and Order" spent time filming Joe Vigiano and his E-2 truckmates. Their team was to be the focus of a new reality-television series. But Mr. Vigiano and 13 fellow emergency services officers died on Sept. 11. The producers scrapped their planned show, but Bill Guttentag and Robert Port created an artful half-hour documentary, "Twin Towers," from their footage.

Having made the film festival rounds, "Twin Towers" is now favored to win the Oscar for best short documentary next Sunday.

The film is not named after the lost skyscrapers, but after Mr. Vigiano and his brother, John, a firefighter who also died in the rescue effort. At its core, "Twin Towers" is a portrait of premeditated heroism. Hauntingly poignant comments punctuate shots of members of Joe Vigiano's unit as they execute search warrants under perilous conditions and relax back at the station. "We go from being a SWAT team one minute -- next minute we might be called to a building collapse to rescue people under rubble," Mr. Vigiano says at one point.

Sept. 11 was such an apocalyptic blow to human life, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that those police officers and firefighters who died responding to the terrorist attacks had previously wrestled with the possibility of making the ultimate sacrifice for society -- in the quieter context of their everyday routines.

"Twin Towers" helps portray their heroism in a more intimate light. "My greatest fear in the job," Mr. Vigiano said back in that spring of 2001, "is to not go home to my kids. I don't leave

my house in a fight with my kids because I might not come home." ANDRES MARTINEZ

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