

9.11 New York: Amid Transformed Shops, Grim Work in 'the Pit' Goes On

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NEW YORK – Burger King is police headquarters; the Men's Warehouse a first-aid station. If you need a break, the Salvation Army is at Starbucks. One blast of the siren means standby; three, get out.

"This is what TV named "ground zero" and what rescue works call "the pit."

Five days after terrorists hijacked two commercial airliners and crashed them into the World Trade Center, New Yorkers spent Sunday attending prayer services around the city, cleaning out their apartments and shops and preparing to go back to work.

Uptown, people are moving on. Down here, though, there is only digging and choking on the dust and smoke from the still-burning rubble of the twin towers that until last Tuesday stood 110 stories.

"People see this on TV and they want to come down here to help," Timothy Fraass, a volunteer from Newark, N.J., says as he stands in front of the increasingly unstable One Liberty Plaza, a high-rise adjacent to the World Trade Center's ruins.

"Don't come," he says. "You don't want to see this."

Fraass, welder in normal life, has been filling buckets with chunks of concrete and pieces of metal off and on since last Tuesday's attack. Like many here, he refused to detail what he has seen over the past few days, insisting that no one could adequately describe it.

Asked if he has any hope of finding anyone still alive, he shakes his head and stares at the four-story pile of rubble a half-block away.

"I don't want to talk about that," he says, his eyes filling. "It doesn't look very good for them."

On Sunday, the number of confirmed dead was 180. More than 5,000 are missing.

In Washington, where hijackers aboard another commercial flight hit the Pentagon, the death toll is 188. A fourth plane, meant for yet another target, crashed in rural Pennsylvania, killing 44 on board.

At the trade center site, where thousands have been laboring around the clock, hastily scrawled messages in red spray paint direct workers toward triage sites for the wounded they had hoped to pull from the debris. On one building, three-foot letters spell "morgue" and an arrow points to a building that is receiving more small remains than identifiable bodies.

In the face of this destruction, the workers have hung American flags from the ruins. They've vented their frustrations by scribbling messages of revenge in the dust of nearby building windows.

"Kill (Osama) bin Laden now," reads one referring to the Saudi-born and Afghanistan-sheltered terrorist accused of masterminding and financing the attacks.

"Cowards!" says another, and "Please God, avenge us all."

Firefighters also have written messages to 300 of their colleagues killed or trapped while trying to save others.

“Brian Hickey. Capt. ... God Bless You,” says one.

Nearby is a message of support for the U.S. military: “We got your back USA.”

Closer to the smoldering rubble, a scorched tree bent from the blast of the crumbling towers still stands, its branches filled with metal shards twisted like tin foil. A family of pigeons roosts on the dust-covered ledges of nearby buildings.

With each swirl of the wind, more dust and debris mixes with the black smoke that scrapes the throat and stings the eyes. The haze blocks the sun, making everything gray.

Occasionally a sheet of seared paper floats through the air. Millions of pages from the World Trade Center’s offices have come to rest on fire escapes and ledges.

Skyscrapers in the immediate area stand like a fortress around the site. But windows are blown out and the side of one building appears to have been ripped by falling debris.

Streets on the perimeter are filled with police cars, bulldozers, forklifts and cranes, as well as port-a-potties and food and drink stations.

As far as three blocks away, shops and restaurants are covered with soot.

Inside Ranch 1, where a neon sign still flashes, “The best grilled chicken sandwich on earth,” breakfast remains on the tables, abandoned in the panic.

At the Easy Spirit shoe store, the display boots near the front are covered with dust but standing at attention. Next door, an automatic teller machine is clogged with dust, its screen blinking a welcome message in Spanish.

At William Barthman jewelers on Broadway, display windows are clogged with 3 inches of dust and the white plastic neck models that held necklaces are toppled over on each other.

On the window, written with a finger in the dust: “Let our war dogs loose.”

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