

9.11: They Were There

By **PATTY REINERT**

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Pete Hamill

NEW YORK -- Pete Hamill had a full schedule for Sept. 11.

The New York Daily News columnist and author had finished his new novel late the night before. After a morning meeting, he planned to head to Kinko's to copy the manuscript and send it off, then celebrate by taking his wife to lunch at Balthazar.

Instead, Hamill found himself standing at the corner of Vesey and Broadway in lower Manhattan, staring into the gutter at the remnants of someone else's morning -- an unopened bottle of V-8 Splash, a cheese danish in a cellophane wrapper and a woman's black shoe, sticky with blood.

Looking up at the fireball eating through the World Trade Center, he saw a shirtless man tumbling, then plunging, fast and face-first, from the sky.

When the towers began to crumble, Hamill and his wife, journalist Fukiko Aoki, ran, but lost each other in the dust. After a frantic search, each trudged home, collapsing in a relieved hug when they found each other outside their apartment.

"By Wednesday morning, the iron workers showed up at the Trade Center and said, 'We cut steel. Do you need us?' They didn't call anyone. They weren't hired. They just came," Hamill said. "When I saw them, I said, 'We'll be OK.' "

Looking back on his year, Hamill remembers the odor of burning rubble that hung in the air past Christmas, the Korean deli down the street that fed the neighborhood because it was the only store with power, World Series players wearing NYPD and FDNY caps.

He remembers crossing the barricades into the frozen zone to get home each day, carrying his passport for a photo ID and his Con-Ed bill as proof of residence.

"Now I walk and I see normalcy -- lovers sitting on a bench by the river, kissing," he said. "I see old people reading large-print versions of Danielle Steel. I see Mexicans eating ice cream cones. I see people running down to the corner market for No. 2 milk and three mangoes."

"To me, those are also images of this year," he said. "I cherish the idea that there was no mass exodus, and that people said, 'You gotta get on with it. You gotta live.' "

John O'Dowd

Col. John O'Dowd of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had been at his post as director of the New York district less than two months on Sept. 11.

O'Dowd was in the middle of a meeting on the 21st floor of Federal Plaza, just blocks from the twin towers, when the first plane hit.

"We heard a boom, and felt this building shake," he said.

As downtown began to evacuate, O'Dowd and his colleagues directed eight Corps ships in the harbor to start ferrying the injured and distraught off of Manhattan island.

"Every available boat in the harbor was nosed up to Battery Park, picking up civilians," O'Dowd said of those first hours. "Cruise ships, tug boats -- people grabbed sheets and spray-painted them, 'Brooklyn' or 'New Jersey,' and started loading people onboard. They'd take survivors off the island and pick up rescue workers for the ride back in."

Within days, the Corps was dredging New York Harbor, deepening long-dormant shipping lanes to make way for barges laden with heavy cranes and equipment needed at "Ground Zero" and carving out passages to carry debris across the river to Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island.

"The city was hit in as hard a way as you could hit a city," O'Dowd said. "Rather than lay down, folks here in New York stood up."

Mike Hall

When Fresh Kills Landfill began receiving tons of rubble from the World Trade Center last September, Deer Park, Texas's Garner Environmental Services Inc. was the first contractor on the hill. Mike Hall, of Clear Lake, arrived Sept. 14.

"There were piles and yards and yards and more yards of debris," Hall recalled.

The demolition specialist set to work organizing the chaos, separating steel from concrete and dividing the big from the small.

"We found a little bit of everything -- IDs, jewelry, clothes, tennis shoes, socks, combs," Hall said. "The first time you find something that's human, it's numbing. You go, 'Oh God.' Two of my guys quit. They just said, 'I don't want to do this anymore,' and I can appreciate that. I respect that."

Hall kept going back though, telling himself every day that he would try to find something that would comfort someone's family.

"If this had happened in Houston," he said, "I'm sure they would have come to help us."

Jack Ryan

It was Sept. 13 when Jimmy Luongo called for the priest.

The Fresh Kills Landfill had reopened the day before and Luongo was the police investigator charged with making sense of tons of World Trade Center debris arriving by barge from across the river.

The task was overwhelming -- and gruesome. Exhausted firefighters and police officers were working day and night in hopes of recovering the dead, including hundreds from their own ranks. Now family members were showing up at the dump, looking for proof of their loss, or some small artifact by which to remember their loved ones.

The Rev. Jack Ryan, a Jesuit from a nearby Catholic retreat house, responded to Luongo's call. "You see the results of true, consummate evil here, but you look at the workers and you see good," Ryan said. "You see the consolation the families get just knowing these people have been up here, taking a quiet pride in their very tedious, very grim work."

For 10 months, Ryan spent his days at Fresh Kills, passing out sandwiches, saying Mass and counseling those who had seen and smelled too much. Each night, he returned to the Mount Manresa Jesuit Retreat House, which had become home to weary police and firefighters and cadaver-sniffing dogs.

When the dump closed in July, bagpipers from the city sanitation department band wailed a dirge and Ryan stood before the last pile of rubble.

"This is the type of thing you never get over, but you will get used to it," he told the workers and mourners. "You will experience joy in your lives again. Already the grass is growing here again. It's like that."

Michele DeFazio

Michele DeFazio wears her grief in a gold heart locket that weighs on her neck, and in a heart-shaped bracelet, and on her key chain, and on a button the size of a dessert plate pinned to her chest. All bear the same photo of her and Jason on their wedding day.

Her three-month marriage to the 29-year-old bonds broker was cut short Sept. 11, when he was lost in the World Trade Center attack.

"He was 6 foot, 220 pounds. He was in top physical condition. I swore he was alive in there," DeFazio said. "We had just started our life. We wanted to have kids."

After a month of waiting, the 26-year-old bride turned widow set up a table with her wedding photos and invited Jason's family and friends to a memorial service.

"I did it for them, not for me," she said this summer. "I still pretend he's just at work. That's how I get through the day."

Jason DeFazio's remains have never been recovered, but workers found his Cantor Fitzgerald ID card in the rubble at Fresh Kills. They returned it to his wife on Good Friday.

"I looked at it once, but now I can't," Michele DeFazio said. "It makes it real."

Joe Murphy

Shortly after becoming a New York City firefighter, Joe Murphy attended his first firefighter funeral.

"I saw the pipes and drums and said, 'I want to play in that band,' " he said.

Murphy joined the FDNY Emerald Society Pipes and Drums 15 years ago; today he's chairman of the 70-member band. Like every member, he fights fires as a full-time job and plays the pipes as a hobby.

Warming up in a scorching church parking lot in Queens last month, the kilt-clad 50-year-old described the past year as a depressing and monotonous marathon of services for 343 firefighters killed on Sept. 11. In many cases, the band marched and played at memorials, only to return later to play at funerals once body parts were identified and families had something to bury.

"In the beginning, we were playing seven days a week -- some days there were 10 or 20 funerals. We split up into groups and took turns, but there were still days where we'd each be playing four or five," Murphy said. "We'd just get up and go, one to the next, playing the same songs over and over -- 'Amazing Grace' on the way into the church and 'Going Home' on the way out. Next morning, get up and do it again."

A year later, Murphy is worn out. He longs for the old days, when most of the gigs were weddings and parties and grand, happy parades.

"Now, even for the good things, you just want to get it over with and leave," he said. "It's not fun anymore."

Patrick Carley

Patrick Carley, a firefighter from Long Island, stopped counting sometime after the 100th funeral.

"Some of the guys I knew, some I didn't. You just pick the ones in your geographical area and go," he said. "If you're on duty, you go to the station. If it's your day off, you go to funerals."

"Last Saturday they buried a guy I went to high school with -- Patrick Lyons," he said. "His wife had a baby a month after Sept. 11. He never knew his son."

Amy Weinstein

Making her way home on foot Sept. 11, Amy Weinstein, assistant curator for the New York Historical Society, was already thinking artifacts.

"We all had this sense that history is unfolding around us, and we have to start today," she said.

By the next morning, museum staffers were calling colleagues in Oklahoma City, Washington and Graceland, who advised them to start collecting immediately.

Police wanted the museum to store the remnants of a few cruisers, school officials were overwhelmed by letters and artwork sent by students from around the world, and firefighters didn't know what to do with all the candles, flags, notes and flowers accumulating outside their stations, which had become makeshift shrines. Transit officials eventually wanted to clear away the "Missing" fliers that had been posted on subway walls and bus stops.

The BBC in London offered thousands of e-mails received from people around the world the morning of Sept. 11, seeking information on loved ones who worked at the Trade Center.

St. Paul's Church, converted into a relief station for disaster workers, offered a cot that had been used by so many tired souls. The church also donated a sampling of care packages from children who sent drawings and thank-you letters, stuffed animals and Chapstick.

"This is part of the story of Sept. 11," Weinstein said. "Firefighters and policemen who had been working at the Trade Center would come in exhausted and dirty after digging for hours, and they would read these letters, and they would take the Teddy bears and Beanie Babies into the cots and sleep with them."

In all that was salvaged from the rubble, Weinstein and other museum staffers were stunned at the things they couldn't find.

"We told people, 'We would like to get a crushed desk or chair or computer terminal,' and they said, 'You don't get it,' " she said. "Everything was shattered or melted or vaporized. Tons and tons of paper from the offices, and business cards and photographs survived, but there was almost no glass left. All of those windows, and no glass."

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