

Remembering September 11: A City and Nation on the Mend

By PATTY REINERT

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NEW YORK -- It took seven months to find Tommy Casoria, nearly a year to get him buried.

Hundreds of his fellow firefighters showed up for the funeral, hoisting a huge American flag between two ladder trucks and filing themselves into tight blue rows outside St. Luke's Catholic Church in Queens.

Kilted pipers, broiling in the heat of an August Friday, wailed Amazing Grace and brought up the rear in a sad, slow procession behind a red fire truck topped with Casoria's silver casket.

In many ways, New York has come back to life since Sept. 11. Yet as the nation prepares to mark the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks this week, the city is still burying its dead.

And although the dust and stench have been scrubbed from the streets, grief still suffocates.

"It's too much," said Ben Cotten, a 13-year firefighter who has spent the past year photographing memorial services and funerals for the New York City Fire Department.

"I know (that) some people who haven't been doing this for a year really want (Wednesday's planned ceremony at the World Trade Center site). But personally, I've already heard it all, from the president on down. I can't take it anymore."

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Sept. 11, 2001, blue skies over the whole East Coast. The news was impossible to process: Four commercial airliners were hijacked by Muslim extremists. Two slammed into the World Trade Center, one into the Pentagon outside Washington. One plowed into a field in rural Pennsylvania after passengers struggled with hijackers, thwarting plans to hit a third target.

The toll was staggering: More than 3,000 dead, including 343 New York firefighters and 23 police officers who had responded to help and were caught inside or nearby when the Twin Towers collapsed.

"The first two or three weeks, before the bombing (in Afghanistan) started and before the anthrax, you saw the city go through a fairly complicated set of emotions," said Pete Hamill, a lifelong New Yorker who writes a column for the *New York Daily News*. "The first day, there was awe and rage, and then, when we realized the proportions of the casualties, sorrow, and then vulnerability.

"It's not like you wake up in the morning saying, 'I wonder if two planes are going to fly into a building and kill thousands of people,' " he said. "But before Sept. 11, in spite of the '93 World Trade Center bombing and in spite of Timothy McVeigh, there was no sense of permanent vulnerability. Now there is, and that will be here the rest of our lives."

Physically, though, New York is moving on. The grim cleanup at Ground Zero and at Fresh Kills Landfill is done. The World Trade Center site is a tourist destination, where signs on a chain-link fence direct camera-toting gawkers to the "Best View" of what now appears to be nothing more than a construction project. Vendors sell FDNY and NYPD hats and T-shirts, stuffed bears wearing Sept. 11 patches on their chests, and books and photo albums of the destruction. Nearby, the Winter Garden's towering palms have been replanted, restoring a touch of nature to the concrete of the World Financial Center.

Businesses are open, residents of Battery Park City have moved back into their apartments, and *Wall Street Journal* reporters have returned to their desks at their lower Manhattan newsroom.

Thousands of destroyed vehicles have been recycled. Museum curators are busy preserving and cataloguing artifacts collected after the attack, and New Yorkers are flocking to Federal Hall to express their displeasure, mostly, over the choices of plans for the perfect World Trade Center memorial. There's a new mayor at City Hall, and there are new shows on Broadway.

In Washington, Pentagon rebuilders have made good on a promise to move staffers back into their offices by the time President Bush arrives this week to mark the anniversary. Architects and security experts have drawn up plans to better secure Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House.

Digging has begun outside the U.S. Capitol to make way for a \$368 million visitor center to control tourist access while providing secure, underground meeting rooms where lawmakers could continue working if there is a future attack, as well as tunnels to evacuate them if necessary.

On Saturday, military jets resumed their patrols over both cities as security was beefed up in preparation for anniversary ceremonies. In Lower Manhattan, hundreds of bagpipers and police from around the United States and Canada marched to a police memorial on the banks of the Hudson River.

But uptown, it was New York as usual as tourists filled Times Square for a weekend crafts festival, many stopping in the median on Broadway to take pictures with "the Naked Cowboy," who jazzed up his singing act by painting his guitar, boots and briefs red, white and blue.

At Rockefeller Center, which has been decked out with American flags around the ice skating rink, passers-by kicked off their shoes and sat in the grass or in bleachers to watch the U.S. Open on a giant screen. In the subway tunnels, sweaty riders awaiting their trains listened to a flute player's "Amazing Grace" and "Oh! Susanna."

In the days after the attacks, blame was quickly assigned to Saudi exile Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida network, terrorists operating out of Afghanistan with the support of the Taliban government. The United States retaliated, freezing funds and rounding up Arab and Muslim immigrants for questioning and immigration violations.

On Oct. 7, U.S. bombs started dropping over Afghanistan. The Taliban were driven out, al-Qaida sent into hiding.

Meanwhile, East Coast residents from Florida to New York started opening mail poisoned with anthrax. The scare caused evacuations at post offices, newsrooms and at the U.S. Capitol. Five people died; 13 others were sickened. Investigators suspect the attacker, still unidentified, is homegrown.

Mental health experts predict the emotional wounds of Sept. 11 could take decades to heal, if they ever do. In the months after the attacks, New Yorkers and Washingtonians reported being sleep-deprived as they turned up the volume on repetitive TV coverage of the tragedy to drown out the unnerving roar of military jets patrolling overhead. Smoking, drinking and pill popping soared, and Home Depot shelves were emptied of respirators.

Since then, those in the targeted cities have reclaimed control of their lives in small but tangible ways. They've stockpiled batteries, water and antibiotics, planned escape routes and sent their children to school with cell phones.

Meanwhile, victims' families have formed several support groups to help through the grieving and the bureaucracy of recovering their loved ones, and to lobby for fair compensation, better building-safety codes and a fitting memorial.

Last week, dozens of Sept. 11 widows, along with their babies born in the months after the attacks, gathered in Manhattan for a baby shower, struggling to get on with their lives.

Those families who could, have buried their dead. Others await word from the medical examiner's office, where DNA testing of thousands of fragmented remains is expected to go on for at least another eight months.

New York's Health and Mental Hygiene Department has launched a subway advertising campaign, urging those still suffering the aftereffects of the tragedy to call for counseling help.

On Wednesday, communities across America and around the world will mark the Sept. 11 anniversary with prayer services, candle-lighting ceremonies and concerts. Here, New Yorkers will stop for a moment of silence at 8:46 a.m., the time that the first plane hit the World Trade Center. The name of each victim will be read aloud, and family members will carry roses to the empty pit of Ground Zero.

Forgoing their own speeches, officials will instead read from the Gettysburg Address, the Declaration of Independence and from "Four Freedoms," President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 speech to Congress. In it, Roosevelt outlined his vision for a world founded upon four essential human freedoms: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of every person to worship in his own way, freedom from want and freedom from fear.

In the past year, the U.S. military has captured hundreds of foreign combatants overseas and continues to hold them at Camp Delta in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. More than 1,200 people have been picked up in the United States, their alleged involvement in the Sept. 11 attacks unclear.

Afghanistan's new president, Hamid Karzai, who last week survived an assassination attempt, is struggling to hold his fractured country together.

Bin Laden's fate is unknown. Bush is lobbying Congress and the United States' allies to expand the war on terrorism to Iraq.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, New Yorkers have grown accustomed to the pomp of firefighters' funerals, having seen more than 300 of them in the past year.

But Perry Stein, 46, who was in the neighborhood getting his car fixed the day they laid firefighter Tommy Casoria to rest, was still moved by the scene. Clutching a bouquet of pink roses he bought at Dan's Supreme Supermarket down the street, Perry approached a fireman outside the church and asked for the dead man's name.

"I know it sounds corny, but these are from my heart," Stein said, pressing the flowers into the flustered firefighter's hands.

"I didn't know the man," Stein said, "but I know what he did."

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