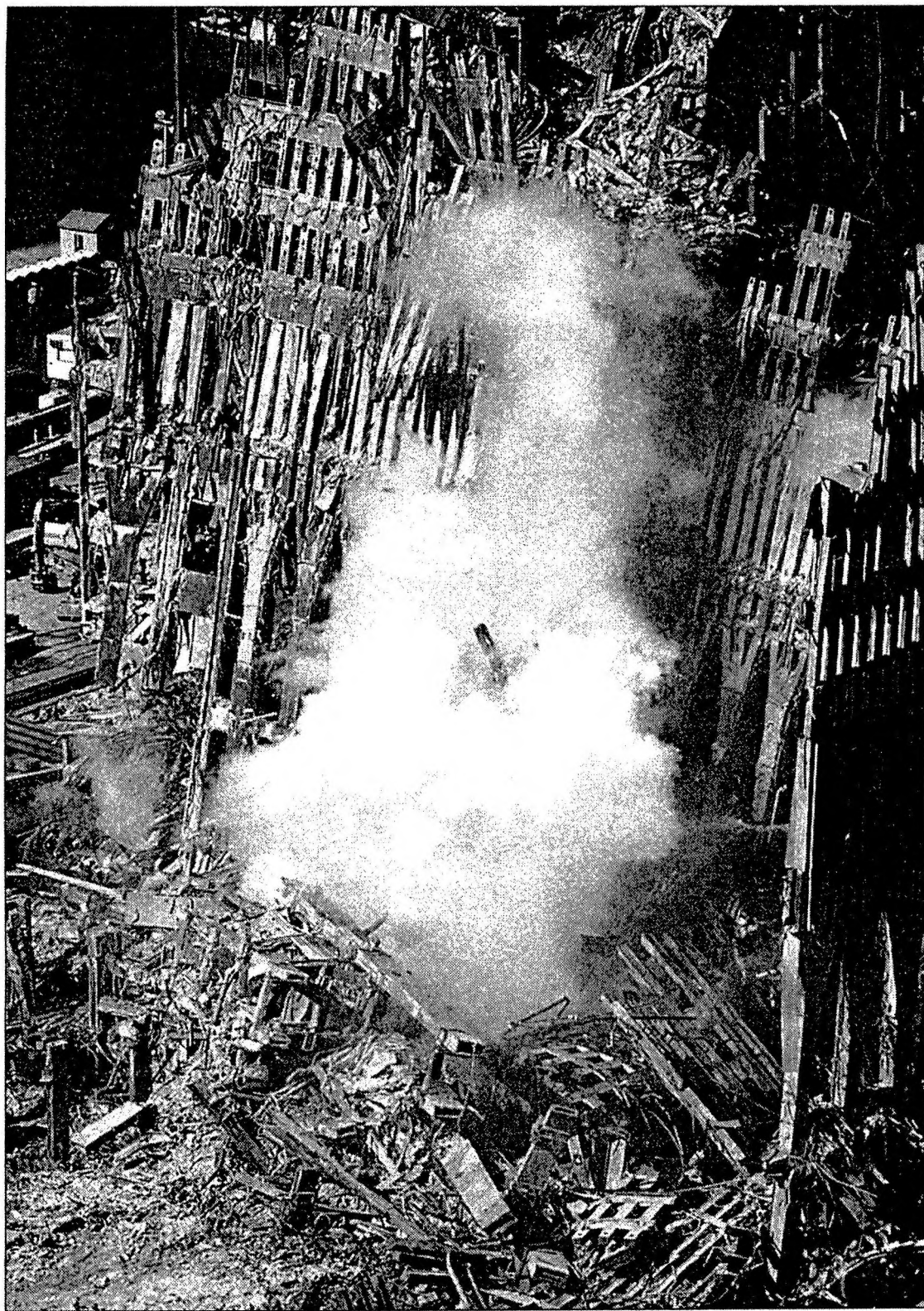


STRIKING BACK



DISASTER ZONE Water pumped onto smoldering rubble creates steam yesterday at Ground Zero. Tests have found higher asbestos levels than previously measured in nearby buildings.

Asbestos higher in newer test

Asbestos contamination inside buildings near the World Trade Center site may be far worse than government officials have reported, according to a new study by a top private toxicology firm.

The collapse of the twin towers pulverized much of the asbestos into such microscopic particles that many fibers were not large enough to be caught in tests done by government safety monitors, says a team of scientists from HP Environmental Inc., a Virginia-based company that oversaw toxicology analyses at the World Trade Center after the 1993 attack.

The firm spent 15 days last month studying health hazards faced by cleanup crews working for a real estate company that owns two office buildings north of Ground Zero.

"In the beginning we were getting clean results, or no [asbestos]," said Piotr Chmielinski, one of the scientists who worked on the study. "Until we discovered that a lot of dust and other particulates in our samples were obscuring the tiny asbestos fibers in the back-ground."

Many indoor tests being done by federal or local health officials or by private cleanup companies use a testing procedure called phase contrast microscopy, which only detects asbestos fibers of at least 5 microns in size, Chmielinski said.

But when Chmielinski and the team's leader, Hugh Granger, used a more exact — and more expensive — method of analysis, electron microscopy, the same samples they had tested with the cheaper method showed far greater amounts of asbestos.

Testing 3 blocks away

The team took 11 air samples on different floors of two buildings that were up to 3 blocks from the Trade Center site. Using the cheaper and less exact method, only two of those samples revealed asbestos levels higher than federal permissible exposure limits.

But when they examined those same samples under the electron microscopy procedure, which captures much smaller particulates, they found that seven of the 11 samples had asbestos levels above federal standards.

Under U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's standard, 70 fibers per square millimeter triggers the need for asbestos decontamination procedures in public schools. Of the samples tested under the more stringent method, three samples had more than 300 fibers — more than four times the EPA standard — and one registered 369 fibers.

Scientist's warning

That is a "magnitude of fibers that it would be best not to ignore," Chmielinski warned.

"What's inside the buildings is the result of what got introduced during the first explosions," said Dr. Stephen Levine of the Selikoff Center for Occupational Safety and Health and Mount Sinai Medical Center. Levine said he is far more worried about indoor contamination than of asbestos levels on the streets outside.

"The smaller the particle ... the easier job that it has penetrating right down into the very depths of the lungs," said one of Levine's colleagues, Dr. Philip Landrigan, director of environmental and occupational medicine at Mount Sinai.

EPA and local health officials have said repeatedly that asbestos levels in outside air have only occasionally exceeded levels of concern. Asbestos is known to cause asbestosis, or scarring of the lungs and lung cancer.

Asbestosis results only from long-term exposure, but when it comes to cancer, there is no safe level of exposure.

Even as they were reassuring the public, EPA officials distributed respirators late last week to their employees in the Federal Building. The handouts came in response to complaints from the employees of terrible air quality in the building, a few blocks from the Trade Center site.

EPA spokeswoman Mary Helen Cervantes said the masks were distributed for the voluntary use of those employees who might have respiratory ailments or who feel some temporary discomfort from the air.

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Fund to help save historic buildings

The creation of an emergency fund to aid and restore historic buildings in lower Manhattan after the World Trade Center attacks was announced yesterday by five historic preservation groups.

There are 67 official landmarks south of Chambers St., including Federal Hall, Trinity Church and a "world-renowned array of 20th century skyscrapers," the groups said.

"While none of these historic resources has yet been lost, some suffered damage and the full extent of the toll is uncertain at this time," the announcement said.

The five organizations are the city-based

World Monuments Fund, the Washington-based National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Albany-based Preservation League of New York State, the 108-year-old Municipal Art Society and the New York Landmarks Conservancy.

Each group is contributing \$10,000 to the Lower Manhattan Emergency Preservation Fund. The money will be managed by the Fund for the City of New York.

Organization leaders said humanitarian aid remains New York's top priority. However, they said they're being contacted by those eager to aid the recovery "of one of the nation's oldest and most historic downtowns."

Owen Moritz