

NEW YORK TIMES, MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2001

Hauling the Debris, and Darker Burdens

By CHARLIE LeDUFF

The crews come silently to work now. The rescue operation at ground zero has become a job. The ironworkers and truck drivers are under contract. At shift change, there is order where before there was mayhem.

For the truckers, it has become a funeral procession of sorts. It wends from the mound of the World Trade Center, still smoking like the wick of an oil lamp, and goes through the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel. It continues over the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and ends on the peak of Muldoon Hill at the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island, where the bones of the skyscrapers are dumped. The trip is a slow one: 10 miles and at least 10 checkpoints.

There are other things in that load, too. Grisly things that federal agents in hazard suits are paid to rake through. When they find these things, they separate them and tag them for later identification. At this point the truckers don't linger anymore. They don't want to see it.

Dennis Gartland, 35, has been hauling wreckage

since Wednesday. They found a torso in his load on Friday. It knocked him off center, he said. The thought has crossed his mind that he is little more than a hearse driver.

"It just really freaked me out," he said of the body as he idled at ground zero waiting for his rig to be loaded. "I got friends who died in here, you know? Firemen. That could have been my friend. This whole thing's got me beat down."

As of Friday, 1,500 truckloads, or 9,000 tons, had been moved to the landfill, which was closed permanently this year but reopened after the Tuesday morning massacre.

The men who make their career of tearing down and building up the city estimate it will take about a year to clear the wreckage and lay new roads. Giant I-beams from the buildings have punctured the subway tunnels, and the tunnels have filled with groundwater.

"There's a lot of work here," one hollow voice said over the CB radio. "But there's a lot we're never

getting back."

The mood among the truckers is a surly one. The adrenaline has given way to fatigue. Though there is little chance that anyone in the wreckage is still alive, the drivers are still holding out for the chance of a miracle.

"I've heard stories of people living 11 or 12 days under collapsed buildings," Mr. Gartland said. When asked when and where these miracles occurred, Mr. Gartland said he could not remember. Still, he has heard about miracles and he believes in them. "It's ironic, though," he said. "We're taking the whole mess to a place called Fresh Kills."

It's unsettling to see a grown man cry, but Bob Vagnier, 58, said those weren't tears welling in his eyes — it was the dust. He, like many of the trucker drivers, is a veteran of the armed forces. He is one of those hardened men, the type who does not cry at his own mother's funeral.

"But this — this is different," he said with his hands in his pockets and his foot on the running board as he looked out onto the carnage. "What about those young Staten Island girls who took the ferry to work? The ones who wore the pantyhose with the sneakers? Gone, I guess. It don't make sense."

The cleanup job is under contract now and the drivers are paid about \$28 an hour. But they would do it for free. They did do it for free, in fact,

and buy American flags to show their support and unity. They already had the Stars and Stripes sewn onto their jacket sleeves. They wore them weeks ago when times were good. And underneath the patches of those union truck drivers is stitched the motto "Proud to be an American."

"They hit the World Trade Center," one driver said on his way to the dump. "They hit the Pentagon. But they missed America."

The scene through the windshield Saturday was one of chaos. There were thousands of volunteers sitting around with nothing to do but eat donated cookies. There were the crash-site crazies who posed as marines and priests and firemen. There were reporters milling around disguised as construction workers. There were men drinking in bars that had their windows blown out. There were tens of thousands of photos taken. Some people stood and smiled and posed. There was too much traffic for the trucks to move in and out effectively.

By sundown, somebody with an efficient mind had taken charge and the streets were clean and the work was brisk, the trucks hauling debris from the south end of Trinity Street.

There was an esprit de corps at ground zero, a respect for one another and the work they were doing. There were inquiries about families and concern for one another's safety. "Get some sleep, pal," they told each other. They wore the flag on their helmets.

"It's all about the working people now," said a national guardsman standing sentry at the rubble to keep the crazies out. "It's about truckers and ironworkers now."

At dusk, while driving over the Verrazano Bridge, one could see that the harbor was nearly empty and that the Coast Guard was searching each cargo ship thoroughly.

Over the CB radios, some truckers, who had no knowledge of the serpentine downtown streets, were in a panic. "Lost on Rector!" a man shouted. "Maybe it's Rector? I can't tell. The signs are blown off."

"Keep making lefts, Jimmy," came the answer.

"Frank. That's called a circle." Eventually the drivers did get their loads to Muldoon Hill, the graveyard for the twisted carnage that has become the roost for 10,000 birds.

Adrenaline gives way to fatigue, and trucks begin to feel like hearses.

until late last week. And now there is a gigantic new job. There is money in war.

The truck drivers — at least the union men — did not have to run out

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