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Looting Is Reported in Center's Tomblike Mall



Edward Keating/The New York Times

Capt. Vincent J. Heintz, left, and First Sgt. John Brett of the New York National Guard search the looted Tourneau store below 5 World Trade Center for evidence. Looters picked through watches there.

By C. J. CHIVERS

Shops and restaurants in the retail concourse beneath 5 World Trade Center were looted in the wake of last week's disaster, and police detectives are investigating whether rescue workers were responsible, law enforcement officials said yesterday.

The looting, which a New York National Guard infantry unit discovered, appears to have begun soon after the fires in the upper stories of the building were extinguished last week, and continued in a less aggressive fashion through Tuesday night or early Wednesday morning of this week, said Capt. Vincent J. Heintz, commander of Company C, First Battalion, 105th Light Infantry.

A warren of wide subterranean passageways in 5 World Trade Center, on the northeast corner of the plaza, somehow survived the collapses of the twin towers and the searing fires that raged in that building overhead throughout the day of Sept. 11. One level below ground, many retail stores and restaurants, as well as the subway stop there, are intact. Even the water damage was minimal.

Together the passageways and shops form an eerie Pompeii, a hushed and lightless world of ash, shards of glass and crumpled ceilings, interspersed with scenes of a New York City morning frozen in time. Several officers and soldiers who entered the basement said the thieves who swept through had acted as if they were raiding a tomb.

The looters picked through a Tourneau boutique watch store, raided cases of designer sunglasses in another shop, tried to pry open at least one cash register and penetrated the service room behind a row of Chase automated teller machines, where steel safes appear to have dissuaded them from making off with stacks of cash. Early this week the Guard

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reported the crimes to the police and Robert M. Morgenthau, the district attorney. Police investigators and union officials toured the concourse Wednesday night, and Daniel Castleman, chief of the district attorney's investigations division, said he spoke with police officials to express concern about security at the site.

On Sept. 13, two men — including a former city correction officer who was posing as a police officer — were arrested and charged with stealing two watches at the Tourneau shop, Mr. Castleman said.

He said yesterday that the looting in the past week appeared limited to a few shops under one building.

"It's not a situation of everyone walking in and stuffing their pockets," he said. "It could be one guy who was very determined, and got his hands on some merchandise. At this point we don't have evidence of who it was, when it was, or precisely what was taken, and the Police Department, understandably, has taken an interest in it."



A Cartier display at the Tourneau boutique in the retail concourse. Two men have been charged with stealing watches at the shop.

Deputy Commissioner Thomas Antenen, a police spokesman, said the department was reviewing the facts of the case. "We arrested two looters last week, and have received these reports of other missing property," he said. "We are looking into it."

Guard officials have exercised painstaking care not to blame any particular group of rescuers, saying the thieves could have come from any number of agencies working under the rubble.

"They could have been police officers, they could have been firefighters, they could have been contractors or National Guardsmen," said Captain Heintz, who is also a rackets prosecutor in Mr. Morgenthau's office.

Guard officials noted that it was virtually impossible for civilians to reach the underground area, which is at the center of rings of security, immersed in darkness and cluttered at many points with hanging or leaning rubble.

They said they had little doubt that the thefts were conducted by people familiar with the ground and equipped to carry out the crimes with speed and confidence. "It was calculated," said Second Lt. Peter Fluker, Company C's second platoon leader. "It was done with crowbars and heavy equipment and some sharp, blunt objects that were used to smash open big doors and jewelry cases. They were rescue workers of some sort."

In addition to the retail establishments that were clearly looted, other shops and newsstands were partly destroyed by localized collapses, and it was not clear yesterday if the scattered merchandise and open cash boxes inside indicated more looting or simple disarray. "In some places, you just can't tell," said First Sgt. John Brett, who spent several watches on security duty in the dark basement, waiting in ambush with night vision equipment, hoping to catch returning thieves.

The scenes surrounding him were unthinkably bizarre.

At the northeast corner of 5 World Trade Center are the remains of a Borders bookstore with many of its windows blown out. Above it sits the blackened and twisted frame of the buildings, through which water drips on the stocked cases of best-sellers, including stacks of new releases. Only a few bookcases are knocked over. All are coated with dust.

An idled escalator leads down to the darkened basement, which has become an unsettling tableau of New York City at the moment that the destruction began. A walk through the Borders basement, past the travel section and a customer service counter, leads out to the main concourse, where untold numbers of commuters and shoppers mingled at the moment the first jetliner slammed into the complex.

The concourse is a world that stopped.

Inside Sunglass Hut International, an employee's breakfast — three link sausages and a moldy entree with a fork standing upright — rests on the counter beside the cash register. The newsstands still hold stacks of the papers from the morning of the attack. At the entrance to the Warner Brothers store, the plastic statues of cartoon characters — Bugs Bunny, the Tasmanian Devil — stand wide-eyed in the blackness, their faces leering as the beam of a flashlight swings by, their heads and backs coated with soot.

At the Chase A.T.M. booth, a customer's receipt — for a $100 withdrawal made at 8:51 a.m. on Sept. 11 — was protruding from the receipt slot. Captain Heinz removed it, blew off the glass fragments and dust, and placed it gingerly on the counter with a faint tap of his hand. "This is from one of the last poor people who was down here," he said.

Inside another store, a Guardsman said he saw a credit card sitting on a counter, with a receipt beside it and also a shopping bag with its top folded shut and stapled, as if a shopper was about to sign for the purchase when the first plane hit.

In Nine West, fully-clothed mannequins stand sentry over cases of knocked-over black shoes. In a bakery, the loaves of bread look fresh. At the Perfumeria Milano, the cases of nail polish and fragrances are neatly arranged. "You could almost come in to work here right now," Captain Heintz said.

In a few places, the corridors abruptly end in sheer walls of twisted debris, where several stories of the building overhead buckled and sealed off escape. The debris seems to have tumbled in as effortlessly as if it had passed through a tissue.

In other areas, smaller sections of ceiling, several yards across, have caved in, dumping piles of debris, wire and ceiling tiles. The infantrymen, navigating with night vision equipment, stepped gingerly around it, shaking their heads.

Deep inside, footfalls are muffled by the dust and the concourse is hushed enough to hear drops of water plinking on metal, or the faint trickle of gravel shifting overhead. Elsewhere, the metallic shrieks and diesel roars of rescue equipment can be heard nearby, perhaps 100 feet away, on the other side of the debris.

The scene changes again on the subway platform, which is brightly lighted, clean and utterly deserted. A

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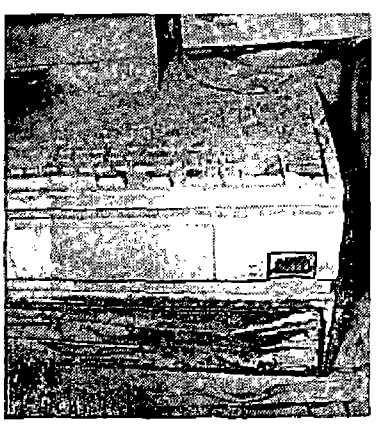
look to the ground reveals small tokens of panic: a dropped novel with a family snapshot as a bookmark; a lipstick container with ruby red makeup protruding, a jumble of scattered coins.

The most determined looting appeared to have occurred at the Tourneau Watch Gear boutique, where the front windows are smashed out, and the display cases just inside are similarly shattered. A few dozen watch stands are knocked about, without a watch in sight. Inside, counter displays have been cracked open as if they were struck with an axe or crowbar, and someone reached through the shards and retrieved scores of watches.

The price tags on the floor are for merchandise that sold as high as $2,500.

Mr. Castleman said the police arrested two men last Thursday at the Tourneau boutique, including a former city correction officer, for stealing two watches priced at a combined $3,700. The correction officer was also charged with impersonating a police officer. It was not clear last night whether the two men were participating as rescue workers.

Guardsmen said the looting was more extensive than the work of the those men, and noted that other merchandise — including dozens of designer sunglasses taken from Sunglass Hut International — disappeared Tuesday night or Wednesday morning this week.



Someone tried to pry open a cash drawer in the concourse. The looting "was done with crowbars and heavy equipment," an officer said.

"There have been people down here trying to steal from a mass grave," the captain said. "They are grave robbers."

Andrew Block, senior vice president of marketing for Tourneau, said that after the company heard of the plane crash, they urged the employees to leave the site immediately. "The store was locked when they left, and it was looted," Mr. Block said.

After noticing rescue workers loitering inside the concourse, Company C tried to secure the area over several nights of silent sentry duty inside the concourse. Soldiers who formed the Guard described unsettling sights.

In a ghostly concourse, smashed windows, rifled cases and stolen watches.

In one store, a mannequin wearing a backpack has been crushed under the rubble. Its arm extends from the pile. Its motionless back and shoulder are heavy with white powder. "Seeing that the first time was freaky," Lt. Fluker said.

The soldiers also expressed disgust that someone had swept through not to free trapped people or recover human remains, but to steal. "Whoever did this should pay the penalty," said Specialist Kiron A. Ahamad, 25, of Woodhaven, Queens. "They should be down here giving a helping hand, not helping themselves."

In Albany and New York, various rescue agencies said that the looting investigation would have no effect on the cooperation between different groups. "We are extremely proud of our troops for continuing to do all they can to support the people of New York City in these trying times, and we're also extremely proud to assist the New York Police Department with the security at the World Trade Center site and around southern Manhattan," said Scott O. Sandman, the state spokesman for the Guard.

Captain Heintz and members of his infantry company also made it clear yesterday that they felt almost all of the rescue workers were honest and noble, and noted that there were even signs of rigid integrity in the same places looters had struck.

Lt. Fluker said one search-and-rescue member had left a note. "On a postcard rack was a dollar bill sticking off one of the card slots," he said. "Someone had written on it, 'SAR team was here. Took WTC postcard. Good luck.' "

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