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THE NEW YORK TIMES, MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2001

At the Scene of Random Devastation, a Most Orderly Mission

By DAN BARRY

When the working masses return today to buildings not damaged by this month's terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, they will hear the echoes of steel girders crashing to the ground or catch glimpses down side streets of workers atop rubble piles that smolder like incense. These are the sights and sounds of a carefully orchestrated effort to close a gaping wound in the city's side.

In the first days after the collapse of the twin towers, the whiff of chaos mingled with the acrid air. Now, a sad and ceaseless choreography is emerging from the muck and debris that was once the proudest piece of Lower Manhattan, as city and fire officials assign specific tasks to thousands of rescue workers, ironworkers, firefighters and police officers — and those tasks are completed, again and again.

"You go through a lot of emergencies in the course of a lifetime," said Richard J. Sheirer, the director of the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management, who has worked for three decades in public safety. "I have never seen the kind of coordination and cooperation I have seen here.

"There is nothing popping up on the radar screen that creates a problem," he added. "We factored that in, anticipating that there might be. But there has been nothing. Everybody is pulling their oars together."

If it were not for the most distressful statistics — 261 confirmed dead, 6,453 missing — another number would take the city's collective breath away: more than 100,000 tons of debris removed, most of it delicately dislodged so as not to crush the dim hope that somewhere lies even one survivor. While the amount removed may be a small fraction of the total, it represents visible progress; once-buried West Street, for example, is now a wide roadway of dirt.

The people responsible — those fulfilling the repeated vow of public officials to rebuild New York — labor on the 16-acre plane of devastation like worker ants on an immense hill: the ironworkers in dirt-colored T-shirts; the volunteer ministers in shirts of sunny yellow; the Salvation Army members in red, the F.B.I. agents in blue, the National Guard soldiers in camouflage green. And all those firefighters and police officers, colored by weariness and grief.

Much of the organization is directed by the emergency management office. Ted Monette, the on-site coordinator for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, said that he and other emergency-management officials meet several times a day with Mr. Sheirer, essentially to ask the same question: "Richie, is there anything that we're *not* doing for you?"

The sounds of recovery: groaning engines, falling steel, hoarse shouts.

But down at the ground zero, as the ground still smokes and the hope for survivors still exists, overall responsibility lies with Assistant Fire Chief Frank P. Cruthers, who is the "incident commander."

Chief Cruthers said last night that the Fire Department had divided the disaster site into four sectors. ("It's as if you just superimposed a cross across the middle of the trade center plaza," he said.) From white tents raised in each sector, senior fire officials coordinate the efforts of hundreds — from search-and-rescue specialists to laborers — all assigned to specific sectors.

"One of the signs that things were working better came when I was on one of my tours of the site, and several construction people came and asked if I was Chief So-and-So," Chief Cruthers said. "Essentially, they were reporting in, looking for their sector chiefs."

The gargantuan clutches of gnarled steel and crushed concrete sprouting from craters at the disaster site's center could serve as some artist's material representation of chaos. But from the point of view of the disaster site veterans who remember what the scene looked like in the first days after the terrorist attack, signs of progress are everywhere.

Warren (Fuzzy) Carr, the leader of an urban search and rescue team from the Albany area, said that he worked at the site, mostly in frustration, for several days, took a two-day break, and then returned in the middle of last week. He said that he was immediately struck by how the emotional and physical landscape had changed, thanks in part, he said, to teams of ironworkers who seem to instantly materialize whenever a girder has to be moved.

"There's been a tremendous amount of cleanup," he said on Friday, while standing in a trailer parked a few yards from the

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THE SITE

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rubble. "And there's not as much chaos with your job assignments."

Inside the restricted zone, state troopers and National Guard soldiers stand sentry at buildings that are either unsafe or ripe for looting, from the Post Office on Church Street to O'Hara's Pub on Cedar Street. The city's police officers, meanwhile, serve myriad roles, none pleasant: some are lowered into the rubble to search for the living and the dead; others collect DNA samples from relatives of the missing for the possible identification of recovered body parts; still others join bucket brigades, where debris is removed pail by pail.

On Friday afternoon, for example, there was a somber shift change. Dozens of fatigued police officers climbed down from a mound that once was 2 World Trade Center and trudged away in silence, like coal miners who had just lost a brother down in the pit. They trooped past dozens of colleagues — their replacements, who strapped on masks while staring at the monster of rubble that awaited them. A superior gave the word, and this next bucket brigade moved up an otherwise-deserted Washington Street.

Similar examples of grim resolve are found no matter where one looks in ground zero. On West Street, construction workers pry loose jagged shards from the windows of Two World Financial Center. On Greenwich Street, an F.B.I. agent watches through binoculars as construction workers tackle the 70-foot wall of rubble that blocks southward passage. On Albany Street, environmental-restoration workers begin the protracted cleanup of a building that houses Morton's, a steakhouse where a blanket of cream-colored soot has settled on place settings for the lunchtime crowd that never came.

In some respects, ground zero resembles a demolition site, but it is not. It is a crime scene and burial ground, and the cleanup is made all the more delicate by the chance for survivors. It is also fraught with danger, with heavy construction equipment swinging above and the potential for collapse below.

A monumental task, but unmistakeable signs of progress.

"The construction people have been great," Mr. Sheirer said. "But we have to keep reminding people on site to stay alert. They are tired; they are fatigued."

On Saturday night, the grim choreography continued under portable lights that provided a ballpark's surreal brightness. The metal teeth of grapples dug into the debris to pull out steel girders and toss them aside as if they were made of paper, while cranes several stories high dipped their hooks into the abyss for yet another container of debris. Kneeling ironworkers cut through metal, sending showers of sparks into the air. Generators hummed, engines groaned and arcing shoots of water from a fire hose formed rainbows as they rained down on yet another hot spot in the pile.

A yellow-suited search-and-rescue team from San Diego plodded up Church Street; a few minutes later, a blue-suited team from South Florida lumbered south. Then a burly member of the Police Department's Emergency Services Unit walked past, the metal loops on his jumpsuit clinking; he grabbed a loop of fluorescent-green rope and headed toward a crater being examined by police and fire supervisors in white shirts.

Young women wearing hard hats and lugging buckets heavy with water bottles approached every person on the street — "Water? Water? Water?" they sang out. "Anyone want drinks?" — while Sigourney Weaver slung ratatouille in the makeshift restaurant called Ground Hero. A confused soldier asked the actress for her name; she made one up.

Sometime around 7:30 p.m., a body was pulled from the rubble, placed in a body bag, and laid across a construction cart. All removed their construction helmets and saluted as the makeshift hearse slowly ground away from the scene.

Then everyone returned to assigned tasks, including a single city sanitation worker, diligently pushing a broom past the blown-out buildings of Church Street.

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