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At Landfill, Tons of Debris, Slivers of Solace



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

The tools are pitchforks and shovels. The rewards include bits of clothing.

By DAN BARRY
and AMY WALDMAN

It gets cold up here. When the wind shifts, it smells like what it is, a half-century's worth of trash. When it rains, the ground bubbles with methane gas rising to the surface. And every now and then, above the groan of dump trucks and backhoes, fireworks ring out to scare off the turkey vultures.

The mind blurs from the monotony, while the muscles ache from raking, or digging, or standing still for hours at a time. Food and bathroom breaks require decontamination: rinse off the rubber boots; remove the gloves and hard hat; throw away the white protective suit; wash hands and face; check for cuts.

On top of all this, there is the task: to look for telltale bits and pieces among thousands of tons of dull-gray pieces of debris that have been carted from the World Trade Center disaster site and brought here, the recently closed Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Island. A warped credit card. A charred photograph. A human bone protruding from torn fabric. Anything that will identify one of the 5,000 dead; anything that will give a distraught family the material proof of a life now lost.

But the New York City police detectives and other law enforcement officials who scour this raised lunarscape say that the hassles and nightmares are worth it for just one of those needle-in-a-haystack mo-

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ment of Sanitation to the American Red Cross, to set up an operation that worked. In the first days, workers and trucks sank in mud like chocolate pudding, so gravel was poured. There were concerns about methane and other gases, so polyurethane and asphalt foundations were laid for the prefabricated buildings to come.

Now, a fully formed base camp — financed in part by $125 million in federal emergency money — has been established, with only 18 inches of fill separating investigators from decades worth of city garbage. There are rows of office trailers and portable toilets; a decontamination center; a supply center; a satellite dish to improve cellphone reception. Two 12,000-square-foot shelters were recently built by AmeriCares, a relief organization, so that the sorting, which may take up to a year, can continue through the winter. Two donated palm trees now rise defiantly from the barren plain.

There is even a mess hall where, on Friday, a movie played on a wide-screen television and the aroma of sausage and peppers wafted through the air — air constantly being tested for unhealthy gases by monitors in the ceiling. At long fold-out tables, weary investigators took 90-minute breaks — eating or reading or napping.

Among them was Scott Grainer, an Internal Affairs detective who drove 55 miles from Suffolk County to arrive for his shift at 4 a.m. Assigned to monitor the conveyor belt, he said he becomes so engrossed that he does not notice when the floodlights that illuminate The Hill at night give way to sunlight. If you watch the belt for too long — more than 20 minutes without looking away — you get motion sickness, he said, or "you get entranced in it, and you miss stuff."

At the end of his 12-hour shift, he drives home, takes four Motrins and a hot shower, and goes to sleep.

Inspector Luongo said that originally he had hoped almost to recreate Lower Manhattan on the landfill — to coordinate the piles of debris in exact relation to downtown streets. But, he said, "I defy anyone to tell me where everything came from."

And so he has sought to bring order to the chaos. Along the perimeter are rows of crushed police cars and fire engines, stacked on top of one another. A separate field has been created for the remains of 7 World Trade Center, which once housed regional offices of several federal agencies, including the Secret Service. In the dirt lay a pink-and-black chunk of its marbled facade.

But there is also randomness to the order. Over here, the engine from American Airlines Flight 11, the jetliner that crashed into the World Trade Center's north tower. Over there, the oversized concrete planters that were installed as a security measure after the trade center was bombed in 1993. And there, a fire hose, unraveled.

On The Hill, these are the easy finds, almost beside the point of the task, which is: to find the flight recorders of the two hijacked planes that toppled the towers; to find human remains; to find the belongings of the victims.

It works this way. Once large girders and concrete blocks have been set aside, the debris that does not run through conveyor belts is carefully laid out by backhoes in rough rectangles about half the size of a football field. On either side, as many as 30 investigators line up and move toward one another, raking and poking as they walk along. Most of the time, they find nothing, and sanitation workers clear the field.

But when an investigator spots an item, like the cache of spotless wedding invitations recently found, a supervisor rushes over. The item is brought first to the F.B.I. and then tagged and bagged by the police.

Some objects, like shoes, are discarded. Some, like a stuffed monkey that lay at the feet of a resting detective on Friday, are not officially vouchered, but are too viscerally sentimental to throw out. Many, like rings and wristwatches, that will not neccesarily help with identifications will be saved nonetheless; they may have enormous value for families left with little else. The department plans to catalog the items so they can be identified and returned to families efficiently and compassionately. The hope is to return belongings all at once, not sporadically.

A rare moment of discovery "makes you work more diligently," said one federal investigator, who in two weeks of raking has found some human remains, a credit card and a photo-identification card. After finding that credit card, he said: "I had an hour left to my shift, and that really juiced me."

Adding to the complexity of emotions is the realization that not everyone who lost an item in the disaster is dead. People who fled the collapse and lived tell of leaving behind baseball memorabilia, irreplaceable photographs — and other items exactly like those being found at Fresh Kills.

The Rev. Michael Harmuth, an Episcopal minister who serves as an F.B.I. chaplain, was present when investigators found a perfectly intact purse. He recalled, wondering: "Did this woman drop the purse and run to safety, or was she in that building, and this is what is left of her? I don't know."

There are pieces: of a wallet, of a keyboard, of clothing, and, sometimes, of a human being. When an investigator finds what looks like a body part, a supervisor brings it to the crime-scenes trailer nearby, where a chart of a skeleton hangs next to a table. Once verified as a human remain, it is photographed, labeled and refrigerated, until it is taken — along with police escort — to the city morgue in Manhattan.

Such are the scenes that will play out, day and night for months to come, in central Staten Island. There, on an artificial hill, can be seen the airplanes gently gliding to land at Newark International Airport and the luminous towers still rising from Lower Manhattan. "It is a beautiful sight," Lieutenant Bovino said. "You can almost forget you're in a landfill."

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ments. These rare finds, they say, bring a sense of accomplishment, and even joy.

Because the cause of the towers' collapse is known, said the Police Department's chief of detectives, William Allee, the search for evidence is secondary to the effort to "find something that belongs to somebody." He wants families to know: "These truckloads of destruction are not just being brought here and dumped in a big hole. There is a process. There is a protocol."

Yesterday morning, investigators found a hand, which may be identifiable through fingerprints. And Chief Allee said they found a "pile of mud" that turned out to be an American flag. He washed it and hung it in the work area.

It is the hunt for the solitary item or human fragment — the possible key to an unknown family's peace — that energizes the likes of Efram Negron, a narcotics detective. He normally works in the South Bronx, but on Friday he was sitting on a concrete block, waiting for a backhoe to lay out another pile of debris to be raked. Through a respirator that made his voice seem far away, he said, "I'll come up here for a year, or two years, it doesn't matter."

Sitting nearby, Joseph Pirrello, a 68-year-old retired police lieutenant who would normally be playing golf on a Friday morning, agreed. Arrayed before him were rakes and shovels, and beyond them, tons of unexamined rubble: piping and plastic and cement and steel and paper, all improbably fused together and coated with the gray powder of pulverized concrete. He repeated the message that superiors on this assignment use to rally their already-motivated troops:

"Somebody's got to do it."

It is something that has never been done. Without precedent to guide them, through trial and error, the Police Department and various other government agencies have developed a fairly sophisticated process to refine crudely jumbled debris. On a 135-acre, waste-made plateau rising 180 feet in central Staten Island — where there had been nothing but a foul wind and a glorious view — they have built a village to sort the evidence of a singular crime.

"The only thing that was up here was nothing," said Deputy Inspector James Luongo. Before the attack on Sept. 11, he was the executive officer of the Fugitive Enforcement Division in Brooklyn; after the 11th, he became the incident commander of a round-the-clock evidence-recovery operation that is known, simply, as The Hill.

"Keep in mind, nobody ever did this before," he added.

For more than a month, the world has focused on Lower Manhattan, where a terrorist attack on the World Trade Center killed more than 5,000 people and created more than 1.2 million tons of sorrowful rubble. Images of debris-laden trucks rumbling away from the site now define a city determined to dig out and move on.

What is less known, but no less remarkable, is that as the collapse site shrinks, The Hill grows. So far, 300,000 tons of rubble — about one-quarter of the disaster's total — have been taken by barge and truck to the landfill. There, as many as 300 detectives at a time, working 12-hour shifts, have pored over nearly two-thirds of that amount.

THE OTHER GRAVEYARD

The carcasses of fire trucks destroyed on Sept. 11 are mute testimony to the fate of many firefighters. The Times Magazine.

To date, they have found more than 1,700 body parts and about 1,600 items — from jewelry to credit cards to a set of keys — that might lead to the identification of one of the thousands of people listed as missing. In the prefabricated building where the investigators suit up, there is a poster-board display bearing five names, a few photographs and the inscription: "The following people were identified by our effort through the recovery operation." Those identifications came through conventional methods like dental records; the rest of the remains found here are undergoing DNA testing.

The display is intended to melt away the hours and days of fruitless combing, said Lt. Bruce J. Bovino. Investigators rejoice whenever he announces at roll call that another match between the missing and the material has been made, he said, adding, "We get guys asking, 'Remember that part I handed in — did you ID it?' "

One triumphant moment came on a recent night, as investigators were staring at the debris that was tumbling past them on the conveyor belt of a machine that sifts small objects from the large. There was a flash of silver. Someone said he thought he had seen a badge jiggle past and then disappear into a small mound of debris.

Immediately, they shut down the machine, spread out the pile, and raked through it — finding nothing.

So a bulldozer was summoned to scoop up the rubble and feed it through another sifting machine. This time they struck silver: the police shield of a missing Port Authority officer, who, as a result, is now counted among the dead identified at The Hill.

"You just don't give up," Lieutenant Bovino said.

Five weeks ago, there was no conveyor belt; no sifting machines; no grapplers to separate cast-iron pipes from fragile remnants. When the first loads of trade center debris made their climb to the Fresh Kills plateau, there was only a team of detectives, lacking protective gear but still eager to attack daunting, 12-foot-high piles that would not yield to mere rakes and shovels.

Gradually, though, Inspector Luongo and his counterpart from the F.B.I., Special Agent Richard Marx, and others patched together an approach for a task without template. They scoured the Internet for construction equipment and researched procedures that would fit their purpose. They enlisted other agencies, from the Army Corps of Engineers to the Depart-

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