NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

THE WORKERS

Amid Dig, Emotions Are Buried

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about going to the local bar and approaching the entrance and looking in at the people laughing and drinking and leading very normal lives. They look at that and then turn around and leave.

"It's like I don't belong there," Mr. Gray said.

According to the union, work is going well and ahead of schedule. With 25 excavators and 12 cranes, officials estimate that 40 percent of the debris has been removed. The two towers are below ground level now. The demolition of another building began on Thursday with the aid of a wrecking ball, a device that had been outlawed in Manhattan for 20 years.

The operating engineers say that they have been put between a rock and a hard place. They have to make progress, their supervisors tell them, and they are no longer allowed to stop the excavation unless they are specifically told by a man in a white hard hat.

"It's becoming a site where they're trying to get something done," said one crane operator, who asked that his sentiments not be attached to his name. "It tears you up."

But the operators and the firefighters have worked shoulder to shoulder since the beginning. They bailed buckets together the first week. And under the supervision of the firefighters, the operators picked columns and girders gingerly until a few weeks ago, when a door to millions in dollars of gold bullion was revealed.

After that, City Hall decreed that the number of firefighters on the site would be limited to 25, citing safety reasons. After protests by the firefighters and complaints from their widows, that number has been brought up to 75. But union officials say the firefighters have no power to stop the demolition.

The machine operators say they will not turn their backs on the firefighters, though. And so, in an unspoken pact, the excavators will dig, and if anything looks out of place, they will take the load and spread it to the side so that the firefighters may scour it for bodies. In the meantime, they will turn to another patch and remove that.



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Operators of heavy machinery have been at the site, round the clock, since the terror attack. Bodies and human remains continue to be found.

It is now classified as a construction site, but it is a strange stage with the flowers and memorials and the iron-beam cross salvaged from the carnage. Weary workers sneak catnaps in the trailers and sheds. Because of their prolonged proximity to the wreckage, every machine operator has what is being called the cough, brought on by the diesel and dust and smoke and water and asbestos and ground porcelain and glass. And the dozens of machines work around each other in a sort of terrestrial ballet.

The operators talk of the small moments when they stop and look to the heavens and see the stars. This makes them feel human again, only to turn around and see the smoke and destitution.

Thanksgiving is this week, and the crew would like to have off. Danny Nolan, a hard-charging man on the wrecking ball, has had few personal days since Sept. 11. There will be a skeleton crew working out of respect for the families, and people like Mr. Nolan, no relation to Gregg Nolan, said it was the right thing to do.

"If I had people in here, I'd want to know someone was looking too," Danny Nolan said.

Danny Nolan has nightmares now, waking up screaming about the job sometimes. Friends from the past who have died visit him, like the old friend whose name he will not speak because of a belief that the name now belongs only to the soul. In the dream, the friend takes him into a strange room and shows him actual items that Mr. Nolan has seen recovered from the World Trade Center, things like African artifacts.

"The place is playing tricks on me, I guess," he said.

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