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Every speck matters in search

Examining the wreckage of the towers, detectives vow that nothing will be missed

By Martha T. Moore
USA TODAY

NEW YORK — On the ground near a cluster of jet engine parts lies the battered bronze figure of a man.

Trade Center debris

It once stood in the offices of Cantor Fitzgerald on the highest floors of the World Trade Center's north tower, part of a Rodin sculpture called *The Three Shades*. Now headless and footless, it lies atop Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island, discovered here recently amid tons of debris.

There are many shades here, for this is a hellish place. It is cold. It smells like rotting garbage. Methane gas bubbles up in mud puddles. The air is gritty. Acres of twisted gray debris and mountains of coarse brown dirt cover the ground.

Within this are the remains of some of the 3,000 people who perished Sept. 11.

"When this is all over, I'm not saying I'm going to be able to recover your loved one, but I'll be able to look you in the eye and tell you we did the best job we can," says Deputy Inspector James Luongo of the New York Police Department.

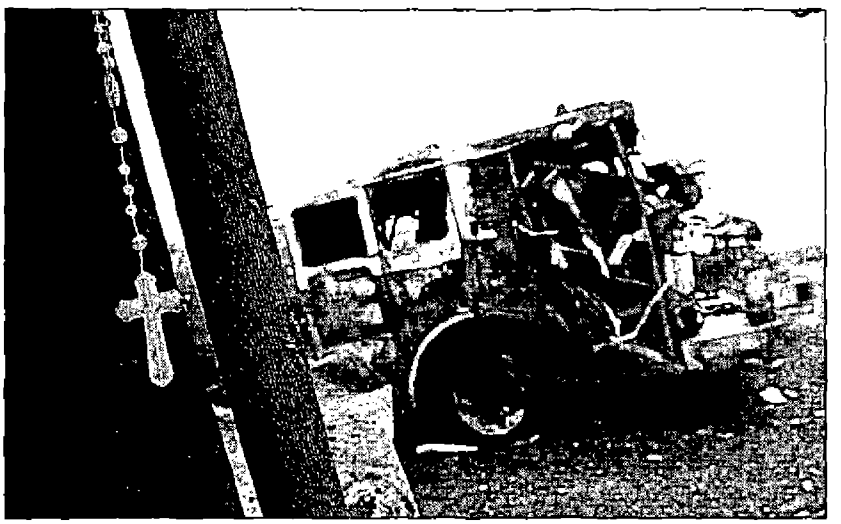
This 175-acre hilltop is a scant 18 inches of dirt on what was the world's largest garbage dump until it closed in April.

It is now a huge evidence field, commanded by Luongo, where the gold of human remains is sought in the dross of building rubble.

Seven days a week

More than three months after the terrorist attack, investigators continue to sift through the rubble of the Trade Center. Their goal: Give victims' families something of their loved ones to bury or some possession to cherish.

The work continues here 15 hours a day, seven days a week, and Christmas will be no exception. The process has been streamlined with machinery, but work is expected to continue at least until July.



"Sacred ground": A rosary, left by the wife of the chief of detectives, dangles from one of the smashed fire engines at the Fresh Kills landfill. Dozens of wrecked vehicles are lined up at the site.



By Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY

Twelve Sanitation Department barges a day arrive at the Staten Island landfill, each loaded with 650 tons of rubble from the Trade Center site in Lower Manhattan. Three hundred detectives and FBI agents sift through and examine the pulverized pieces.

White Christmas lights and a large wreath with red, white and blue ribbons decorate the command post trailer. But Christmas will still be bleak here on "the hill."

"This is the non-glory end," Luongo says. "This is not Ground Zero. This is on top of the Staten Island landfill."

Police consider the site a crime scene, even though details of the crime are all too clear.

"It's a recovery," says William Allee, chief of detectives. "We understand, probably better than most, how important it is to try to get a piece of personal property that belongs to (a victim), or some human remains that we can link with DNA (and) to give people the sense of security that stuff isn't being trucked over here and dumped in a big pit."

Investigators have found police badges and guns. They have found safes squashed to half their size and the contents incinerated. They have found purses and jewelry and employee identification cards and bits of bone and skin.

Police officer Barry Lavender found a wallet with identification and cash. "Hopefully it got back to the family," he says.

He found a ticket machine from the destroyed train station under the Trade Center. And he has found body parts.

"It's a curse, and it's rewarding at the same time," he says of the work.

On a clear day, workers can stand in the rubble of the Trade Center and see the gap in the Manhattan skyline where the twin towers used to stand. They shoot firecrackers skyward every few minutes to ward off seagulls.

A temporary city

For three weeks after the disaster, the site was just heaps of rubble. Police simply used rakes, shovels and their hands.

A temporary city has risen from bare dirt: offices, evidence rooms, a decontamination station for scrubbing yellow boots with disinfectant.

Red Cross volunteers serve hot meals. The walls by the food line are decorated with thank-you letters and drawings from schoolchildren. Pictures of police officers who died at the Trade Center hang on the walls around the encampment.

In a muster room, where workers pick up equipment and assignments, there's a massage table. Sample flight data recorders, both pristine and burned, are in a glass case. "So we know what we're looking for," says Richard Marx, the lead FBI agent at the site.

Enormous steel I-beams from the Trade Center are no longer brought to Fresh Kills. They now go directly to a metal recycler in New Jersey. Everything else goes on the barges.

From the barges, the debris is trucked uphill. It is separated with grapplers and mechanical shakers into heavy metals, light metals and crushed concrete and dirt. Big pieces are spread out in debris fields. Police armed with shovels walk with heads down, searching.

The rest is mechanically sifted three times with 6-inch, 2-inch and quarter-inch screens. It all goes onto conveyor belts. Detectives stand over the conveyor, looking and looking.

So far, they have gone through 680,000 tons of debris, more than half the estimated 1.2 million tons of material from the Trade Center.

When something is found, the conveyor belt stops.

Individual belongings such as the wallet Lavender found — ordinary things carried by people heading off for what was to be an ordinary day — are put in evidence envelopes and bags and stored. If they can be linked to specific victims, they will be returned to families.

Human remains are photographed, put in a bucket and taken to a forensic anthropologist for verification. Then they are kept in a refrigerated truck to be taken to the medical examiner's office.

So far, investigators have found 2,555 body parts. They have identified 34 Trade Center victims through fingerprints, dental records or replaced joints.

"We go through every speck down to a quarter-inch," says David Leach, who heads the Army Corps of Engineers team on the project. "There isn't anything that is getting by the detectives."

At the far end of the debris fields, neatly lined up, are dozens of wrecked fire engines. Some are relatively intact, some are scorched and flattened. A steel ladder on a truck is twisted and torn.

Firefighters rode to the Trade Center in these vehicles, ran into the burning buildings and never came out. A rosary dangles on one truck. Allee's wife, Diane, put it there.

'A job that has to be done'

Police assign investigators to the site only one day at a time because the work is stressful. Detective Frank Frasco, like most of the investigators, is usually here two days a week.

"It's a job that has to be done," he says. The reward is finding something that may go back to a family, whether to be cherished or to be buried. "It's a good feeling when you can help somebody."

"You try and become desensitized, but to say that things don't affect you would not be true," Luongo says.

"If it doesn't bother you, I don't want you here," Allee says.

For some, the work is a way to deal with feelings about surviving when others did not. Allee comes to the site at night to drive around. "I come up and I cry, and it's OK. It's OK to cry."

Priests have blessed the piles of wreckage, and Masses have been said. "This is sacred ground," Allee says.

Luongo had T-shirts made with a picture of St. Michael, patron saint of police. On the back is a Latin quotation from Virgil, the poet Dante chose to lead him through the underworld. Luongo chose it for his journey through Fresh Kills.

"No stranger to misfortune myself," he translates, "I have learned to relieve the suffering of others."

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