NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

ROCKAWAY POSTCARD
AFTER THE CRASH



At noon on Monday, November 12th, a Rockaway-bound A train was packed with news reporters and photographers. They hovered around the subway map, amazed by the route, which cuts, ferrylike, across the shallow waters of Jamaica Bay. It seems fair to assume that never before had a subway car traversing this stretch of Queens contained so many people talking on cellular phones. One person not on the phone was Jimmy Breslin, the newspaper columnist, who gazed out over the water toward the Rockaways. He carried a paperback edition of Balzac's "Lost Illusions" in his jacket pocket.

Hours before, American Airlines Flight 587 had crashed into Belle Harbor, Queens, a middle-class enclave on the Rockaway peninsula, killing everyone aboard and five people on the ground. Already, the passengers on the A train knew certain things: that many Belle Harbor residents were firefighters, that dozens and dozens of them had died at the World Trade Center on September 11th, that a good number of families were now doubly cursed. Within moments of the crash, local firefighters, on duty and off, had rushed to the scene to douse the blaze that had quickly consumed a swath of the neighborhood.

By the time the trainload arrived in Belle Harbor, the fire was pretty much out. On the crash's perimeter, out of sight of the wreckage, the scene—chaotic as it was, with firemen and fire trucks and cops milling and rushing about—seemed oddly composed. Conditioned by the immense spectacle and horror of September 11th, the media horde was unsure of itself, not quite capable of recalibrating its coverage to the gruesome but more ordinary subject at hand. This was a plane crash. The damage was done. The fire was out. Homes were gone. Loved ones were dead. Bodies were recovered, and bagged, and counted. The cops manned barricades. The network-TV vans found curb space. The correspondents found witnesses and backdrops. The Governor and the Mayor paid visits. The Scientologists distributed booklets. "It's a horrible thing," said a Belle Harbor man, who had been interviewed more than twenty times. At a certain point, there wasn't much more one could say.

A theory making the rounds among some of the younger Rockaway residents was that the neighborhood had been the target of a terrorist attack. On Wednesday, just before midnight, a teen-age boy was hanging out with some young women on a rusted swing set by the boardwalk. He had on a hooded sweatshirt and jeans. "Osama's out to get Rockaway," he said. He recalled that, at a benefit concert at Madison Square Garden last month, a firefighter named Michael Moran, whose brother had died on September 11th, had declared from the stage, "Osama bin Laden, you can kiss my royal Irish ass! And I live in Rockaway Beach." So Flight 587, the teen-ager surmised, had been steered into Belle Harbor as payback.

Others knew better. Rogers Irish House, on 116th Street, about half a mile from the crash site, is known as the bar where the retired guys go. Retired doesn't necessarily mean old in the Rockaways; cops and firefighters retire young. A few nights after the crash, the TV above the bar was tuned to the Fox News channel. The anchor was trying to get a former investigator for the National Transportation Safety Board to entertain the notion that Flight 587 might have been sabotaged; the investigator wasn't biting. Neither was Frank O'Rourke, a fifty-three-year-old retired investigator, who sat drinking a half pint of beer. "How about a little common sense?" he said. "People need to take a timeout, read some history. Get a book! This war is about economics. Let me give you an example: Would I like it if someone put an oil rig in Jamaica Bay? Would I like it if all the oil went to someone else? Would I like it if all the money went to someone else? No. In the Middle East, they're mad."

Raised in lower Manhattan, O'Rourke, who is tan and fairly fit, moved to Rockaway in 1978. His house, overlooking Jamaica Bay, has a garden full of tomatoes and corn, and a view of the Manhattan skyline. "Once you get a taste of the salt water, you're here for life," he said.

O'Rourke lost a passel of old friends and sons of old friends on September 11th. "We were all lifeguards together," he said. "If they're hurting, I'm hurting." Among those hurting friends is Bernie Heeran, a former cop and firefighter, who owns the Harbor Light Pub, a block from the crash site. His son Charlie, a twenty-three-year-old trader at Cantor Fitzgerald, died in the World Trade Center attack. Then, last week, Chris Lawler, a law student and an occasional fill-in bartender at the Harbor Light, was killed, along with his mother, Kathy, by Flight 587. So were other friends and neighbors. After the crash, Heeran helped put out the fire, then turned the pub into a makeshift rescue center. That night, it stayed open late for a kind of Irish wake. Food and drink were free. Rescue workers drifted in and out. In the morning, staff and neighborhood residents came by and cleaned up. Many of them had to sneak past the police barricades to get to the bar.

"This is another tragedy. We're making the best of it," Heeran said last week. "But there's another two hundred and sixty people who died on that plane. After we put out the fire, we were stepping on the bodies without even knowing it. People keep asking, How do I feel? How do you *think* I feel?"

—*Nick Paumgarten*

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