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At the Pit, a Night Shift to Numb the Body and Soul

By CHARLIE LeDUFF

There is no exact starting time for the graveyard shift at ground zero. The crews work on staggered schedules depending on the jobs they do. The gangs of ironworkers go until midnight. The excavators labor for 12 hours at a stretch, the firemen often come in their spare time, and so on.

The simplest gauge is sunset, about 4:30 p.m., when Eddie Reinle hits the switches on the false lights and the pit takes on the look of a lunar landscape.

"The winter days are long and dark and cold," Mr. Reinle, who earned the lighting privilege after 30 years of operating heavy equipment, said on Friday night. "They're fourteen-and-a-half-hour days now. Maybe in the summertime, I'll get some sleep, if I live that long."

There is no extra money for working the night shift, though there are extra physical and psychological challenges. There are the strained marriages, the spotty eyes from the floodlights, the cold and the wind. At night, the tourists don't line up to take your picture or slap your back. The movie stars rarely visit. It's Friday night and people are partying.

At night, it is all about the work, work that the men and women at ground zero consider an honor to do. It is their defining moment, just as it was for their grandfathers when the Empire State Building went up.

About half the rubble has been removed now, the foremen estimate, perhaps 600,000 tons of steel and debris. The south side of the site is as clean as a parking lot, and the only thing left of the two towers is a section to the north about 200 feet high and 12 columns wide. Most of the work goes on below ground level now, and compared with the



(Edward Keating/NYT)

The night shift at the trade center site is work that presents unique physical and psychological challenges.

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initial wreckage, the scene looks almost sanitary.

The workers, though, do not count their success in metal or tonnage, but in bodies. Despite pressure from the contractors in charge of the site and decrees from City Hall, it is still a recovery operation to them, and it will be until the end.

At 6 p.m. Friday, the work stops: two uniformed bodies are found in a stairwell near the elevator shaft, their faces still discernible. They are firefighters, and their remains are bagged and covered with a flag and taken out of the pit through a double column of mud-stained firefighters. A salute is given, a prayer offered, and finally they are driven away to the temporary morgue on Liberty Street for identification.

James McKee, 59, watches. Ironwork is in his blood. He worked three and a half years on building the trade center, he watched his brother Gerard fall to his death while helping to erect the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, his father was crippled by ironwork and his great-uncle Jimmy Sullivan was the first in the family to join Local 40.

"All these people died for what?" Mr. McKee wants to know. "Let us not forget about the civilians who died here and those who lost them. Who salutes them?"

When the bodies are gone, the work resumes and all the undramatic things familiar only to the ground zero crew assume their proper places. The excavators claw through the pile. The ironworkers are hoisted up in a bucket to burn away the remaining wall. It rains fire, pressurized water dissipates into mist and the blowtorches produce an eerie green vapor. The pit fumes a white stinking smoke. Men shout. The falling metal makes the sound of the ocean booming as it breaks over the shore. The smells are of burning wiring, dankness from the subway tunnels and the sweet, acrid, cherrylike smell of death.

There are small amulets: crosses welded together from the steel and piping, Christmas wreaths attached to the grills of dump trucks, Mass cards hung in the cabs of the cranes as a favor to the relatives of the missing.

Around 8:40 p.m. on Friday the bodies of two more uniformed men are found in a stairwell of the south tower. Work again stops and the ironworkers, who have been cutting steel beams, emerge from the hole.

Andy Jacobs is among them, looking numb. Mr. Jacobs is a 36-year-old Mohawk from the Kahnawake reservation near Montreal, and in the tradition of that territory, he followed his father and grandfather into the occupation.

"I'm Indian, so I can adapt," he says, staring down toward the

nightmare. "Those are human beings, eh? But you got to detach yourself. I try to think of them as big stuffed dolls."

Lunchtime comes at 9 p.m. for the ironworkers. Some eat the free grub in the Salvation Army tent. They have coffee cake and pepper steak and nearly anything you want there except a change in scenery.

So the gang takes lunch at the pizza parlor on Greenwich Street, next to the Pink Pussycat strip club, where streetwalkers also work because capitalism abhors a vacuum. In the back of the pizza parlor, there is a little bar where the women talk friendly and are more friendly if you pay them.

The ironworkers and their foreman, Larry Keating, take their coffee outside and smoke cigarettes. They are covered in pockmarks where the slag sparks from the burning metal have smoldered into their necks and arms and eyelids. One of them, Al Benecke, goes back to the night he first got to ground zero. He grows animated and frightens a man in white shoes and a clean overcoat who is walking out of the Pink Pussycat. The size and volume of the ironworkers upsets the man, who has the look of never having suffered prolonged physical discomfort, hunger or cold. He tosses a sheepish grin and gives a wide berth to the group of substantial men.

Another man, similar to the first, walks out of the club alone, similarly dressed, and soaks his foot in a puddle, which causes Dennis Telford to howl with laughter.

"Haw, haw, did you see that?" It is the freest, moist boisterous laughter all evening. Laughing, screaming, even drinking coffee are not done in the pit.

The work goes steadily to midnight. More debris is removed and two more bodies are recovered. A group of ironworkers stand on a gnarled beam, one end of which juts out over the pit like a gangplank. They stand with their arms folded and they can smell the bodies. A chaplain attends to every corpse. No one goes to the morgue alone, without a friend. Mr. McKee, the signal man, looks at his watch and confuses 10:40 with 4:50.

"You lose track working at night," he said. "When I wake up I don't know if I should eat eggs or dinner."

Midnight comes, the half-moon is low in the sky and the ironworkers don't linger. Most run to their cars and drive home to Long Island or New Jersey. A few go to the Blarney Stone: bars seem to be the only nighttime businesses in the general vicinity to have recuperated.

There they find a Friday night crowd. They study their fellow patrons, listen to their worries and small concerns. A couple hug and kiss, soul

music plays, the ice cubes tinkle. The sign above the bar reads: "Smoking and Breathing Second Hand Smoke Is Dangerous to Your Health."

At the pit, the work never stops. Early in the morning, between 3 and 4 o'clock, workers find two more bodies, and when they pull them out, Martin Riley, a gigantic man with ears set low on his head, lingers in the cab of his excavator, shattered, whipped, numb.

The halt in work gives him a moment to gather himself, and when the uniformed men pray, Mr. Riley thinks not just of the dead, but of those yet to be, his unborn child, those who remain.

Mr. Riley had taken the last three days off to be with his wife, having been at the site since the beginning of this calamity. The regular life, the poinsettias and the groceries and the housework, had softened him. Now back on the job and looking at those bodies, he understands how difficult it is to be the master of one's emotions when under distress. And as he shivers, someone asks, "You O.K., Mo?"

At some point, some people need a crevice in which to catnap. The ambulance drivers do it in their rigs, the foremen in the construction trailers, the morticians in the morgue. Many go over to St. John's Church on Broadway to sleep in the pews. Nearby on the corner at Fulton Street, laborers stand around waiting to be chosen for office-cleaning jobs.

Inside the church, the morning coffee is brewing. When you put your head down to rest, you see the backs of the pews covered with letters and drawings from children across the country, and you fall asleep reading good things about yourself.

"The sausage and pancakes are really good," one police officer says. His breakfast is interrupted by a call. More bodies.

And at 6:30, in the waning darkness, the seventh victim of the evening is exhumed, and a Port Authority police officer who just carried the body out says to one of the machine operators: "We got some of our guys, the Fire Department got some of theirs, the city cops got one. Everybody tonight. It's crazy."

No one speaks of the civilians.

At 7:08, dawn streaks across the sky and the moon still hangs high. The morning crew begins to take control of the machinery. And Eddie Reinle turns off the lights.