

# Retired NYPD officers: We dug through the World Trade Center rubble, looking for our brothers

*The area that would come to have different names: Epicenter, Ground Zero, The Pile and, eventually, hallowed ground. For us it was Dante's Inferno.*

<https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2021/09/05/people-who-survived-collapse-twin-towers-september-11/5453485001/>

The tears still come, especially when we recall our wives and children waiting for us that day – from home, from work, from school – not knowing if we'd walk through the door again.

We were New York City police officers at the time. We each took different paths to the World Trade Center that day. Those paths converged as we tackled opposite ends of a dangerously intense rescue of two New York and New Jersey Port Authority police that changed our lives.

Only 20 people survived the collapse of the twin towers and were pulled from the rubble. We were able to help save two of them.

We'd both ended shifts just before the planes crashed into the towers, although the notion of working a shift quickly became meaningless. We drove through civilian-directed traffic into Manhattan because police officers and firefighters already were running toward danger at the World Trade Center site.

## **We couldn't see the men we rescued**

Officers set up perimeters and saved as many dust-covered people as they could around the area that would come to have different names: Epicenter, Ground Zero, The Pile and, eventually, hallowed ground. For us it was Dante's Inferno. We choked on thick, black smoke that kept us from being able to see the men we were rescuing, even as we were chest-to-chest with them.



Emergency workers at ground zero on Sept. 11, 2001 after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. AP Photo/Mark Lennihan

Two officers, Port Authority Police Sgt. John McLoughlin and rookie Port Authority Police Officer Will Jimeno, were trapped under 30 feet of rubble. Will's wife was seven months pregnant. They were injured, stuck and in pain.

Our team crawled over and through hot steel beams. We stripped ourselves of "extra" equipment – even our service weapons, which is unheard of – to fit through a dark, narrow opening in the ground about the size of a manhole. There wasn't room or time for sophisticated equipment.

We scraped at the rubble with hand tools and knives to free our brothers while dozens formed bucket brigades to carry away and sort through rubble and remains. Choking and dry heaving from the heat and smoke, we dug with our bare hands. When the medical kit a medic brought to the rescue wasn't compatible with the one given by an emergency room physician, we improvised, doing things like using a ball point pen to puncture vials of medication while officers McLoughlin and Jimeno were trapped beneath cinderblocks.

Firefighters yelled at us to get out of the hole as two more buildings collapsed in the area, while McLoughlin and Jimeno worried we were going to leave. We stayed, but worried they may not survive the rescue.

Ultimately, we wedged a perfectly angled piece of rebar between Jimeno and the cinder blocks that were crushing him, and were able to get him out. About eight hours and hundreds of rescuers later, we were finally able to pull out McLoughlin the next morning.

We didn't know until later that we'd endured burns and cuts through our uniforms and our boots, right through to our feet. We worked until supervisors forced us to get medical attention. We were just two of hundreds of people who helped save those two men, but we'll always remember our colleagues who didn't return to their families. Those two men were all of us, and we used every bit of training, strength, and even gallows humor to free them.



Ash covers a street in downtown New York City after the collapse of the World Trade Center following the terrorist attacks on Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001. *Bernadette Tuazon, AP*

We worked on the pile for nine months. Today, we're haunted regularly by the images of the people and things we saw and uncovered – body parts, shoes, souvenirs – to offer what solace we could to as many families as possible.

Now our families worry as we cough and use inhalers to treat our labored breathing. We get checked regularly for conditions that we acquired from toxic conditions and materials at the piles, and encourage everyone who worked downtown after 9/11 to get medical consultations free of charge

through the World Trade Center Health Program, which was established under the Zadroga Act.



Scott Strauss in Spetember 2017 in New Hyde Park, New York. *Northwell Health*.

## **Eddie Reyes and Scott Strauss** Opinion contributors

Most important to us now, is to remember those we lost on 9/11, and those we continue to lose too soon from the effects of Ground Zero. That gallows humor still keeps us intact as we discuss our ailments the way elderly people might. Many of us are managing the most serious medical conditions, like cancer, as a result of our work, so we need it.

We don't regret one moment of work on the rescue and in those piles. It has brought us to today and we consider it a privilege to carry the memories of those who were lost, and those memories we've been able to create with our families ever since.

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