

# Ground Zero

New York, November 11th, 2001

If you have ever been to New York, it is unmistakable that a lot of things have changed in the wake of the September 11th attacks. Yesterday, I visited Ground Zero, the location of the WTC twin towers that were taken out by an act of such evil stupidity that it quite simply defies understanding. I wanted to share my experiences of this visit with all of you, as my little contribution to remembering those whose lives were lost, lest we forget. Today is the attack's two month "anniversary"...

One of the most visible changes here in New York is the abundant presence of police and National Guard (the US's domestic army), especially at important structures like tunnels, bridges and Grand Central Station. When driving into Manhattan through the Midtown Tunnel, my taxi was stopped and inspected by an armed and stern looking National Guardsman. New York State Troopers (the state police) can also be seen driving around in the city, a strange sight indeed. At lunch time, you share the deli with military police out to lunch like everyone else. At first sight, this looks more like Belfast than New York.

Entering the Bank of America building now requires a bag search for all non-ID'd visitors. Another sure sign of change is that everyone calmly accepts the checkpoints, road blocks, bag searches et cetera. Where Americans are usually the first to make a fuss about their constitutional right to do as they please, the almost gladly succumb to the new security measures. The need for stricter security is widely accepted, and one man I spoke to confided in me that he did not think we would see the end of it in our lifetimes.

American flags and other signs of patriotism are all over the place. People are wearing buttons with stars and stripes on them, shops display banners with texts like "One nation under God", "United we stand" and "God bless America, my home sweet home". Big billboards along the freeway declare the boundless gratefulness felt for the New York Police Department (NYPD) and the Fire Department of New York (FDNY): "Our Heroes".



When walking along the streets of Manhattan you are bound to pass a firestation. Two months ago, you could quite easily get away with not noticing them: rather obscure red doors in large office blocks along the many streets and avenues of this great city. Now, every fire station is a shrine to the firefighters that lost their lives in the aftermath of the attack. Every single firestation in Manhattan has lost one or more of its crew; some stations have been wiped out completely. The stations are covered with flowers, letters, little notes, poems (some of them written by children as young as 13 years old). One particularly heartbreaking note, written in the handwriting of a six year old, said: "Daddy, please come home. I miss you"...

The pictures of the FDNY firefighters show big confident men in uniform or with their families. Letters from the station's neighbours invariably claim that a fund has been started to help the widows and orphans of those who gave their lives rescuing others. Our loss is heaven's gain. A

meagre consolation...

The WTC complex is/was located in the south west of Manhattan, an easy four mile walk from my hotel which is located next to Grand Central Station (42nd and 4th). After about an hour of walking, it becomes clear that something is missing at the horizon. Where two gigantic towers used to rise up to the skies, a large glaring hole now exists. Closer to the Ground Zero site, the air becomes thick and heavy with dust; the unmistakable smell of burning penetrates your nose. (Not that the buildings are burning anymore, but the deconstruction activities have to demolish and break the large metal structures that formed the towers' skeletons.)



A large perimeter fence has been erected around the entire complex, but you can get close enough to get a good view of the carnage. From afar, the completely burned out skeleton of one of the smaller office buildings next to former the twin towers can be seen. Closer, the view simply defies description. Large cranes are tearing down the remains of office buildings, construction workers are stepping among the rubble where the remains of over 4,000 men, women and children are still buried. Occasionally, a body is recovered from the site. The day before yesterday for instance, marking the 559'th body that was found in this incredible heap of

metal and concrete.

There is an awed and deeply shocked silence among the onlookers. Some people are praying or keep a solemn silence while pondering on the enormity of it all. Police and private security personnel are guarding the site. Nobody, literally nobody, are trying to get closer, pass the barrier or take a "souvenir". People have written and drawn things in the dusty windows surrounding and on Ground Zero. The pictures range from the United States Flag to a bunch of flowers. The texts contain prayers, but also express the anger of the writer with these gruesome attacks ("One nation undivided under God/ with liberty and justice for all/ You got a problem with that?").



We walked the perimeter to the northwestern corner of the site. There you find the main entrance to the site for the lorries that transport rubble to dumping grounds elsewhere. The National Guard and police officers all wear respirators, for here is also the facility that hoses down each and every vehicle leaving the site with water. The military style checkpoint does not allow viewers on the near corners of the crossroads. Those wishing to take photographs are delegated to the far side of the road.

We walked south along the fence

We walked south along the fence to the southwestern corners. The office buildings we passed were closed. Big posters proclaim that respirators are compulsory inside these buildings because of asbestos residues. The most southwestern tip of the site borders the ocean. Here we got a full view of a large office building, mostly intact, but with a great chunk missing on the side, as if a giant had taken a bite out of the side and decided that it did not taste well after all.



Round the corner you reach the former entrance of the WTC grounds. A sea of flowers, notes, poems, pictures and teddy bears stretches as far as your eyes can see. A big banner proclaims the eternal gratitude of American Airlines flight attendants towards the FDNY and NYPD. People from all over made their grief materialise in this place. Obituaries line the fence. Lovers, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, children and friends proclaim their everlasting love to the deceased and missing. Pictures of the victims, beautiful in

their happiness, can be seen all over the place. Prayers and poems speak of the great loss to all mankind that has happened here. A sister has written a letter to her lost brother, fondly remembering the good times they had and how they would always be there for one another. A wrestling team mourns the passing of their companion. Colleagues state how much they miss their co-worker. A husband states how much he misses his wife and how he will never forget her.

Blue and pink teddy bears have been placed on top of thousands of flowers. There is no anger here. Just unspeakable grief. Tears came to my eyes as I walked along the shrine. I silently cried while reading the letters taped to the walls and looking at the pictures. I do not know any of the grieving or deceased people, but they are me, and I am them.

Tuesday September 11th 2001, a part of us all died. And we all lost people we loved, for they were us.

++Jos

*No one leaves you, when you live in their heart and mind.  
No one dies, they just move to the other side.  
[Steve Hogarth]*



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*Last updated Sat May 4 17:11:34 CEST 2002 by josv@osp.nl*