

9/11 responders live with injuries, illnesses sustained at Ground Zero

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The stabbing pain in Robert Reeg's chest every day is a relentless reminder of Sept. 11, 2001.

The retired New York City firefighter from Stony Point was seriously injured in the collapse of the South Tower at the World Trade Center.

"If I close my eyes, I can picture it," the now 59-year-old recalled.

Reeg, a firefighter with Engine 44 in the Bronx, was reaching for equipment in a truck when he saw the top of the building start to crumble.

"It looked like a mushroom coming down," he said. "As I saw it coming, I started running the other way. I got some distance, and then parts of the building were rocketing past me like they were shot out of a cannon."

Hurling steel slammed into his back and head, knocking him to the ground as he was buried in rubble.

When the tsunami of debris stopped, all he could hear was a chorus of beeping PASS

alarms, devices firefighters wear that go off if they aren't moving.

Barely able to breathe or see in the thick cloud of dust, he crawled on the ground and managed to climb into a police car, where he was found by police officers.

But his ordeal wasn't over. The ambulance taking him to the hospital narrowly dodged the North Tower collapse and hit a bus before Reeg finally reached the former St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village. He was then transferred to Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx and needed surgery for six broken ribs, a collapsed lung and blood in the membranes around his lungs. He had also developed a staph infection.

Reeg, a father of two daughters, spent nearly a month in the hospital and was shocked to learn how many friends he lost.

"A lot of times it's the luck of the draw," he said. "You ran one way, you made it; you ran another way, and you didn't."

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Reeg tried to go back to work, but had to retire in 2003. Doctors have to monitor scar tissue in his lungs that's around the concrete and glass still lodged there. Today he suffers from nerve damage, back and chest pain and asthma attacks.

"I don't like to make a big deal of it," he said. "A lot of people have pain. I just put up with it."

Thousands of 9/11 responders like Reeg still suffer health effects from Ground Zero, their pain never letting them forget the horror they witnessed and just how much they've sacrificed for others. Ten years after the terrorist attacks that drew them to the World Trade Center destruction, many were forced to retire and some do not know if they'll be compensated for their ailments.

Escaping together

Edward Kennedy, 57, of Mahopac was a fellow firefighter with Reeg in Engine 44. He survived the South Tower collapse by jumping under a car.

"It sounded like a hurricane or freight train running down my back," Kennedy remembered. "I stumbled and lost my helmet. I didn't really have time to think. I just said, 'I have to get underneath there.' I was buried and when everything stopped, it was eerie. It was total silence. When I came out, it was like being in a snowstorm."

Kennedy, who miraculously escaped injury,

spent about 10 days working on the pile.

Health problems for the father of three began about five years ago with snoring at night and wheezing. Kennedy was diagnosed with sarcoidosis, an inflammatory disease that commonly affects the lungs and which doctors believe is caused by exposure to toxins. He also has asthma, which he controls with medication, and needs CAT scans of his chest every year to monitor the scarring of his lungs.

But he's currently in good health.

"There is very rarely a day that goes by when I don't think about how lucky I am, and I think about everyone who died," Kennedy said. "You often wonder, 'Why me? Why did I live?' "

Every Sept. 11 he has returned to Ground Zero to re-trace his escape path that day. He has also shared his story at events and the 9/11 Tribute Center.

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"How do you always remember and move on?" he said. "You have to move on and live your life. This is a good way of remembering people."

Although he's "in a happy place" in life, he's still concerned about his future health.

That's why the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act of 2010, a fund set up to help ailing Ground Zero responders, is so important.

"Who is going to take care of the families?" Kennedy said. "God forbid if I die, it would help my family."

Fighting cancer

But responders who now have cancer are currently excluded from the act, like cancer survivor Ernie Vallebuona, a retired NYC detective from New City who worked for months at Ground Zero.

A National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health study released in July found there isn't enough scientific evidence to link cancer cases to Ground Zero.

"Just based on the common sense alone — the staggering number of cops, firemen and emergency workers with blood cancers," the 46-year-old said. "It's so obvious, it's ridiculous."

Despite the findings, he is optimistic cancer will eventually be added to the list.

When he worked in the rubble, there were

never enough paper masks to go around, he recalled, and even those quickly became filled with black soot. After leaving the site, workers would "cough up granular goo. You would choke on it."

He was diagnosed with Stage 3 lymphoma in 2004 after suffering from stomach pain and horrible fatigue he thought was from working midnight shifts.

The cancer returned the next year, forcing him to get a stem-cell transplant from his own blood and endure more grueling chemotherapy.

"The worst part of the cancer is your life is so on hold," said Vallebuona, a father of two. "Everything is so uncertain. It's hard to focus on getting your life together until you know you are going to be healthy." He retired from the NYPD in 2006.

While he is grateful to have survived, the aggressive cancer treatment has left him with kidney problems, severe hearing loss, and tingling and numbness in his

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extremities.

"Would we do it again? Yeah, but I hope someone in the powers-that-be would say 'Let's give them masks,'" Vallebuona said.

David Worby, the White Plains attorney representing 10,000 Ground Zero workers, pointed out that New York City, the Port Authority and other agencies agreed to an \$812 million settlement with workers that included blood cell cancers, respiratory illnesses and other diseases.

It's still unclear which specific respiratory illnesses will be covered under the Zadroga Act, and Worby hopes cancer will eventually be added to the list.

"There has got to be a way to resolve it amicably so these people can still be taken care of," he said.

For sick responders, the fear of illness returning is always there, Vallebuona said.

"The people like me and my friends who are sick, we are going to live with this the rest of our lives — fighting off cancer," he said.

Enduring discomfort

Yonkers firefighter George Kielb, 53, considers his Ground Zero-related problems minor compared to others. Kielb was one of about 140 Yonkers firefighters who rushed to New York City in the aftermath of the attacks.

"I thought it was dangerous," he said of the floating debris. "You could see it was like snow in the air."

The battalion chief suffers from gastroesophageal reflux disease, which has been linked to Ground Zero workers, and while he is still fit enough to work as a firefighter, he carries an emergency inhaler for breathing difficulties.

"I have some days when it just hurts to breathe," he said.

Kielb takes part in the Mount Sinai Hospital health monitoring program and doesn't know if his lungs will stay healthy.

"Don't get all worked up about little stuff," he said of what his 9/11 experience has taught him. "I appreciate a lot of things more."

Living with disability

Former Peekskill detective Charlie Wassil

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still remembers with crisp detail the week he spent sifting through the devastation at Ground Zero.

"It seemed like everything was frozen, and while we were digging, the fighter jets are over circling," the 51-year-old said during an emotional interview this summer. "We had dogs to go down into the voids, and every time a dog would hit, there would be a signal that maybe someone was alive. They would tell everyone on the pile, 'Be quiet, be quiet,' so you could maybe hear someone yell for help. During the silence, you could hear the fighter jets, the flames still crackling from the buildings still on fire."

Within months, Wassil, a former Marine, developed a cough and shortness of breath.

He was diagnosed with sarcoidosis, the body tissue inflammation disease that has forced him to use a wheelchair. Wassil, who retired in 2008, is being cared for at Bethel Nursing & Rehabilitation Center in Croton-on-Hudson.

"I can't get out of bed without help. I can't eat without help. I can't drink. I can't go to the bathroom by myself," he said. "I wouldn't wish this on anyone."

Wassil, who receives state workers' compensation and may be eligible for money from the Zadroga Act, doesn't consider himself a hero.

"The firemen who ran into the building that day, the cops, they are the real heroes," he

said.



Eddie Kennedy, a retired FDNY firefighter, holds his firefighter's helmet at his Mahopac home Aug. 4, 2011. He was buried for a short time under the rubble of the World Trade Center and has sarcoidosis, a respiratory disease, and asthma from working at Ground Zero. (Joe Larese / The Journal News)

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Ernie Vallebuona, a retired New York City detective from New City, worked for months at Ground Zero and was diagnosed with Stage 3 lymphoma in 2004. "The worst part of the cancer is your life is so on hold," says Vallebuona, a father of two. / Peter Carr/The Journal News

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