



GROUND ZERO JOB DID KILL OFFICER

By MURRAY WEISS and CATHY BURKE

April 12, 2006 -- The death of a burly, 34-year-old NYPD detective who wasted away and died of respiratory failure was "directly related" to his heroic work in the smoldering debris of Ground Zero after 9/11, a New Jersey coroner ruled in a first-ever finding.

The momentous decision in the Jan. 6 death of James Zadroga, which was announced yesterday, definitively links a death to cleanup work at the World Trade Center site - a toxic soup of burning debris and noxious fumes.

"They all knew it was detrimental to their health," said the officer's father, Joseph Zadroga. "They all knew that, yet they stayed there."

At least 75,000 cops, firefighters, rescue personnel, other workers and volunteers had at least two weeks of direct exposure there in the days following the terror strikes, according to one expert.

Dr. James Kay, the Ocean County, N.J., coroner ruled Zadroga succumbed from respiratory disease after "exposure to toxic fumes and dusts."

The death, Kay ruled, "with a reasonable degree of medical certainty," stemmed from Zadroga spending 470 hours - less than 12 weeks of normal workdays - inhaling fumes amid the ruins. He wore only a paper mask for protection.

Zadroga, married and the father of a 4-year-old daughter, quickly became ill, experiencing shortness of breath and a cough that degenerated to the point where he needed an oxygen tank to breathe.

Zadroga retired on an NYPD disability in November 2004, just weeks after his wife, Rhonda, 29, died of a heart ailment.

Before his retirement, mounting medical bills often made him bitter and angry - but his father said Zadroga never once regretted the Ground Zero work.

"Although my son didn't like to talk about it, he said he wouldn't do a thing differently," Joseph Zadroga said.

Rep. Carolyn Maloney said the coroner's finding "confirms what we've long feared: that the death toll from 9/11 is still growing."

"I hope the federal government will stop denying the extent of the problem and finally come up with a plan to help others who continue to suffer as a result of their work at Ground Zero," she said in a statement.

Michael Paladino, president of the Detectives Endowment Association, said, "Detective Zadroga was the 24th officer to die as a result of the World Trade Center attack. The original 23 died that day, but he died years later."

Paladino called for legislation that would reclassify Zadroga's case as a "line-of-duty death," ensuring that his

daughter, Tylerann, will receive full tax-free pension benefits until she turns 19, rather than a lesser "retirement" pension until she is 12.

"We really, really hope that we can get this passed, not for me but for her," said Joseph Zadroga, a retired North Arlington, N.J., police chief, as he held his granddaughter in his arms.

According to lawyer David Worby, who represents 7,300 Ground Zero rescue and volunteer workers in a lawsuit, the ruling is certainly no surprise - but no less significant.

"It's the best thing that could happen for survivors," he said. "Now people will realize there's death in the air unless people are properly tested and given preventative treatment."

Worby has described Ground Zero after 9/11 as the most toxic site ever known.

Zadroga was 6-2 and weighed more than 260 pounds before he became ill within weeks of his selfless work at Ground Zero.

He was plagued by nightmares and headaches, and ultimately needed oxygen, antibiotics and steroid injections just to get through the day.

He had lost 40 pounds by the time his father found him dead on his bedroom floor in the family home. The coroner's autopsy was performed Feb. 28.

Worby's lawsuit has been filed against New York City, the Port Authority, the EPA and the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, alleging dozens of deaths are related to exposure to trade center dust.

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