

9/11 HERO FALLS AS FIGHT GOES

ON

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Philip Rooney spent five grim weeks at the World Trade Center after it was destroyed by terrorists, catching glimpses of body parts as he cleared the debris. It was a land of ghosts he was proud to inhabit.

Just over five years later, the city Department of Transportation carpenter is dead at age 41.

Rooney died March 1 of acute leukemia, after logging 202 hours at the site beginning on 9/11, the DOT confirmed.

"He smelled the jet fuel. He said it was like a big graveyard," said Rooney's wife, Patricia.

It's impossible to say for sure what caused the Seaford, L.I., father of three

to develop a disease that affects just one or two out of every 100,000 men in their 30s, said Rooney's doctor, Mark Heaney.

Rooney was diagnosed three years ago; his wife said she has "no doubt" her husband's exposure to Ground Zero is to blame.

"The timing is similar to what we have seen with other toxic exposures. There is a possibility they are connected," said Heaney, an associate attending physician at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.

Attorney David Worby, who is representing Philip Rooney and more than 9,000 Ground Zero workers suing over illnesses they developed after working there, said at least 11 of his clients have died of blood cancers, and 10 times as many are sick with them.

"He felt he was doing a great thing. ... I assumed he was well-protected," Patricia Rooney said.

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Philip Rooney