



Going Back to Square One at Ground Zero

There is a newfound respect for those who wear hardhats in New York City, an abiding appreciation for those who have the demolition and cleanup skill to bring a semblance of order out of chaos. It all began with the first few attempts — rescuers digging by hand into the gray dust of what was the World Trade Center, pulling at the twisted metal in hopes a cry for help might be heard.

But the majestic Twin Towers had been imploded with so much force that the early optimism of finding life among the ruins quickly faded. Rescue efforts were given over to cautious cleanup — and heavy machinery.

With emotions running high, New Yorkers leaned from balconies and lined the West Side Highway leading into downtown Manhattan in those first few weeks waving flags and welcoming the transports of machines going to the site. Among the earliest were six semis, each cradling a section of two 75-metric-ton John Deere 750 Excavators. The machines had been purchased only a few days earlier by Manafort Brothers, Inc., Plainville, Connecticut, a subcontractor at Ground Zero known for their demolition skills and problem-solving abilities. ►

A Manafort Brothers' John Deere 750 carefully removes debris from the "basement" of the World Trade Center. "When the other contractors saw what we could do with our 750s, they started bringing in their big excavators, too," says Jay Franza, the demolition company's day-shift foreman on the site.



"No other country could have reacted as quickly as we did or could have done what we have done as fast, nobody," says Jay Franza, a Manafort Brothers' demolition supervisor.





It was a minor miracle that the excavators were on the scene as quickly as they were. Manafort Brothers had won the bid to demolish the partially standing nine-floor North and South Plaza buildings, part of the Center's five-acre complex. They had to have the equipment ready to work as fast as possible.

"It was a team effort all around," says Jay Franza, Manafort's day-shift foreman at Ground Zero. "We needed something beefy, powerful. We called the John Deere dealer on a Thursday (September 20) to order the excavators. Luckily they located two machines at John Deere's warehouse in Baltimore."

By Thursday (September 27), the machines were up and running and ready to go to work.

The states of Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, and New York expedited oversize transport permits when officials found out the 750s were tagged for the 9-11 site. At the time the dealer received the machine order, the 750 grapples had yet to be manufactured and John Deere standard buckets had to be modified to a special 8,000-pound 5.5-cubic-yard size to fit the application. Knowing the urgency of the situation, ▶

A John Deere 750 works on the floor of the fourth story below ground level at the World Trade Center six months after the attack. The cleanup crew went down seven stories before the job was complete.





Almost 1.2-million tons of debris had been removed from Ground Zero at the six-month mark, with three levels of the underground complex still to go.

everyone, attachment suppliers included, gave the machines their around-the-clock attention.

In a cramped staging area beside the partial shell of what had once been the North Plaza Building, four John Deere dealer service technicians assembled the two excavators with Herculean efforts in just over 18 hours. "It was nonstop, a record time," adds Franza. "We had to unload the sections in one night and get the trucks off the landing the next morning. Everything was rush."

Manafort's 15-man crew with a 12-man backup walked onto a

job site that no one had ever experienced on U. S. soil. "It was just emptiness," says night-shift foreman, Frank DeNino. "I had never seen total destruction before. It was as if your life had totally changed. It was like the bombing of London during World War II that I've watched on the History Channel. Being in demolition, I've always been tearing down buildings. But I've never seen anything of this magnitude.

"Towers 110 stories high were in a pile no taller than 80 or 90 feet," explains DeNino. "It was so compressed and so hot,

you couldn't walk on some spots; we were still pulling out cherry-red-hot beams eight weeks after we started. One beam was put on a truck bed and caught the sleeper on fire. After that we just set them over to the side and let them cool down."

According to DeNino, the structural beams that were the backbones supporting the centers of the two Towers were so massive and unstable that they bent the arms of all brands of excavators on the job, as well as prematurely wore out bucket cylinders.



Besides the grapple and bucket attachments, a frost tooth mounted on the end of a 750 arm was used to leverage some of the larger pieces of metal. Beams were so heavy they were oxy-flamed in four-to five-foot sections and used by Manafort's crew as six-ton wrecking balls on their cranes.

Manafort was given special permission because of the circumstance to use a wrecking ball, something that was outlawed in New York City 15 years ago. They are one of the few companies who still retain this forgotten art. The entire approach

Manafort proposed and carried out was so creative and efficient it still holds seasoned structural engineers who worked on the site in awe.

"The smell was unbelievable, indescribable," continues DeNino. "The tons of wiring, carpets, and everything else created a horrible odor from the smoldering ground. It was like a foggy night there most of the time. The most remarkable thing is we never saw a large piece of concrete in the Twin Towers rubble. It was so completely pulverized that it was ground to a fine dust."

There was no evidence the Towers had been a 10-million-square-foot office complex. There was no visual evidence of desks, chairs, computers, and office equipment. Nothing.

Yet each demolition machine's every move on the site was carefully watched by a group of spotters. Firemen and other rescue workers combed the caverns still open under the collapsed buildings. The area was a crime scene filled at times with police, FBI, and other special agents. "Every night there was always something new, something different that we'd never seen before," says DeNino.

"It was the survival of the fittest for the machines on site," adds Franza, a six-year demolition supervisor. "It was a proving ground for machinery and people. We had good operators on good equipment and completed our jobs to everyone's satisfaction.

"Our dealer supplied us with parts quickly," compliments Franza. "Everything was fast. We had to change oil every eight days. That's how hard we ran our machinery. A new cab, replacing one demolished by another excavator swinging a beam, was supplied in two days. Luckily no one was hurt. It only took one day to get a new stick after we bent one.

"The camaraderie on the site was great," says Franza. "And when our guys got on the subway after their shift, people got up and offered them their seats. People got up and gave them their seats in restaurants. This was such an emotional tragedy."

Although the original crew, including Franza and DeNino, left earlier this year after the demolition was completed, Manafort operators and John Deere 750s continued on to the end of what was a grueling, warlike cleanup.

Now it is Square One at Ground Zero and it soon will be as if the past 40 years have been erased. The slurry wall cement bathtub surrounding the complex, built 70 feet in the ground to bedrock to keep the Hudson River tidewater out, is all but waiting like it originally was for the ambitious construction of the Twin Towers to begin.

Ground Zero now is a mecca for those who wish to honor the memory of the 2,828 people from all over the world who lost their lives on the consecrated ground. It has become the most-visited tourist stop in the city for those who want only to remember the majestic towers as they once were, together a city within a city that once dominated the New York skyline.

It was evident to visitors walking up the ramp to the temporary observation deck overlooking the site during the cleanup that something within the U. S. spirit had been awakened, reaffirmed by the attack. Franza said it best: "No other country could have reacted as quickly as we did or could have done what we have done as fast, nobody." His message is a calming assurance to everyone affected by 9-11. Not only can our economic system build for the future, but we also have the determination and know-how to go about our business and cope with any man-made or natural disaster. Manafort Brothers and companies like them will be there to see to that.

When the workers emerged from their shifts through the main exit of the sealed-off disaster site, onlookers walking the ramp of the observation deck and people visiting the wall that was covered with condolences from around the world nearby at St. Paul's Chapel turned their heads.

In New York City, there remains a deep respect for those who wear hardhats. ■