In Oklahoma City, heart of the Finest

By MANUEL HERNANDEZ

FOR MORE than 20 years, I've been an emergency service cop, which means that I go to the worst disasters in the city, including the World Trade Center bombing.

But *nothing* compares with Oklahoma City. I'm just back from six days there, and it was unlike any disaster I've ever seen. The devastation, the loss of life, the destructive power of madmen — they will stay with me forever.

As a member of the new federal emergency response team, I got my call directing me to Oklahoma City around 1 a.m. on April 20. I and 55 other task force members from the NYPD, FDNY and EMS reported to our mobilization point at Floyd Bennett Field to pack our gear. Within six hours, we were lined up on the tarmac at JFK.

On a normal day for the last 22 years, you'd find me next to the 43d Precinct in the Bronx with Truck 3 of the NYPD's Emergency Service division. But this was no normal day.

Like family

I went to Oklahoma City not really knowing where it was. I only knew it was part of the United States, that it was "out there" somewhere. But after 12-hour shifts over the first six days of this tragedy, I feel as if I've been on a visit with family.

The people of Oklahoma City put aside their own grief and shock to give us the support we needed to endure the heartache everyone encountered. Of that, there was plenty.

Initially, the only pictures I saw of the building were those on television. They were horrifying.

But it was overwhelming to stand up close and see the results of such an awesome destructive force. The north face of the federal building had been blown off and the floors pancaked below.

We were eager to get inside to try to find survivors. Sadly, we found none, only corpses.

Our first day was spent in an office area in the basement, recovering bodies and shoring up the sub-floors.

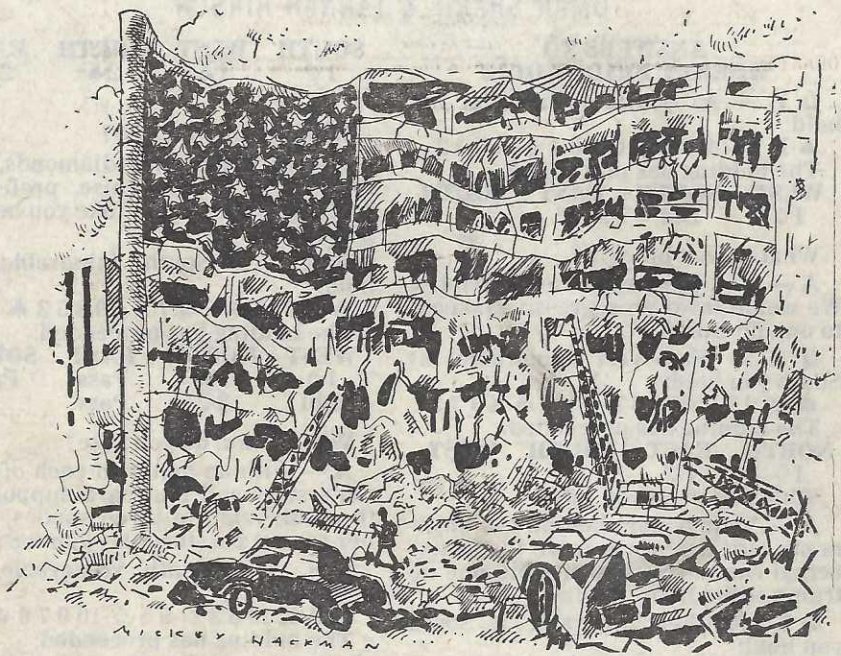
It was wet, and our only light was from auxiliary lighting and flashlights. Our masks protected us from the tremendous clouds of dust. Getting from point A to point B was an obstacle course of fallen walls, partitions, chairs and desks.

The four bodies we found that first day were in roughly the same area. The victims were probably in the middle of early morning chit-chat over coffee. Pulling them from the rubble was a slow, tedious process. Each step took a lot of evaluation. Move the wrong piece just a little, and the shift could compromise a wall that was holding back debris.

One poor soul was trapped under a pile of debris 15 to 20 feet in diameter — the ceiling above him had punched downward on top of him. Only his foot was visible. He never had a chance.

An unforgettable moment was the honor and privilege of recovering the bodies of two Marines from a recruiting station in the building. Including myself, there were four former Marines on our team. FEMA graciously gave us a window of four hours to extricate one fallen brother. He was in full-dress Class B blues. He had on the tan shirt with his dress blue trousers, his captain's bars and a rack of ribbons. We put him in the necessary body bag and closed his eyes. I prayed he didn't suffer.

We draped this guardian of our nation with an American flag and marched him to a detachment of Marines. We respectfully



folded that flag and gave him our slow salute. The sight of passersby coming to a standstill and either taking off their hats or offering a respectful salute is something I will take with me to my grave.

That ceremony was repeated the next day when we took the remains of the Marine sergeant. It was a Marine tradition we were upholding: We never leave our dead. We never leave our wounded. We'll always recover them. That Marine did not die in an officially declared war. But as far as I'm concerned, the bombing was an act of war against America.

Threat to us all

Those who would take it upon themselves to do this again — to kill fellow Americans as a form of protest — need to be sought out and removed from society by whatever means necessary. No place is safe if Oklahoma City is an example of the tack they're going to take.

We did have moments of solace, thanks mostly to the touching, handwritten letters from local children. One 5-year-old boy wrote that he couldn't help us, but said that he was praying for us and hoped we would be safe and would find his friends.

He helped me by writing that letter. My eyes tear up whenever I think about it.

All the children who wrote rescue workers were part of a heroic effort to find the living, honor the dead and uphold our way of life. My 5-year-old pen pal may not have had the best penmanship or grammar, but he got his message across. For that I'll always be grateful.

At 9:02 a.m. last Wednesday, awaiting our return to New York on the tarmac at Oklahoma's Tinker Air Force Base, we observed the national moment of silence marking a week since the blast.

I thought about our experience: The intense search for the living, only to find the dead. The heroic strength of the people of Oklahoma City. The children.

My thoughts are with them several times a day. For sure, I will have many more moments of silence.