

# From Landfill to Hallowed Ground

Frank Marra  
Maria Bellia Abbate

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## 9/11: THE UNTOLD STORY OF AMERICA'S LARGEST CRIME SCENE

A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Heroic Stories That Unified America's Most Vibrant City

**DALLAS, TX**—There's no debating that September 11, 2001, is one of the most important and remembered dates in U.S. history. For Sergeant Frank Marra, NYPD retired, what followed his assignment to the Staten Island Landfill, where he helped sift through approximately ten tons of debris being processed daily for evidence related to the attacks, will always be an inescapable memory.

Staten Island school teacher and co-author Maria Bellia Abbate joins Marra in writing *From Landfill to Hallowed Ground: The Largest Crime Scene in America* to take you behind the scenes and into the largest mobile crime scene in history—the Staten Island Landfill, otherwise known as “The Hill.” At this location, volunteers, including NYPD officers, spent countless hours meticulously sifting through debris, ash, and remains to find fifty-four thousand personal objects and twelve hundred identities of those who perished.

“It's important to learn about the event, but it is also necessary to take the students beyond that particular day and into the lives of those trying to rebuild a broken city,” said Abbate.

A NYPD officer for seventeen years, Marra recounts vivid memories and the sights and sounds of the moments and months after September 11.

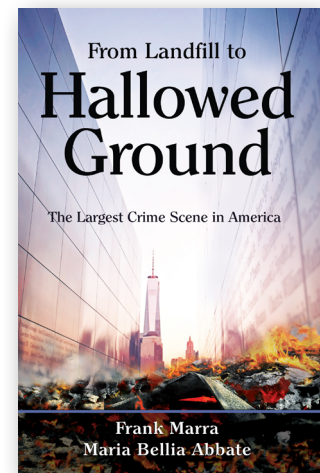
“As time passed we realized how many people's ashes and DNA still remain at the Landfill. It was clear this became a holy ground, a place of rest for many who would never be recovered, a cemetery without tombstones,” Marra said.

Marra and Abbate ultimately hope *From Landfill to Hallowed Ground* becomes not only a historical first-hand reference but an educational tool and aide to those who lost loved ones or who struggle to suppress the harsh memories.

“The book is a must-read for those who were there,” says psychologist Richard Levenson Jr. “It is an excellent resource for undergraduate and graduate students, as well as researchers in mass disasters, terrorism, psychological trauma, and the resulting stressors.”

For more information on this vivid and—until now—untold story resulting from September 11, 2001, visit [www.FromLandfillToHallowedGround.com](http://www.FromLandfillToHallowedGround.com).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Frank Marra** worked at the Staten Island Landfill World Trade Center Recovery Site from September 2001 until February 2002, an experience that served as inspiration for *From Landfill to Hallowed Ground: The Largest Crime Scene in America*. His law enforcement career included seventeen years with the New York Police Department and the rank of Detective and then Sergeant. He was born in Staten Island, New York, and currently resides in Millstone, New Jersey, with his wife, Laura, and three sons, Anthony, Dominic, and Frank.

**Maria Bellia Abbate**, inspired by Frank's experiences at the Recovery Site, was eager to assist in helping to put all his stories and memories together to create *From Landfill to Hallowed Ground*. Currently, she is a teacher in Staten Island. A native of Brooklyn, New York, Maria lives in Millstone, New Jersey, with her husband, Michael, and her three children, Alexa, Michael, and Delilah.



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## Q&A WITH FRANK MARRA & MARIA BELLIA ABBATE

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**Besides the obvious, what was the main reason you decided to write this book?**

We wanted to keep the memory of 9/11 alive. It started as a recognition of the first responders in their valiant efforts post 9/11, and then that lead us to the realization that so many people had never been recovered. After watching numerous TV shows on American history, we began pulling together the post-9/11 events in the hope of putting them into a documentary for television. Because we had so many memories and experiences we wanted to share, a book seemed to be the best outlet for our material.

**Frank and Maria, please describe in your own words the importance that this story has in American history.**

September 11, 2001, has the same level of importance in American history as the two world wars, the Vietnam War, and the only other major attack on US soil: Pearl Harbor. So many lives were taken, so many lives were changed, and it was the whole country that was affected.

**What is the significance of the title *From Landfill to Hallowed Ground*?**

The original title of the book was *City within the Borough*, depicting the transformation the Staten Island Landfill made post 9/11. However, as time passed and the book was coming to a close, we realized how many people's ashes and DNA still remain up at the Landfill. It was clear to us that this was a holy ground, a place of rest for many who would never be recovered, a cemetery without tombstones.

**Frank, what should the men and women in law enforcement today know about September 11, 2001, and the days following?**

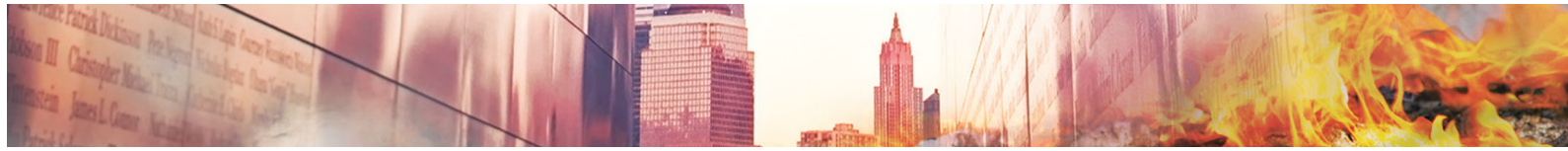
They should realize that it was a day of infamy, and they should know what happened to the individuals who spent time up at the Landfill, trying to bring some normalcy back to a city that had been turned upside down. Those who were not there should take the time to reach out to our first responders who were there, to understand the perspective of those who experienced the tragedy.



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**Maria, from an educational perspective, what will students gain by having this book available either through class or on campus?**

It was a tragic and surreal moment in our nation's history, and when students are studying American history and 9/11, they should read and understand all that went on behind the scenes. It's important to learn about the event, but it is also necessary to take the students beyond that particular day and into the lives of those trying to rebuild a broken city. It is an important part of learning beyond the textbook, reading about someone's real experiences. This has been done in the past with other historical moments. But this event is so recent—occurring a mere thirteen years ago—and needs a much fuller context and treatment.

**What does *From Landfill to Hallowed Ground* offer the family members of those who perished on September 11, 2001?**

It offers a strong, sympathetic shoulder for their heartbreak, as well as a venue to let them know that we are on their side and want the world to understand what they are going through.

**What is unique about the point of view that this book offers, as opposed to other books written about September 11?**

All the other books talk about the day of 9/11. *From Landfill to Hallowed Ground* offers inside perspectives of the days that followed. It takes the reader on a private tour through the recovery process and the personal experiences of Frank, the author, and his emotional involvement during this tumultuous time in history.

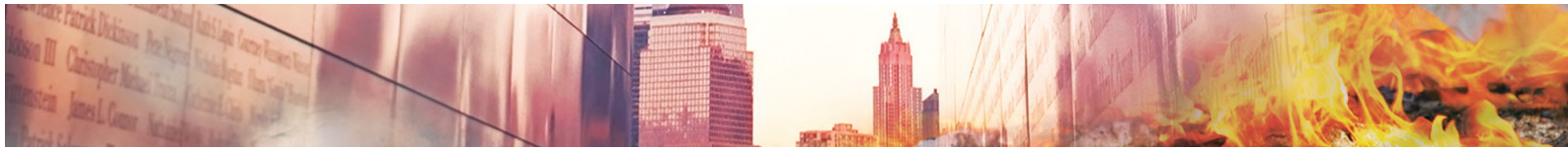
**Does the book serve as a sort of token or remembrance piece to the men and women of law enforcement and the heroes of that day?**

Yes, we dedicated this book to the first responders of 9/11 and the families who lost loved ones. There were no heroes that day. All first responders did what they were expected to do. They did their job.

**How often do you go back and visit the Landfill?**

We went back once for research for the book, and we were surprised to see that it is turning into a recreational facility. We were sad to find out that no memorial was built at the Landfill, and there is no memorial in the works, either. The "Hill," the recovery area, should be considered sacred and dedicated to all of those who lost their lives. We would ultimately like to see an area where families can go to pay their respects.





**What are you hoping people take away from reading *From Landfill to Hallowed Ground*?**

We hope people say to themselves, “Wow, I didn’t know that.” We want them to be enlightened and informed, develop an understanding of what the first responders experienced. We want others to try and understand what families went through when they lost loved ones. We want readers to see that time in history from another perspective, to understand how a landfill, a garbage dump, was transformed into a crime scene, and eventually became hallowed ground taking its rightful place in American history.



*October 16, 2001, Staten Island, NY. Large sifters were brought in, early on, during the search and recovery process at the Landfill.*

*Photo from Wikimedia Commons, from FEMA Photo Library, taken by Andrea Booher*



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## PRAISE FOR *FROM LANDFILL TO HALLOWED GROUND*

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*“From Landfill to Hallowed Ground is a compelling saga, detailing the events following the horrific attack on America on September 11, 2001. Marra details how many first responders, filled with sadness and disbelief, selflessly acted with courage, love, and dignity in what became a massive recovery operation. The heroic efforts of these public servants helped restore our faith in the human spirit in the face of monstrous acts perpetrated upon so many. We shall never forget what they gave, and the victims will never be forgotten.”*

**—Anthony J. Marra, NYPD Ret., established crime scene at the Landfill**

*“A gripping account of September 11, 2001, through the eyes of one who served there. Lt. Frank Marra, NYPD-Ret., artfully, adeptly, and sensitively takes us through the most horrific experiences of his honored career, leaving no stone unturned. The Staten Island Landfill, ‘that sacred and hallowed ground,’ became the world’s largest ‘movable’ crime scene, where the debris was picked apart to find anything that might identify victims who had perished, from human form to dust. This book is a must-read for those who were there, and it is an excellent resource for undergraduate and graduate students, as well as researchers in mass disasters, terrorism, psychological trauma, and the resulting stressors. I urge you to read it.”*

**—Richard L. Levenson, Jr., Psy.D., CTS**



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## EXCERPT: CHAPTER 9 *FROM LANDFILL TO HALLOWED GROUND*

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### Landfill to Hallowed Ground

The Staten Island Landfill, circa 1984, was a garbage dump, satisfying one main purpose: storing garbage and burning it. Infamously known as the “dump” by the residents of Staten Island, it was a place that I would go to with my dad when I was a kid whenever he had to throw out items that the local garbage men would not take. Who would’ve guessed all those years ago that many years later I would’ve been assigned there as part of a search and recovery site for a national tragedy? Who could’ve guessed that the “dump” would be considered the area containing the largest crime scene in American history?

The “Landfill” rose and was fully functional. The largest crime scene in American History opened in September of 2001 and closed in May of 2002. To me the memories and experiences there will never be gone. Even after over thirteen years, when I drive by the Landfill, I no longer see the “dump.” I see a holy ground, a hallowed ground with bright lights that shine for miles, but all I can think about every time I pass is how many lives were affected there, mentally, physically, or both. I still think of it as a time that stood still. I think that I will begin to make the sign of the cross as I pass it, as I would if I were passing a Catholic church. I want to show my respect to those who gave so much of themselves on September 11, 2001, and to those whose final resting place is there, lost on “The Hill.”



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## SYNOPSIS

The morning of September 11, 2001, began like any other morning for police Sergeant Frank Marra. He woke up early, brewed his coffee, and got his son Anthony ready for kindergarten. That was until the image of the South Tower engulfed in flames and smoke interrupted televised broadcasts nationwide. *From Landfill to Hallowed Ground* follows the footsteps of Sergeant Frank Marra and the people whose lives were irrevocably changed in the aftermath of September 11. Marra and co-author Maria Bellia Abbate take readers to the Staten Island Landfill, where the largest moveable crime scene in America was combed and searched for those buried beneath the twisted metal, steel, and cement. Step into the landfill mire with the New York City Police Department and the volunteers who searched tirelessly, often at great cost to themselves, for the remains of those silenced forever in the ashes. This heartrending story gives readers a never-before-seen glimpse of the days and months following the attack on September 11, and the stories that echo from "The Hill"—the hallowed ground of those who perished on that fateful day.



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