

We are all indebted to the first-responders ... police, fire, EMTs, etc. ... who put their lives on the line every day in the performance of their jobs to serve and protect their neighbors. One such responder ... who married a daughter of my wife's cousin ... survived two of the most catastrophic events in the annals of the Fire Department of the City of New York (FDNY). The guilt of survival, PTSD, and its associated depression took its toll, and ultimately his life.



This is the story of:.

## *John A. Garcia (1959-2011)*

Jack Garcia never gave up that ubiquitous boyhood dream of growing up to be a fireman. The thrill of watching those red engines barreling down the streets of New York to protect lives and property lived on in his heart, and at age 27 he achieved his goal. He joined the Fire Department of the City of New York (FDNY) in the Bronx.



Jack was “a burly but athletic” man who rode his bicycle to work for each shift. It was a 40-mile round-trip from his home in suburban Rockland County to the firehouse of Engine 68 and Ladder 49 in the Bronx. There he was the consummate fireman ... dedicated, professional, and competent. According to the *New York Daily News*, “Garcia, a father of four, was famous in the department for helping his fellow fire fighters on-duty with whatever arose and off-duty with everything from leaking roof to plumbing.” At his funeral, one of his sons said his father “had been a hero and a role model who taught his children the importance of courage and morals.” Fifteen years into his FDNY career ... on September 11, 2001 ... Engine 68 was called to lower Manhattan.

Jack and his fellow Bronx firemen arrived at the base of the *World Trade Center* only a few minutes before the *mayday* was called as the first tower collapsed. Jack said he only survived because he was lucky enough to “run in the right direction.” As we all know, hundreds of New York firemen and thousands of civilians died in that 9/11 attack. Many of the men of Engine 24 and Ladder 5 in SoHo, near ground-zero, who were among the first on the scene, were victims. Soon thereafter, as FDNY re-staffed that firehouse, Jack Garcia was promoted to Lieutenant and transferred to Ladder 5.

The nearby 39-story *Deutsche Bank* building was seriously damaged by the *Trade Center* collapse. For years, city officials, developers, and insurers fought over whether to demolish or repair that building. In 2007, demolition began. Then on August 18, a fire was reported in the derelict building, likely caused by shoddy workmanship of the demolition crew. Ladder 5 was the first to respond to the 7-alarm blaze. They got a slow start due to an inoperable standpipe. Finally, Lt. Garcia and his men got a hose-line to the smoky maze that was the involved area of the 14<sup>th</sup> floor. There was a collapse and Jack Garcia and several of his men fell through plastic sheeting that was covering the window openings. Fortunately, they landed on scaffolding 6 or 8 feet below and received only minor injuries. But, two of Jack's men were trapped above in the thick smoke and succumbed to asphyxiation. In all, during the seven hours that the FDNY fought the *Deutsche Bank* fire, there were 115 injuries in addition to these two deaths.

The *New York Times* wrote: “In the months and years following the *Deutsche Bank* fire, Mr. Garcia struggled to cope with the deaths of the two men. He told friends that he felt responsible, and by the time he retired in July 2009, he was found to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.” Jack Garcia took his own life on May 13, 2011. Did his “work as a firefighter [leave] him scarred” or was, as many of his fellow firefighters believe, being “badgered and harangued” by attorneys in the subsequent litigation behind his demise? We'll never know, but we all owe Jack Garcia and his fellow first-responders a great debt of gratitude for their lives of service.

[The information in this piece was extracted from *NY Times* and *NY Daily News* articles on Jack Garcia's life and death, and published obituaries. The photos are (clockwise): the FDNY emblem; Jack Garcia with Engine 68; fellow firefighters carrying his casket into the funeral at *Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Church*; and the *FDNY Firemen's Memorial*.]

