



by: Eileen C. Herbert

First Responder

As director of the EPA's Environmental Response Team,
Joseph P. Laformara '64 is called into action when disaster strikes

As Iraqi forces retreated from Kuwait to Baghdad, in the waning days of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Saddam Hussein ordered a team of engineers into the Kuwaiti oil fields to set fire to the hundreds of wells. More than one billion barrels of oil burned, engulfing the region in an environmental catastrophe. The poisonous smoke stretched from Baghdad across the United Arab Emirates to Iran and caused black rain to fall from as far away as Turkey, Syria and Afghanistan. The smoke also contaminated fresh water supplies and found refuge in the lungs of people and animals.

Among the first to respond to that environmental disaster was the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Environmental Response Team (ERT), which was called in to conduct air-sampling tests. Twelve years later, in this most recent war with Iraq, fewer than a dozen oil wells were reportedly set ablaze. The government is still evaluating the current crisis to determine what agencies will be needed but **Joseph P. Laformara '64** says, "I anticipate we will be called in to do the same."

As director of the EPA's ERT Center, headquartered in Edison, NJ, Laformara and his team are among the 'first responders' to chemical emergencies and oil spills throughout the country. He says, "In a given year we do about 200 responses."

The chemistry major, who selected Canisius because "a chemistry degree from Canisius meant you could get into just about any graduate school you chose," earned his PhD from the University of Florida, before landing a job with the EPA. His first position was in oil spill research, during which he developed a method for identifying what the agency calls "mystery oil spills." As a result of Laformara's method, the EPA can fingerprint oil sheen when it washes up on the beach and identify the tanker from which

it was spilled.

Laformara is now responsible for managing and directing a staff of 45 government experts and 150 support contractors who make up the ERT Center. In the past two decades, the organization has responded to more than 6,000 hazardous material releases and oil spills throughout the country. And because the nature of their work puts ERT employees at the forefront when disaster strikes, Laformara has witnessed some of the worst chemical and oil disasters in the nation's history including the Exxon Valdez spill, which dumped 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound. The ERT has also been on the scene of some of

the most serious hazardous waste sites including the Niagara Falls Love Canal neighborhood and the Valley of the Drums, where 50,000 drums of hazardous materials were found in the middle of a ravine in northern Kentucky. Most recently, the



Joe Laformara '64

Laforanara responds to a nylon warehouse fire in Hemingway, SC, where hydrogen cyanide was released. A news photographer, with a telephoto lens, snapped this picture at the scene.



newly opened ERT West Office responded with FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) in recovery efforts involving the Columbia Space Shuttle.

“In the initial days, we had very sophisticated air monitoring equipment testing for methyl hydrazine, the main rocket fuel used on the shuttle,” explains Laforanara. “We had to decontaminate the recovered shuttle parts before they could be moved or analyzed.”

In his more than 30 years with the Environmental Protection Agency, Laforanara has seen it all – or so he thought. He notes, nothing could have prepared him for the events that unfolded in New York City and Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001, which “changed everybody’s life.”

Ironically, Laforanara was driving to D.C. on the morning of the attacks, for a meeting to discuss the nation’s emergency response plan. He recalls, “I heard on the radio that a plane crashed into the World Trade Center. The thought that it could be terrorism did cross my mind.” When the second plane hit, Laforanara knew the nation was under attack. At the next exit, he turned his car around to head back to the New Jersey ERT office. But when it was reported that a third plane hit the Pentagon, Laforanara turned around again and headed back to Washington. Once inside the grid locked city, he went to the EPA’s old Waterside Mall location to call his office.

“By the time I made the call, my capable staff was already mobilized with our Broadway office and had begun conducting air sampling as close as they could get to the towers. By the next morning we had access to the area in lower Manhattan and began sampling there.”

What Laforanara saw, upon joining his team at Ground Zero, was overwhelming.

“I stood there in disbelief,” he says. “In

the emergency response business, we were always involved with the hazard of industrial chemicals but now we had to prepare for situations in which someone wants to intentionally hurt people. The whole aspect of security, personal security and safety became paramount.”

In order to ensure future security and safety, says Laforanara, it is now essential for the EPA to establish working relationships with the FBI, the military and other response teams, not previously known for their close associations. The anthrax scares made this a more immediate priority.

“Anthrax caught the federal government by surprise,” says Laforanara, who admits the EPA did not have a lot of experience with biological agents. With chemicals, he notes, you know what the toxic levels are. But it took three weeks to determine that the danger level of the resilient powdery anthrax spores was zero. “One spore was a problem and anyone that had a potential for exposure needed to be treated with antibiotics. We never dealt with anything like that before.”

In response to the September 11 attacks and the anthrax scares, the federal government drafted what is now known as the Homeland Strategic Security Plan, a blueprint for how government agencies should collaborate to prevent and respond

to intentional contaminations. The National Response System, as it is called, consists of 17 federal agencies including the EPA, the FBI, and state and local police, all of which are “networked together so they can share information, cooperate and pull in the same direction,” explains Laforanara.

Also created by the Homeland Strategic Security Plan was the EPA’s Environmental Response Team West, a new office with an additional staff of 50 on-scene coordinators and 20 ERT members, all of whom report to Laforanara.

“Prior to opening the new Las Vegas offices, the closest EPA location to the West Coast was in Cincinnati. With this new office, the Environmental Response Team can respond simultaneously to multiple incidents across the country.”

And when it does, Canisius alumni can rest assured that one of their own is among the first responders. ★