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On call with the hazmat unit

False anthrax alarms keep bioterror team on its toes

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By NICOLE BODE
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Jersey City Firefighter Herman Lozada secured his oxygen mask, stepped into a high-rise office elevator and inspected the mound of suspicious whitish powder on the ground.

He painstakingly collected a sample for an anthrax test before neutralizing the place with bleach. Then he unsealed his mask and gave his honest assessment of the nature of the sinister stuff.

"It's a cracker — somebody stepped on a cracker," said the 47-year-old ex-Marine. "It's brown and white — like a Saltine."

Lozada belongs to Jersey City's Ladder 2, Engine 6 Hazmat, or hazardous materials unit. Before the anthrax scare, he and his mates got about two calls a week. Last week, they responded to 80.

Many calls are hoaxes, in Lozada's opinion. He pointed to the evidence — not a single sample sent to Trenton labs for testing has come back positive for anthrax.

Still, with new cases of the disease popping up in offices in New York and Washington, and in mailrooms in nearby Trenton, Lozada's team must treat every call with deadly seriousness.

"You can't minimize anything any longer. You never know when anything might be the real thing," said his captain, Dan Costa, 42.

Things had calmed down since last Wednesday, when a rash of panic-stricken calls summoned the unit nonstop from 8 a.m. to 3 a.m. Thursday. At 11:30 a.m. Friday, Hazmat responded to its third call of the day from an office at 10 Exchange Place.

An employee on the 26th floor told police she had found white powder in that day's mail. She had opened the letter hours earlier, but out of fear and embarrassment, she cleaned off the desk with Kleenex, threw the envelope into the trash and sealed it up without calling the authorities. That afternoon, her office manager called 911.

Smoke lingers

While Costa went upstairs to survey the area, his team waited near four rigs, parked in the empty courtyard. Across the Hudson River, in clear view, smoke rose from the rubble of the World Trade Center.

"When the wind shifts, you can smell it," Lozada said, nodding at the stripped-down skyline.

Minutes later, the troops were gearing up for another potential hoax.

"Probably it's a prank, but they don't know," said Costa, "we're going to go through the whole nine yards again."

Lozada donned his rubber gloves and zipped the hooded jumpsuit all the way up to his chin, joking, "I got kids I got to worry about."

He picked up his meter, a yellow box that reads for mustard gas, toxic chemicals and bomb ingredients — but not anthrax.

Those $60,000 testers are too costly for the cash-strapped department.

So — like the frightened people they try to comfort — Hazmat can only wait for lab results, and hope for the best.

As he rode the rig back to the firehouse, Costa said he sympathized with the office worker, who began to cry as she watched his men clean her desk with all the precautions of handling a toxic site.

"The worst thing is not knowing," he said.

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