

The great emergency hoax in Aptos

THE APTOS fire department is one of the best trained, most efficient and most responsive fire departments in Santa Cruz County. Under Chief Richard Chinn, it has grown from an undermanned, underequipped department into a cohesive, alert firefighting force.

One of the problems in running any fire department is keeping it in a constant state of readiness for any emergency or disaster. One way of keeping firemen tuned up is by the use of drills involving simulated emergencies.

The Aptos fire department has used such drills in the past for this purpose. But in its drill last Thursday, it outdid itself.

Apparently without telling anybody, it held a drill centering on the "crash" of a helicopter in a meadow in Seascap with "injury" to more than a dozen people.

The alert put out by the Aptos fire department resulted in mobilizing nearly every emergency vehicle in the central part of Santa Cruz County and the swamping of communication facilities. It sent scores of fire trucks, ambulances, sheriff's cars, coroner's cars, and highway patrol cars racing to Seascap with red lights flashing and sirens wailing. There, instead of the wreckage of a helicopter, officers found a fire truck (it was used to create a cloud of smoke) and a bunch of drama school students, their injuries painted on their bodies, lying around.

Fire Chief Chinn seemed pleased with the drill, which came as a complete surprise to his own men. Understandably, the heads of other county agencies were not so pleased, including Sheriff Al Noren, who rightly pointed to the danger to life and limb posed by the scores of emergency vehicles rushing at high speed through traffic to reach the scene.

But not only is there the question of safety, or even of cost, which must have been considerable considering the number of men and vehicles involved. There's the matter of tying up highway patrol cars, sheriff's cars, ambulances and other emergency vehicles on one operation — a phony one at that — leaving other areas of the county exposed. Suppose at the time the false emergency was underway there had been a bank robbery in Soquel, an explosion and fire in Watsonville, or a major traffic accident on the freeway involving injury to many people?

Too, we question the wisdom of allowing any emergency jurisdiction — fire, police or sheriff — unilaterally ordering a drill involving men and equipment of adjoining departments, without their knowledge. What will be the response, we wonder, when a real disaster occurs in the light of what happened last week in Aptos?

The Aptos fire department should be congratulated for its enthusiasm, but perhaps it ought to let its neighbors in on its secret next time.