

Aptos Chief Could Face Prosecution

By PEGGY RUDNICKI
Sentinel Staff Writer

A mock helicopter crash staged by Aptos Fire Chief Richard Chinn Thursday morning may have been a violation of state law, sheriff's officials charged today.

The sheriff's department has asked the district attorney's office to look into the incident, which sent ambulances, the highway patrol and deputies — unaware the accident was a staged drill — rushing to the scene.

District Attorney Phil Harry said he would review the case today and if Chinn "deserves prosecution, he will be prosecuted."

The charges, if filed, would be under a California penal code section which prohibits filing of false reports, said Harry.

But Chinn has defended his actions as a test of the county's emergency system.

The incident began shortly after 10 a.m. Thursday when the county communication center received a report

of a helicopter crash with 13 injured persons.

Sheriff's deputies and the highway patrol rolled to the scene with red lights flashing and sirens wailing. One ambulance blew out a fan belt as it rushed to the scene and arrived smoking and sputtering at the "crash site."

Only when the noise died down did officers discover the helicopter crash was a staged drill.

Chinn defended his actions late Thursday, saying that most disaster drills in the county are not "realistic."

Most of the time everyone knows what is going on when a drill begins and has beefed up for the impending "disaster," said Chinn.

Thursday's drill caught everyone by surprise and allowed a "true picture of what people's reactions would be," said Chinn.

Soquel Fire Chief Ray Negro agreed, saying that although his 15 men were called out believing there was a true disaster, the drill taught firemen a lot about emergency situations.

"We didn't know it was a drill. We thought it was a

real, live crash," said Negro.

The disaster scene looked so realistic — with the victims made up to look bloody and burned — that one of his firemen nearly got sick at the first sight of the crash scene, said Negro. "I don't think it was so bad," he added.

But law enforcement officials are less than pleased.

There wasn't one person in the sheriff's office that knew anything about the drill, said Marvin Gangloff, chief of the sheriff's patrol bureau.

Everyone involved treated it as a real disaster.

Bob Gordon, head of the county's communication center, said although it is "normal policy" to inform agencies of the upcoming drill, dispatchers did not discover the emergency was staged until 25 minutes after the first call.

During that time, they had dispatched two sheriff's cars, three highway patrol cars, firemen, ambulances, special investigators and an investigating team from the San Jose office of the Federal Aviation Administration.

Gangloff scoffed at that remark.

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If there had been a real emergency at the time, there may have been a critical delay in getting officers and ambulances to the scene, according to Gordon.

If the crash had been real, "we may have begun scouting out-of-county for additional ambulances and service units, said Gordon.

Sheriff's deputies and other law enforcement officials also have criticized Chinn for forcing their units to speed to the scene with sirens sounding and lights flashing.

Those kinds of responses — called code three — have the potential of being dangerous to the officers and other motorists, law enforcement officials believe. Officers prefer to go code three only in urgent situations, they said.

But Chinn said he "plainly" told dispatchers to send the ambulances without sirens since firemen "were having an extrication problem and could not get to the victims." One of the ambulances went with sirens sounding anyway, he said.

As for the deputies? Chinn said he requested only one unit. "It's their own fault if they sent more," he said.

He also said the type of situation he reported was not a code three situation for deputies.

Communications director Gordon also said Chinn's emergency report could be a violation of FCC guidelines which prohibit "false or superfluous signals."

But, he said, in order to prove a charge, maliciousness must be shown.

KSCO Station Manager Vernon Berlin said the U.S. Communications Act prohibits anyone from "knowingly uttering or transmitting any false or fraudulent signals of distress communications."

He said he planned to write a letter to the Aptos Fire District board of directors informing them of the regulation.

Chinn said he had planned the drill for two weeks as part of Dominican Hospital's yearly emergency drill. He said he agreed to do the drill only if no one knew when it was to happen.

No one did.

Chinn said he informed the communications director that he planned to have some kind of drill, but didn't say when. He also told the highway patrol.

But, when the call came in, the director was not there to tell his dispatchers it was only a drill, said Chinn.

And, according to him, the test was an effective show of how the county handles itself in an emergency.

REFERENCE

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