

Aptos 'disaster drill' provokes critical storm

By BOB SMITH
and MARJ VON B

A storm of criticism over yesterday's "disaster drill" in Aptos billowed this morning.

And it appeared that Aptos fire chief Richard Chinn, who conducted the emergency exercises, in which a helicopter was reported to have crashed, may have to defend his action in court.

The sheriff's office was investigating the incident which sent some emergency vehicles roaring to the scene at Camp St. Francis from all over the county.

District Attorney Phil Harry, in his first public statement on a case, said this morning he is awaiting the sheriff's report on the incident.

But, Harry said, he was already aware of some of the circumstances through the blanket news coverage given the "tragedy" yesterday by newsmen who rushed to the scene.

Harry said "if he (Chinn) has violated the law and if the sheriff's report shows he should be prosecuted, he will be prosecuted."

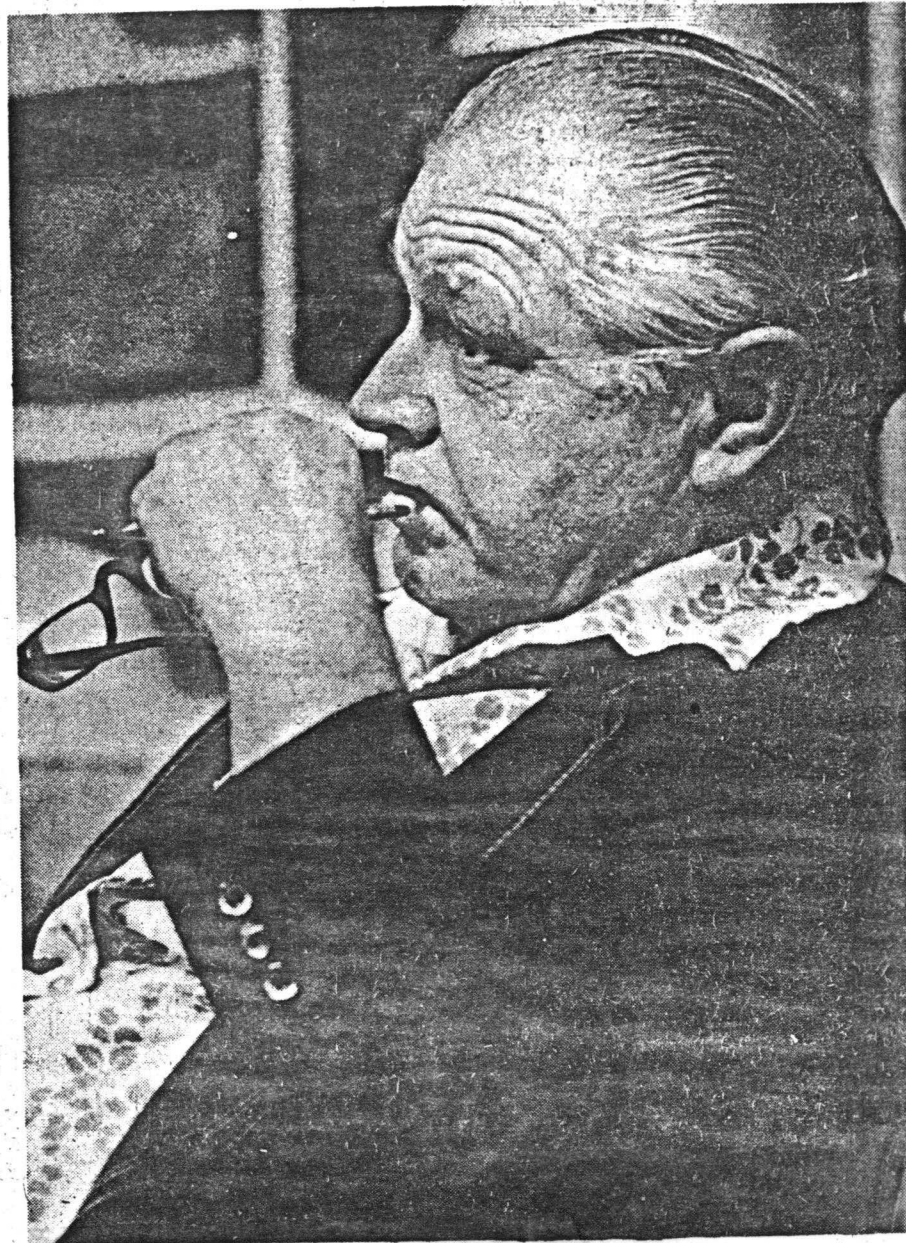
Sheriff's patrol Lt. George Foster, in his initial report completed this morning, stated he felt Chinn was guilty of violating a Penal Code section which prohibits the false report of an emergency to any government agency while knowing that no emergency exists.

Violation of the code section is a misdemeanor, punishable by up to a year in county jail and a maximum fine of \$1,000 or both.

Foster stated in his report: "County communications and the sheriff's office should have been advised prior to any practice to avert units responding to the scene using Code 3 (red lights and siren.)"

Foster documented the radio contact county communications center dispatchers had in relation to the incident.

They began at 10:20 a.m. with a report dispatcher Bonnie M. Budworth had from Chinn himself over the county's fire net.



RICHARD CHINN — fireman under fire.

Chinn himself over the county's fire net. Chinn reported a helicopter crash.

Aptos fire units were then advised by dispatcher Mike Beller and they stated they were responding.

Two minutes later, an ambulance was requested. At 10:25 a.m., Chief Chinn reported he was on the scene and that the crashed helicopter had cracked apart, leaving several victims lying around and three trapped inside.

Two minutes later, Chinn requested a sheriff's car to respond to the scene. (It was dispatched and the officer advised the dispatcher he was responding Code 3).

Twenty-four minutes after Chinn's original radio call, Beller contacted the Aptos fire department secretary, and "was advised it was a drill and that county dispatchers were not to know."

A minute later, the dispatcher requested a report on conditions at the scene and the sheriff's unit there advised it was clear.

Sheriff's officers were hot under the collar this morning.

One said: "He never told anybody, the sheriff's office, the highway patrol or communications, that he was going to have a drill." And the officer noted a sheriff's car had responded, "as would be normal in such an emergency situation, going Code 3."

"When cars go in this fashion, you're always risking people's lives, including the officers and kids crossing the streets," he said.

Another officer responded to a reported statement by Chinn that he had never asked for Code 3 response. "How in the hell do you react when you are advised that a helicopter has crashed with bodies strewn around and people trapped inside."

A highway patrolman said angrily: "Next time, we let them run over his damned fire hoses and to hell with him."

Two highway patrolmen Thursday guarded fire hoses on the scene and one of them said he was there for 15 minutes before he realized it wasn't a true emergency situation.

Chinn said he had "touched bases" with officials in the highway patrol and the county communications department about the possibility of holding an unadvertised drill.

REGISTER-PA JARONIAN
October 7, 1977

"I had lunch with Lt. Richard Nutting (acting CHP area commander). I asked him what's your reaction to being called cold turkey?" He said fine.

"When the patrolman got on the scene, I told him it was a drill and if you got a call, take it.

"I did not contact Al (Sheriff Al Noren). When they got to the scene, they were disappointed. But they did what I expected — security of personal property and the wreckage. Then a sergeant turned up.

"I asked for the ambulance Code 2 (no red light or siren). I had checked with Nutting on the Code 3 response," Chinn added. "He told me we should hold it to Code 2."

Chinn said that all Aptos units responded Code 2.

Not so with the rescue squad and the fire chief from Soquel. Chinn requested assistance from the Soquel and Capitola fire departments to extricate and care for the victims. Capitola came Code 2, but Soquel came in with red light and siren.

"We responded Code 3," said Soquel Fire Chief Ray Negro. "When we normally get a call to cover another department, it is Code 3. We were never told to roll Code 2."

Negro said neither he or his volunteer firemen knew it was an exercise until they were at the scene.

"I knew it when I got out of my car," Negro said Thursday afternoon. One volunteer found it hard to believe even as he was starting to treat a realistically made-up victim.

"It was real good experience for my men. It was something you don't get into very often. It was quite an experience," Negro added.

Would he participate again? "If we were asked to, sure."

Chinn also contacted county communications director Bob Gordon during the preliminary planning.

"Chief Chinn and I talked about the drill two or three months ago," Gordon told a reporter Friday morning. "He wanted to know if I felt spontaneous or prepared was best. I felt spontaneous was, provided everyone doesn't bust out Code 3.

7495 SOQUEL DRIVE
APTOS, CALIFORNIA 95003

APTOS - FIRE DISTRICT APTOS BRANCH
LIBRARY

REFERENCE

other side

"I don't disagree with his motive on a surprise drill so far as my people were concerned. But I would have liked to know about it in case something real had happened. Then I could have pulled units out of the drill and sent them to a real emergency. It almost happened," Gordon added, referring to an ambulance call in the mountains. It turned out to be in the Los Gatos ambulance territory.

"As a disaster drill, I had been thinking about something along this line in a month or two. But, I would have notified the responsible authorities rather than keeping everyone in the dark," Gordon said.

Why were the other units sent Code 3 by his dispatchers?

"It was normal procedure under the circumstances — the dispatchers did not know it was a drill. Any accident would normally call for Code 3."

"The drill was valuable as a whole to see how everyone reacted. I'm a firm believer in drill — not necessarily spontaneous — to exercise the people involved," Gordon added.

Chinn said he kept the date, time and location confidential because of an experience two years ago. Another drill was held in cooperation with Dominican Hospital to test the emergency medical response.

Some agencies — notably the sheriff's office — refused to participate. Others offered only token aid.

A hospital critique afterwards at Dominican Hospital found the hospital reacting pretty well, said administrative assistant Tom Hart. "Taking an overall view, we responded pretty well. There are a few areas that need improvement," Hart added, "mostly in the areas of paper processing. When victims were transferred from the emergency room to other areas, there were problems with forms. We could streamline our forms.

"We have been receiving a lot of calls from the press and television, upset that they weren't notified," noted Hart. "We feel it was a good test. You can be criticized whichever way you do it, but I think it went well."