

Planning for the Big One

Andrea Howry, Ventura County Star, 9-15-10

If — and some would say when — a 7.0 earthquake hits Ventura County, would you know where to go?

Would you know what to take with you, and what to do with your dog or your cat or your pet snake?

Would you know how to let your family know you're OK?

Those who live and work at Naval Base Ventura County (NBVC) face the same disaster preparedness issues as everyone else in California and the rest of the nation. That's why an Aug. 31 exercise that simulated a 7.0 earthquake and ensuing five-foot tsunami was so important.

"Each time we do an exercise like this, we find unforeseen things that we can better plan for," explained Robert Huether, NBVC's installation training officer and the lead coordinator of the event. "From our perspective, it better enables us to provide emergency services to the installation."

This year's drill was part of a nationwide, Navywide exercise called Citadel Rumble 10, which ran from Aug. 30 to Sept. 2. It assumed two earthquakes wreaking havoc in the Northwest and Southwest regions and a wildfire and CBRNE (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and high yield explosives) event in the Midwest.

It was designed to improve awareness on both individual bases and across regions about the need to plan for disasters and to be prepared for them.

Here was the scenario at NBVC:

About 4,000 base residents have no home to go to.

"There's no power," Huether explained. "There's a water tank, but no feed to it. All community agencies are busy, and there's no support for us."

The exercise assumed roads had collapsed outside Point Mugu. The air traffic control tower had lost power, and the Port Operations building at Port Hueneme partially collapsed. People were trapped in debris at both Port Hueneme and Point Mugu. The Beach Motel and RV Park needed to be evacuated because of the tsunami warning.

And two hours after the quake hit, looting began.

Top civilian managers and military leaders spent Aug. 31 and the next day responding to the scenario and discussing its many ramifications.

For two people, Carol Becker and Master-at-Arms 2nd Class Chris Mills, the drill was all too real.

Becker, the mass care coordinator for the Ventura County offices of the American Red Cross, has lived in Ventura County for 50 years and survived its many natural disasters, including fatal floods in 1969 and 1978, the 1994 Northridge Earthquake that severely damaged Fillmore, and several landslides in La Conchita.

Mills worked in the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. He'd been stationed in Norfolk, Va., and was sent first to Pascagoula, Fla., then to New Orleans as part of a mobile security detail.

Both knew first-hand the issues that would come up in the hours and days following a natural disaster.

“We have real life to guide us,” Becker said.

Among the questions brought up:

Where should people be told to go immediately after a quake?

Possibilities include the base gymnasiums, where there are bathrooms and shower facilities; hangars, where there's room and a roof; and the grinder at Port Hueneme, which could house hundreds of tents.

How can people get word out to their families that they're OK?

There is a system available, called the Navy Family Assessment and Accountability System (NFAAS). Commands and families need to make sure all NFAAS information is current and that everyone is registered.

Becker suggested the gate guards register all people leaving the base.

“It might be good to know who left the base at what time and where they were going,” she explained.

Other ideas included:

Create a pet zone where people can take their animals. Mills said this became a huge issue during Katrina. Swimming pool areas and fenced-in baseball fields and military working dog training areas are other possibilities.

Train people to be shelter managers.

Develop a list of all resources at all the different commands on base, and keep the list current. Who has tents? Who has cots and usable sleeping bags? Who has portable showers? What buildings have generators?

“The battalions have communications and an element of self-sufficiency that most bases don't have,” Mills said.

And while Mugu might be isolated at first, its runway, “a way to get in and out,” would eventually prove to be important on a regional level, Huether said.

The role NBVC would play in the local community — or be expected to play — was another topic. On one hand, Becker recalled the Seabees bringing portable showers to Fillmore after the 1994 quake; on the other, Mills recalled that with Katrina, “there was a point where control became an issue.” Base access might be drastically curtailed or shut down entirely, and retirees, contractors and others should be prepared for that scenario.

So with questions asked and issues raised, where does the base go from here?

Huether is planning some training programs, and various managers will come up with ways to fill the holes they found in the system. Then they'll hold another drill, perhaps one that focuses on shelter management.

It's not an issue that's going away anytime soon. Just last month, scientists said that after looking at earthquake data for the last 700 years, a major quake in this region is long overdue.

And as this story was being written, on Sept. 3, New Zealand was hit by an earthquake — magnitude 7.1.