

If This Had Been a Real

By Larry D. Hatfield

If this had been a real attack alert, you would not have heard about it because the warning system doesn't work.

The radio station that was supposed to stay on the air to give you survival information didn't even see the warning that an attack was imminent.

The radio stations that did see it didn't believe it and did not do what it was supposed to do.

Chilling Facts

These chilling facts about the system that is supposed to warn Bay Area residents of an impending nuclear attack — or other national emergency — surfaced yesterday after the nation's radio stations were erroneously alerted that a national emergency existed and all regular broadcast activities were to halt at once.

The failure of the system — formerly called Conelrad and now called the emergency broadcast system — sparked immediate top-level investigations in Washington, D.C.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, the system appeared to break down completely. No formal broadcasting was interrupted; some stations did not see the alert; others delayed emergency procedures while the alert was checked.

No Warning Here

If there had been an actual attack, the public here would have probably had no advance warning.

KNBR Radio, the station that broadcasters said was a

"primary" station which would stay on the air to broadcast news and emergency instructions to the public, was not aware the alert had been sounded.

Dale Henry, a KNBR engineer, said there were only two men on duty. The alert, moved on the wire services, was noted at 6:50 a.m. — 17 minutes after it was moved.

In fact, by the time KNBR saw the initial alert, the Associated Press and United Press International were moving bulletins cancelling it.

Alert Cancelled

Officially, the actual alert was not fully cancelled until 7:13 a.m. after two cancellations were carried without the proper code words verifying their authenticity.

Under the system, stations are to leave the air except for designated emergency stations.

"We didn't do anything because we didn't see this warning," KNBR's Henry said. Neither teletype which would carry an alert is where either the engineer or disc jockey on duty can see them. They are checked "periodically."

"It's lucky in one way we didn't see it because it was inaccurate," Henry said. "But it also shows the system isn't infallible."

'Couldn't Believe It'

John Motroni, managing editor of KCBS, said his station did not go off the air, which, under prescribed procedures, it should have.

"It (the alert) came over the wire at 6:33, the same time it does every Saturday morning," he said.

"I pulled it and took it into the engineer to have it

Attack Alert...Forget It!

logged. But then I looked at it and read the first few words and couldn't believe it. I thought they'd made a mistake."

'Hatefulness-Hatefulness'

He checked an authenticator envelope all radio stations have and the code, "hatefulness-hatefulness," indicated it was a real alert. But, Motroni said, "I really started thinking, It's gotta be a mistake. It has to be."

Instead of going off the air, he called the local UPI bureau, then UPI and CBS in Washington. The engineer meanwhile was monitoring other radio stations and a special "Conelrad alarm" which hadn't gone off. By the time they decided the alert was in error, the wires were moving messages cancelling it.

"I had visions of Pearl Harbor, of that guy standing at the scope watching the planes coming," Motroni said. "Here I was fooling around while the rockets were coming towards San Francisco. I didn't know whether to get on my roller skates or what."

'This Is It'

Don Chamberlain, of Oakland's KNEW, looked at the message and thought, "This is it." He went to the engineer and they read the instructions to put on a tape beginning:

"This is a national emergency."

But they too were suspicious that the alert moved at the same time practice alerts normally moved. They decided to check it out.

"Most broadcasters tend to use their own minds and

common sense," he said, "and they're not going to get a message of that sort and obey it blindly. This might be the fault of the system. All of us who have been in the business have seen faults in the warning system before. We tend to not think of the system very highly."

Ignored Bells

B. R. Bradbury, who was alone on duty at KFRC, ignored the bells announcing the alert because it was the regular Saturday morning time for it.

"I went in and did a newscast without checking the wire and when I came back I came very close to a coronary," he said. He also criticized the system, saying, "It's ignored by practically everybody. It's the same time every Saturday morning and we think, 'Oh well, here's another regularly scheduled weekly emergency. The whole system is a sham.'"

'It's Too Routine'

Dave Henderson, of KSFO, said, "I just assumed there was another test — a higher grade of test." He said the instructions for the emergency were "difficult to decipher" and, "we didn't consider going off the air."

He said the warning system, with regular tests on Saturday morning and Sunday evening, "lulls you into a false sense of security. It's too routine."

KPFA of Berkeley had not gone on the air yet when the alert moved on the wires but a spokesman for the station summed up the general feeling of broadcasters here yesterday:

"That's not a very funny accident."