

Operator's Story:

'How the Hell Did I Do It?'

Examiner News Services

CHEYENNE MOUNTAIN — (Colo.) — The man who temporarily startled much of the nation's broadcasting system yesterday with an erroneous national emergency warning later looked at his transmitter and commented; "I can't imagine how the hell I did it."

The man, teletype operator W. S. Eberhardt, a civilian who has worked for the Army-run National Warning Center for 15 years, said that as soon as he realized what he'd done he called his boss, Louis I. Smoyer, director of the center.

Smoyer immediately ordered cancellation of the message.

'Won't Happen Again'

At that point, Eberhardt said, "everything hit the fan."

He said the cancellation notice was sent again and then the phones started ringing.

Smoyer, who has headed the office of Civil Defense center here since 1966, said there was no procedure established should such an erroneous message be transmitted.

"We just didn't see that an erroneous message could be transmitted," he said, "It damn sure won't happen again. I've got to have time to sit up here and figure out how to make this thing fail-safe."

Pre-Punched Warnings

Hanging on hooks above the transmitter are three tapes, he explained. One of them is the test tape normal-

ly sent Saturday mornings on the broadcast wires of Associated Press and United Press International.

It hangs alone about four inches to the left of two other tapes. They contain pre-punched emergency warning messages, neither of which had ever been transmitted before.

The hooks themselves are labeled and the tapes contain a visible translation of the message.

"It's something you just can't explain," Eberhardt said. "When I sit back and look at it now, I can't imagine how the hell I did it. If I could have pulled the tape back, I sure would have."

Smoyer said yesterday's mishap "calls our attention to a problem we didn't know existed."

And despite the momentary chaos it caused, he noted that at least it would give the warning system a chance

to see where the bugs might be.

In Hot Water

And, he added, it could have been worse.

The other emergency warning message, which was not transmitted, contains reference to an attack.

"There are no steps necessary after the cancellation notice except to answer questions and make sure it doesn't happen again," he said.

Smoyer said he contacted the civil defense office in Washington as soon as he had been told the erroneous message had been sent.

"I assume both he (Eberhardt) and I are in hot water, and I know how badly he feels about it. He's still on duty and capable of doing a very fine job. I might add their (Civil Defense's) reaction has been the same as mine," Smoyer added.

55-2-11
2/21/71