

Oregon Shake-Out

Pete Steen

On October 20, 2016, at 10:20 a.m., Ellen and I were relaxing at home, looking out at the gray ocean, and the rain that was keeping the rivers too high to fish.

Suddenly, there was a terrific jolt that jarred the house and sent books and other objects flying off the shelves! We looked at each other and wondered aloud if there had been a massive explosion nearby, like the one that had occurred in Portland the day before. Then the house started shaking with massive undulations and we shouted “earthquake!” in unison and dove under the dining room table, clinging to the table legs and to each other.

I don't know how long the sickening undulations and the loud noises lasted. It felt like being in a small boat in heavy seas, rising swiftly to a wave's crest, then a terrifying drop into the trough, over and over and over. It was surely only a matter of a few minutes but it seemed like forever until, finally, all movement stopped. Then came an eerie silence. No appliances hummed. The television was silent and the screen was dark. The only sound was the soft rain coming in a west window which had been broken by a large glass float swinging from its ceiling hook.

We got to our feet warily, not sure that it was really over. We looked around at the damage. Several of the rocks from the rock veneer of our fireplace were on the floor in the living room and partially blocked the stairway down to the garage below. Fortunately, the concrete block body of the fireplace was still intact due to the rebar inside it and the fact that it was in the center of the house, anchored at its base in the garage, at the living level and again at the roof. Checking to see that the flue was intact would be essential to discover whether a fire would be safe, as there would be no other way to heat the house in the months to come.

Large pieces of furniture had been securely fastened to walls as a precaution, so only books and other small objects were on the floor. But that included a lot of broken glass and we were glad we had our shoes on. Sadly, a goodly portion of the broken glass was from our bar (I silently hoped that some of the bottles would be intact). The large oil painting on our south wall had crashed to the floor, cracking the heavy ornate frame and tearing the canvas painting. Ellen was heartsick; it had belonged to her beloved grandmother. Navigating the rocks in the stairwell, I brought up some plywood from the garage to nail over the broken window, while Ellen began to sweep up the broken glass on the floor.

The house, except for the window, seemed intact. Five years ago we had a seismic retrofit done, including extra strengthening of our stemwall to stickwall attachment, as well as three additional shear walls added. This past summer, our deck was rebuilt, including a stronger foundation, a stronger attachment to the house and, best of all, steel strapping criss-crossing under the joists to further stiffen the structure. I was grateful for this, as I was able to stand on a portion of the deck to cover the broken window.

As I finished covering the window, I could hear people shouting from down the hill. I looked to see people beginning to come up the street toward our house. I looked at my watch. It was 10:30 a.m., ten minutes since the quake started. In another five to ten minutes the first of several waves of a tsunami would wash over our beach and a portion of Cape Meares. I looked out to sea. I couldn't see a wave but I was startled to see a vast expanse of beach, reaching two or three hundred yards farther out than I had ever seen on a minus low tide!

Our neighborhood tsunami assembly area is the house to the north of us. We put our "OK" sign up on the front door, donned our rain gear and hardhats and went to the assembly area. People were arriving from both up the hill and down. From below, we could hear shouting and some screaming. We saw a car driving away to the north up 4th Street, only to slam to a stop at a power pole laying down in its path. A man and a woman jumped out and climbed over the pole and began to run but the man stumbled and fell among a shower of sparks. The woman ran back toward him and someone else grabbed her and held her. Another man poked a long pole around the man on the ground and then two other people dragged the fallen man to the side of the road. The woman knelt beside him and then more and more people began streaming by them, coming south, and we couldn't see the couple any more.

Several of us went partway down the hill, hesitant to go far because of memories of the tsunami in Japan. There, some who went back to help others ended up being swept away in the tsunami themselves. We urged people to hurry. People ran up past us, some grim-faced, some sobbing, some gasping for breath. As the flow of people passing us lessened, our Cape Meares fire engine came crawling slowly up the hill, people clinging to it like leeches. One of our courageous volunteer firefighters had brought it across the breadth of our village to our hill, driving through some yards to avoid downed power poles, to make sure it would not be ravaged by a tsunami.

Then we heard the sound: more of a hiss than a roar. We saw the water racing in over the exposed beach expanse toward the row of oceanfront houses on the lower elevation. Two blocks away from the beach, people were still trying to get to the road up the hill. One man was running as he pushed a wheelbarrow with another man in it. An anxious-looking woman ran alongside, helping to balance the wheelbarrow. Cheers went up as they made it up from the inundation zone. We were to learn that the man in the wheelbarrow was the one I had seen tangled with wires still live from the vestigial current of a transformer on a downed power pole; he was burned but still alive.

Some people were carrying their dogs in their arms as they ran up the hill. A loud roar accompanied the first wave as it slammed into the row of oceanfront houses, picking many of them off their foundations and slamming them into the next row of houses. Smoke poured from two of the houses and one burst into flame as it floated on the surge.

As a straggler came to safety, her dog, struggling in her grasp, jumped from her arms and ran back down the hill. The woman screamed the dog's name and turned, running after her pet. We watched in horror as she neared Pacific Avenue, and a surge of dirty, debris

laden water shot out between two houses and swept her and her dog away. We lost sight of her as the wave swept across 4th Street, carrying pieces of houses and some cars along with it.

The next several hours were a blur: helping the injured, triaging in a safe house, watching additional surges of water reaching as high as the 60-foot elevation level in one case. It was good that we had planned for an 80-foot tsunami. We checked on people in nearby houses, some of whom were injured by falling objects and/or partial collapse of their houses. Most houses not hit by the tsunami were habitable, however. Propane lines were shut off until it could be certain the connections were not leaking. We parceled out the refugees among several unoccupied vacation houses.

Over the following days, we recovered seven bodies from the inundation area. We placed them in temporary graves in an area away from any stream. Information about their identities marked their locations. We never found the body of the woman who ran after her dog, although her dog returned two days later, hungry and limping. We distributed our emergency supplies of food, water and blankets to those who no longer had any, as well as those had not supplied themselves beforehand. Latrine areas were set up and sanitary procedures established. Generators hummed for a few days. Then it was very quiet. We didn't know then that our first contact from the outside world would be an Ohio National Guard helicopter six weeks after that fateful October day.