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"Freedom of the Press belongs to those who own one."

A. J. Liebling of the New Yorker

May 12, 2003



Something Else to Worry About

To keep viewers constantly concerned and on edge, the evening news features "crises of the night." Well, I have new one.

Tsunami.

Of course, tsunamis are hardly of much concern to anyone who lives inland, but people on shorelines have grown far, far too complacent. Hawaiians generally understand the threat on a vague, intellectual level, but there is no immediate thought of the danger. And a major tsunami is certainly long overdue on the Hawaiian Islands. Historically, the Hawaiians get a BIG tsunami every 10 years or so...and there has been nothing large for more than 42 years. (Hawaii actually records a measurable tsunami, on average, every two years.)

Tsunamis are also a problem for places other than Hawaii. The San Diego Union (May 3) carried an article on geologists finding records of HUGE tsunamis on the Southern California coast. While tsunamis are thought of as infrequent, they actually happen often...just not at a deadly level. Sometimes tsunamis happen in places that are really unexpected – and are deadly on a huge scale. In 1750, an estimated 50,000 people died in Lisbon, Portugal! Now you may think that 1750 is a long, long time ago, but if it happens in Lisbon today do you think only 50,000 will die? Many thousands die each decade in the Pacific area, but since it does not happen in the U.S. it does not get coverage.

Japan is the subject of many tsunamis, large and frequent...and indeed the Pacific is probably more often struck because the Pacific is the most active volcanic area, and seismic activity generates tsunamis.

As the recent earthquake in Alabama shows, seismic activity can happen anywhere. Despite our mental picture of the terrible San

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Francisco earthquake, our worst earthquake happened in Missouri – it changed the path of the Mississippi River – and we can not easily predict earthquakes.

Volcanic activity and earthquakes cause tsunamis...they are not “tidal waves” because they have nothing to do with tides. Of course, if you see a 100-foot wall of water coming at your condo it makes little difference at that time how the wave was generated!

If there is a large seismic activity, say an 7.0 or greater earthquake on or very near the Pacific Ocean, there is very likely to be a tsunami. Each tsunami behaves differently depending on where it starts and a lot of other factors but a tsunami in the Aleutian Island chain, which is not unusual, travels at 450 MPH toward the north coasts of Hawaii. That has happened several times in recent memory – 1946 and 1957 – then there was another one in 1960 caused by an earthquake in Chile. Since then...nothing worth mentioning.

Since 1946 there has been a tsunami warning system on Hawaii and generally throughout the Pacific, and it is tested regularly, but the populace seems to not fully understand the danger. Tourists and locals alike ignore tsunami warnings and go to the beach to see...heck, some surfers even go to the water to surf! A real tsunami will mean instant death to each and every surfer...the “waves” might be manageable to experts but they will be filled with huge blocks of coral and boulders and sand. Instant death.

We have a lot to learn from the tsunami warning system in the Pacific, but it is far from foolproof. A Chilean earthquake in 1960 showed a small 6 inch rise as it passed Christmas Island, but it turned into a 36-foot wave at Hilo. Generally, undersea earth movement in the North Pacific take several hours to reach Hawaii, and South American earthquakes take a few hours, but Hawaii generates its own share of earthquakes from its volcanic present and past, and those tsunamis take only minutes, even seconds.

The Pacific is very restless, and San Diego is not immune...it is just oblivious.

Sign in the lobby of a Hilo, Hawaii hotel:

**Warning
In Case of Tidalwave
Rule One – Stay Calm
Rule Two – Pay Hotel Bill
Rule Three – Run Like Hell**



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