

August 5, 1952

DISASTER

TO: MEMBERS AAAE and CAAE

FROM: KERN COUNTY CALIFORNIA  
DEPARTMENT OF AIRPORTS

While many of you fellows east of California were bathing, shaving, eating breakfast or going to work, your scribe on Monday, July 21st was languishing in deep slumber on his Beauty Rest when suddenly at 0455 the bed leaped straight up in the air came down with a bang and Pandemonium broke loose. One of those California earthquakes you've heard about had come upon us. Having been through them before your writer was not particularly alarmed but my bedroom being within falling range of the 5000 gallon airport water tank, I sprang out of the room, scooped up my eight-year-old daughter in the next room and together with my wife Isabelle rushed out the back door to comparative safety. My daughter not yet completely awake asked, "Whats the matter"? I replied, "Earthquake". She says, "Get the bunnys". (Four pet baby rabbits).

The lights snapped off, explosions and flashes commenced, here, there, everywhere. Power transformers blowing up as hundreds of them were shook off the poles. I got a flashlight and went over to the administration building and just as I went in another good shock hit and the United Airlines, CAA and Weather Bureau boys and girls took off like a covey of quail. Seems as though in earthquakes everyone has an uncontrollable urge to get outside and brother they "git".

Within a matter of minutes the INSAC teletype informed us that the shock had been felt from San Francisco 250 miles NW to San Diego 215 miles south. Daylight arrived, the local radio stations started raving, a big fire was burning south of town (\$23,000,000 Paloma Oil Refinery total loss), sirens and fire trucks started their wail, Deputy Sheriff Art Cross, Chief of Sheriff's Aero Squad, wheels up to the airport and says he is flying to make a survey, "Will I fly to Lebec in the mountains 40 miles south while he flies to Tehachapi in the mountains 40 miles east". "What for"? says I. "We have no Deputy on duty there this morning and the phones are out so no report on possible damage, our Deputy at Tehachapi has just radioed in that there is damage at Tehachapi". "OK", says I. Art takes off, I examine some cracks in the walls of the waiting room and decide nothing serious, then debate in my mind whether to waste anytime flying to Lebec or not and finally deciding that its a fine clear morning for a hop and Kern Counties brand new Beechcraft Bonanza is gassed and ready to go, so I start her up and take-off, this is about 0555, one hour after the first big shock, I am flying solo so climb easily and swiftly toward the south when suddenly the BFL Control Tower calls, "Five Four Delta, Sheriff Kelly is here, will you return and fly him to Tehachapi"? "Roger, Wilco".

I taxi up to the ramp and Sheriff Tom Kelly says "Cec, I hated to bother you but we just received some more reports from Tehachapi and evidently they've been shaken pretty badly and I'd like to go up and see if they might need any help". "OK", says I, "Let's go".

From the usual Kern County C-A-V-U and smooth air we sail along and as Tom has 6-1/2 hours student instruction we talked mostly about flying, we arrived over Tehachapi once a beautiful little mountain valley town of about 2000 people and all talk of flying airplanes abruptly ended. The Sheriff put his hand on my arm and said, "Cec, this is a major disaster".

We landed at Tehachapi-Kern County Airport #4, elevation 3954 feet, 4500 feet oiled runway and taxiway, the rest in grain, four TEE Hangars and small parking area, 900 feet walking distance from the main street of Tehachapi. On the way into town we noted damage to every residence, but on arrival at the three block business section the disaster hit home. Several of the business buildings were completely flattened and all the rest without exception were damaged beyond possible repair. The final tally included 13

CONCLUSION

1. The close-in to town airport proved invaluable.
2. Even little airports can handle lots of safe traffic if they have to.
3. Tehachapi-Kern County Airport #4 undoubtedly had as many planes land there during this one week as during the 20 years of its existence.
4. Newsmen and photographers had a field day, they flew in from everywhere and flew away again.
5. Clyde Boughton and Tommy Powell of the Bakersfield Control Tower won the blue ribbon of the entire operation for spending days and nights on the job. CAA Air Traffic Control you are congratulated on doing a first class job in a dire emergency FIRST and taking care of the red tape later. Our hats are off to you.
6. Yes, one fully loaded Stinson on the 8th day got over the fence, then turned upside down. Wrecked the plane but no injuries. Pilot said earthquake caused bad air currents. A bottle of beer was found in the plane later.
7. Arvin, a little larger town in the Valley between Tehachapi and Bakersfield suffered almost as great damage to buildings and far more damage in dollars to collapsed irrigation wells and pipe and wrecked fields of cotton and alfalfa but were hardly noticed; in fact, got little attention for two or three days, but, Arvin has no airport. (There was the difference).
8. We have had more than 230 shakes since the big one so we won't mind if you call Bakersfield, "Shakersfield" from now on.
9. Bakersfield suffered relatively small damage, consisting mainly of toppled chimneys, broken plaster and dishes, but we did lose our City Hall, the County Court House was damaged, serious damage occurred to four or five other major buildings and three water tanks toppled. Much plate glass was broken. The airports were undamaged except our Administration Building and CAA Offices have cracks.
10. Kern County has suffered it's greatest loss, figured without loss of crops at more than 50 million to-date. Louie Inwood's flood at Kansas City was worse, but because they come without warning they are more fun.
11. Great rifts in the earth have appeared in the Bear Mountain and Arvin area which will remain for many years. Any member of AAAE or CAAE coming by this way will be flown over the area as a courtesy and we guarantee a sight to behold. LET'S GO!

C.C.M.

The following is an Editorial appearing in the Bakersfield Californian, Kern Counties' leading newspaper under date of July 30, 1952:

#### THE VALUE OF AN AIRPORT

Many times, in the past, arguments in favor of the establishment of a system of airports in Kern county have been heard, and it is good that they have prevailed because they brought into being one of the finest networks of landing fields in the United States.

Most of these fields, established through efforts of the Kern County Board of Supervisors and Superintendent of Airports Cecil Meadows, have been of great value in civilian defense training and military aviation.

But the wisdom of the plan set forth by Meadows and approved by the board was amply demonstrated last week when Tehachapi Airport, within two blocks of the city, proved to be the port of entry for all aid to be given the stricken community in the first hours of its need.

Rail and highway communication was blocked by slides and rocks. Even late in the day, this way was only partially cleared. But airplanes carried doctors and nurses, medical supplies and other aids into the area and had an airport on which to land close to the city. All delay was avoided. Tehachapi airport proved its worth that day.

While not anticipating further trouble, it is comforting to note that the Kern airport system places a landing field close to every major community in the county, making airborne aid possible and convenient.

It is significant, too, to note that San Bernardino is taking steps to establish similar airport facilities for the cities of San Bernardino, Riverside and Colton. The move is being led by Assemblyman Stewart Hinckley, who observed that the Tehachapi earthquake disaster, "is an outstanding example of what a civilian airport can mean to a community in time of emergency."

Due to the foresight of Mr. Meadows and the Board of Supervisors, Kern county has an excellent system which assures nearly all communities of adequate communication by air.

We may also add that the prompt mobilization of an air fleet to carry medical teams to Tehachapi was a feature of the rescue work done by the Sheriff's Aero Squadron, whose pilots flew all types of planes to the stricken area from Kern County Airport, the key field of the county system. Physicians and supplies were flown in also by pilots of the Civil Air Patrol here.

This reservoir of trained pilots is invaluable.

dead, with 25 seriously injured, but on our arrival, live people were still in the wreckage. The rescuers were working frantically but the recurring quakes would send them scurrying from their hazardous work.

People are good; an Air Force Major arrived from Edwards Air Force Test Base (30 miles to the east), in an AT-6, asked who was in charge, and when Sheriff Kelly was pointed out, told him his Commanding Officer had offered everything under his command if they needed it. The Sheriff asked for doctors, nurses and medicine, 20 MP's, a field kitchen with food, cots and bedding. The Major took-off in a steep climbing turn low over the town in low-pitch which caused loose bricks to fall and scare the rescuers, but in less than an hour a C-47 arrived with doctors, nurses, MP's and medicine and the other stuff started coming soon thereafter.

Also, as far as aviation was concerned something else started happening (the main highway and only road and the railroad to Bakersfield were closed by the quake), airplanes started arriving, most of them were private pilots curious to see the damage, but many came with doctors and nurses, until by noon there were so many doctors and nurses with nothing to do they started for home, but the airplanes kept coming. We turned our eyes away several times when collision was EMINENT; calm air, landing head-on, circling town both directions, three on final at the same time, others cutting in. I got through to Bakersfield on our radio and requested Clyde Boughton, CAA Chief Controller to grab any of our men in sight, get a portable generator and light gun ready to go as I was on my way down and would fly them back to Tehachapi. We had the "portable Control Tower" in operation within an hour and, its unbelievable the calm and control that came out of chaos in a matter of minutes. The pilots were swell, they all fell in line and obeyed the signals and we were in business. Our worst problem was parking space until an Air Force C-47 pilot solved it for us, he taxied right out into the wheat (tall and tinder dry), held his brakes, run up his engines and thrashed room enough to park several planes, other small planes followed suit and though acres of good wheat were destroyed we had no fires.

From the time we got the "tower" in operation until dark the second night we had 607 airplanes land (airplanes not movements) with more than 1800 people aboard. The first seven days ending Sunday night we had 982 planes land and with the ones we missed before we got set-up, the count would be, we believe over 1000.

Cordially,

Cecil C. Meadows, Sup't.  
KERN COUNTY AIRPORTS

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