

Disaster

By Ed Miller

It could have happened. Acrolein, a colorless, flammable, poisonous liquid was dumped onto the school ground of Upchurch Junior High School Saturday as a tanker containing the substance backed into a propane tank.

Poisonous smoke billowed from the flames that started when the collision occurred, said Hoke County Emergency Medical Service Director Bill Niven.

Niven would know better than anyone else about the accident because he set it up.

It was a mock disaster planned for the local fire, law enforcement and emergency personnel of Hoke County.

"It was a satisfactory test. Mistakes were made, and they could have cost lives but that's why you have exercises," said Niven.

According to Niven, the emergency medical personnel and the seven fire departments who worked the disaster co-operated to the fullest.

In fact, those who wrote and observed the test commented several times on the good co-operation efforts, said Niven.

The alleged fire started at about 10:50 a.m. and was over by noon, he said.

Johnny Baker, Chief of the North Raeford Fire Department was in charge of the exercise since the accident occurred within his jurisdiction.

There were several things learned from the mock disaster, Niven said.

One thing is that the Raeford Fire Department needs to switch radios so the members of that department can communicate with the other departments from the county.

Raeford is the only fire department with an odd frequency for their radios, said Niven.

Also, there was a problem in the "triosh" part of the operation or the time between pulling the victims out of the Upchurch gym and transporting them to the hospital.

Victims should have been separated into three groups; those who can wait, those who need transporting immediately and those who are dead, said Niven.

One shortcoming of the local departments was that they had no suitable clothing to wear for a chemical spill and fire, said Niven.

The mock accident showed department chiefs and personnel what they did wrong and right.

Personnel from Sandhills Community College observed the operations and held a debriefing session afterward, said Niven.



(Photos by Pam Frederich)

