

Headline: An 8.2 Cascadia earthquake and tsunami devastates Waldport: First person account of her experiences by Jane Carpenter, manager of the Oceanside Motel

Date: Saturday, August 21, 2010

Setting: The Oceanside Motel and RV Park, 2 blocks from the beach in Waldport, a 2-story motel with 30 rooms, 10 RV spots with full hook-ups, shower and laundry facility, and swimming pool

8:30 AM

It was a bright sunny morning, about 60 degrees with a light breeze. The motel was full, because of the salmon fishing contest that was being held that weekend in Waldport. I had Rachel Meredith, the day receptionist, checking out departing guests at the front desk. As usual, John Daniels, our maintenance man and all-around helper, was answering the phone for Rachel. I was running a little late, because I had to drop the copy for our new advertisement off at the newspaper. But, after I checked in with Rachel my plan was to look over the reservations for that evening, to see if any cancellations had come in during the previous evening. So, I was also working behind the front desk. The supervisor of the maids, Kathy Porter, had just called from the laundry room to find out when the list of checkouts would be available. She mentioned that Sally Fry and Maria Gonzales, two of the maids, had already arrived, and that Joan Maxwell, another maid, had phoned to say that she was sick and wouldn't be coming in today.

8:40 AM

It started with a slight jolt, and all of us at the front desk looked at each other and wondered if it was an explosion or something else. Sometimes they are blasting on the new highway bridge that is being built nearby and at first I thought that maybe they had just had an extra large boulder to blow up that morning. However, the first jolt was followed by a much harder shaking. I suddenly realized that "The Big One", which the newspapers had been talking about from time to time over the years, was finally happening. I looked wildly at Rachel and John and shouted to them to get under the front desk. But, as we all three tried to fit under the desk, I realized that the space was too small. The computers were underneath the desk, and we also had stored several boxes of computer paper there. So, I yelled at John and Rachel to stay put, and headed for the office behind the front desk.

By this time the shaking was so hard that I was knocked off my feet. So I began crawling toward the office doorway. Things were falling all around me—the computer monitor fell off the desk, the filing cabinet tipped over, and the ceiling tiles and light fixtures started falling out of the ceiling. As I reached the doorway to the office the door swung toward me, hitting me in the face. It had such force that it broke my glasses and, I later learned, also broke my nose and gave me a slight concussion. As you can imagine, the blow stunned me, and for a moment I lost my focus. Fortunately, the door swung back

the other direction, and I had the presence of mind to continue crawling until I reached the keyhole area under the nearest desk.

I'll never forget the next few minutes for the rest of my life. I later found out that the shaking lasted for 4 1/2 minutes, but at the time it felt like an eternity. The building seemed to groan and heave, and I could faintly hear screams coming from the second floor above me. Fortunately, the walls and ceiling held, but everything that wasn't tied down was flung around—the pictures came off the walls, the big chandelier in the lobby crashed down. Even the desk that I was under was moving, so I grabbed onto the leg and held on for dear life.

8:44 AM

Finally, the shaking stopped. For a couple of moments I just continued to crouch under the desk, not believing that it was finally over. But, it wasn't quiet like I had imagined it would be. The fire alarm was shrieking, and the overhead sprinklers suddenly came on. At the same moment the NOAA weather radio, which we keep in the office, came on with the standard screeching noise that precedes warning announcements. At first I wasn't paying too much attention, because I was so shaken from the earthquake and still disoriented by the pain in my face. However, for some reason the word "tsunami" caught my attention. Then, I remembered with horror that the articles that I had read about the Cascadia earthquake had always mentioned the inevitability of a local tsunami following that kind of earthquake.

Gathering myself together a little bit, I crawled out from under the desk and headed back out to the front desk to see how John and Rachel had weathered the quake. Fortunately, they both seemed to be fine, with only some minor cuts from the glass that had broken out of the picture window to the right of the front desk. I asked John if he could see about turning off the fire alarm, and suggested to Rachel that she call the laundry room to find out the condition of the rest of my staff. When she picked up the phone she discovered that the line was dead. John came back from turning off the fire alarm and finally we could hear ourselves think and could talk without shouting. We have always had a walkie-talkie system for the maids and John to keep in touch with the front desk, and John said that he had talked to Kathy on his walkie-talkie. He said that she had reported that she and Sally were fine, but that one of the dryers had fallen on Maria's leg before she could get completely under the linen-folding table. They were helping her, but she seemed to be in a lot of pain. So, I tried my cell phone to see if we could get an ambulance to take her to the hospital. No luck there—the cell towers must have been knocked out by the quake, because my cell phone didn't work for the next week.

8:50 AM

Guests had begun to fill up the lobby area, and the place was just a madhouse. The NOAA weather radio was still broadcasting a tsunami warning, so I retrieved it from the office and put it on what was left of the front desk. I figured that the guests had as much

right to hear the warnings as I did, and I wanted to be able to hear what the announcements were saying without dashing back and forth to the office.

Up to this point, miraculously, the electricity had still been on, but suddenly the lights went off, which made things even spookier in the dusky light of the lobby. Some of the guests seemed to have minor injuries that we could take care of. Most of them had cuts of some kind, and John retrieved the first aid kit from under the front desk and started to bandage the worst of the casualties. One of the guests said that the smell of natural gas had been very strong at the east end of the building. So, I took over the bandaging job and sent John to turn off the gas as well as the water. Evidently the shaking had pulled the plumbing fixtures apart in some of the second floor rooms, and one guest reported that there was water running down the hall and cascading down the stairwell.

I was starting to feel like we were beginning to get a handle on things, when the warnings on the NOAA weather radio became even more ominous. The usually calm voice of the announcement was practically hysterical, and was urging everyone on the coast to evacuate all low-lying areas and to stay away from the beach. So, I looked at Rachel and we both thought at the same time “The preparedness plan”. We had put together a plan the year before and I fortunately had thought to put a copy at the front desk. We had even held a training session or two for the staff. However, right at that moment I couldn’t recall a word that it said, so I grabbed the plan out of the drawer and quickly began to run through it.

The first thing that I realized we should do is get the older and more physically impaired people moving toward the evacuation assembly area. I knew from having made the preparedness plan that the Oceanside Motel is in the inundation zone, and that the route to the nearest assembly area is almost a quarter of a mile. So, I yelled to the guests in the lobby that we needed to start evacuating, and that they should start walking toward the assembly area immediately. Because most of the guests in the lobby had heard the NOAA broadcasts, they didn’t argue very much. However, some of the guests wanted to take their cars and others wanted to return to their rooms to pack their things. I urged them not to waste another moment in getting out of the inundation zone, and that taking their cars might mean that they would get caught in a huge traffic jam.

While I was talking to the guests, Rachel called Kathy and Sally on the walkie-talkie again, and told them that we were starting the evacuation of the motel. They were willing to leave, but they didn’t know what to do about Maria’s leg. Rachel suggested that they put her in the wagon of the riding lawn mower, or perhaps even in the wheelbarrow that we use to haul supplies around. They said that they would take care of it and meet us at the evacuation assembly area.

About that time John came in and said that he had done a quick survey of the RV park while he was going to turn off the gas and water. He reported that several of the RVs appeared to be seriously damaged and that one was even tipped over onto its side. He said that a group of people had gathered at the shower house. I asked him to take the bullhorn that we keep for emergency announcements and to start making an evacuation

announcement in the stairwells of the motel and in the RV park. I told him that he needed to be sure to tell people the closest evacuation route and the location of the assembly area. We had put signs in all of the rooms about the tsunami evacuation routes and assembly areas, but I was pretty sure that most people would have ignored them.

My next thought was to secure the list of registered guests and the receipts from the day before. Fortunately, since the computer was now dead along with the electricity, I had the printout from the night receptionist's accounting. So, I took that, and emptied the cash drawer into our usual bank deposit bag. When we had originally prepared our evacuation plan we realized that the computer was the only thing that would open the cash drawer. With the computer off, the cash drawer is safely locked up, but it is also inaccessible. So, we had a manual override installed, and thank heaven for that, because I was able to use that override instead of a crowbar to get the receipts to take with me. I grabbed my purse and headed for the evacuation route.

8:55 AM

Even though it seemed like it had been an eternity since the shaking had started, it was only 15 minutes. However, I knew, from the reading that I had done on local tsunamis and from the NOAA weather radio's announcements, that time was running out. The streets were chaos. Power lines were down everywhere, the streets had big cracks in them, and a number of the storefronts had fallen into the streets. Some people just seemed to be standing around, or were trying to get their stuff out of the damaged buildings. It was tempting to stop and help, but I knew that, with my responsibilities to a motel full of guests, I had to keep going. As I walked I raised John on the walkie-talkie again. He reported that he was still trying to get people to leave, and said that some guests were resisting the idea. They didn't want to abandon their expensive RVs. It was a tough decision, but I knew that I would need John very badly in the next couple of days, so I ordered him to leave without them. We had decided when we were putting together the preparedness plan that we would make every effort to notify our guests of the danger and to help them evacuate, but that we would not be responsible if they refused to leave, or became argumentative.

With my head injuries I was still a little bit disoriented, and the landscape looked so different. Some of my favorite landmarks were missing or at least dramatically changed in appearance. However, the town had had the foresight to put the yellow tape on the street signs to mark the inundation area and I decided to just head uphill as quickly as possible. Earlier, I had really wished that I had my glasses on, but fortunately my sunglasses are prescription, so I at least could see where I was going. As I headed up the hill, I found that big rocks and dirt had fallen into the road. So, I was even more thankful that we had opted to evacuate on foot, because I was able to easily skirt the debris. I also passed a sparking power line, which was really scary until I realized that it wasn't lying across the road. I could imagine that the shaking I had felt must have whipped the light and power poles around just like whips.

9:00 AM

Just as I neared the evacuation assembly area I heard the oddest sound. It was like the roar of distant jet engines. At first I looked up, thinking that it was the Air Force, coming to do some sort of reconnaissance of the earthquake damage. Then, I realized that it was coming from the ocean and not from the sky. I turned around and looked back down the hill that I had just climbed. A wall of water seemed to be headed directly toward the beach. I would swear that it was 40' high, it seemed that big, but I later found out that it was only 20' tall. But, you wouldn't believe what it was doing to the boats harbored in the bay. It literally picked up even the largest of them and carried it along as if it was a surfboard or something. I watched aghast as the wave hit the beach and then the buildings. I had always heard about the power of moving water. In my years of living at the coast I had witnessed the damage caused by the waves generated by winter storms. But, nothing had prepared me for what I was watching at that moment. The buildings just seemed to dissolve, as if they were made of sugar. I saw cars swept up and thrown against the buildings, and I sincerely hoped that they were empty, because I couldn't see how the people in them could possibly have survived.

Eventually the water seemed to slow down. The buildings several blocks from the beach appeared to be taking a battering from all the debris that the wave was now carrying, but at least they were still standing. Then, the water began rushing back out toward the mouth of the bay. The water was full of debris—pieces of buildings, boats, cars, and even some people clinging to anything that floated. As the water rushed away I saw that most of the buildings within a block or two of the shorefront had simply vanished. All that remained were the foundations.

For a few minutes I just stood there, too stunned by the devastation to move. Finally I came to my senses and started looking around the evacuation assembly area. To say that it was a madhouse would be too calm a description. It looked like the casualty ward from the war movies that I had watched. Injured people were everywhere, and most of the people that I saw had at least some blood on them somewhere. Fortunately, our assembly area was in the parking lot of a school, and the doctors and nurses from the nearby hospital were starting to filter through the mass of people. I caught sight of Rachel, Kathy, and Sally, but I couldn't see Maria for the crowd. As I worked my way toward them I was just hoping that they had somehow managed to bring her. I tried to reach John again on the walkie-talkie, but the distance was too great. I could only hope that he had followed my orders and left.

9:30 AM

When I finally reached the girls, we all fell into each other's arms, crying with relief. They had brought Maria in the wheelbarrow, and were nearly exhausted from pushing it up the hill that far. She was in good spirits, but a lot of pain. Eventually a doctor came by and some people improvised a more comfortable stretcher from a blanket and two poles that a nearby homeowner furnished. They took her off to the hospital. I looked around and recognized some of the guests who had been in the lobby, so I decided to circulate through the crowd to find more and tell them to meet over by the school steps.

While I was doing that, Rachel, Kathy, and Sally went back to helping the less injured guests with bandages. I eventually ran across John, and I can't tell you the relief that washed over me when I spotted him. He said that he had barely managed to leave the motel before he heard the wave coming. He had to sprint for several blocks, but he had only managed to escape the wave because he had left the motel right after I had ordered him to leave. That head start had made all of the difference. He thought that only a few guests were still remaining when he left, and we both hoped they had escaped the wave.

During the next hour, two more huge waves smashed into the beach. All during that time people continued to arrive at the assembly area. Some of them were in very bad shape. They had gotten caught up in the wave and the water had actually stripped most of the clothes from their bodies.

I headed back to our makeshift rendezvous area. While I was walking toward it I remembered that the preparedness literature had mentioned aftershocks. I realized that the front steps of the school were probably not the best place for the motel's survivors. The school had come through the first earthquake pretty well, but might not hold up if the aftershocks were as strong or stronger than the original earthquake. Fortunately, John had brought along the bullhorn, and I used it to talk to the guests who were gathered on the steps. We eventually all moved out into the middle of one of the baseball diamonds.

We spent the next 6 hours waiting for the "all clear". Some of the guests wanted to immediately go back to the motel after the first couple of waves, to begin looking for missing relatives and friends. Out of the 100 guests I had on the registration list, I managed to account for 55. The people in the nearby houses were wonderful. They brought out blankets and, to protect them from the sun, we improvised some temporary shelters over some of the elderly guests. The school had fortunately stockpiled some supplies, so we had some water and a little bit of food.

All of the staff members were desperate to find out what had happened to their family members. I told Rachel and Kathy that they could go look for their families. However, they weren't gone long. When they returned they said that the bridge across the bay was completely gone, and they couldn't get across to their homes. They reported that the devastation in the downtown was really horrible, with some fires racing from building to building. I had seen the smoke clouds earlier, but hadn't been able to see its origin from my vantage point.

Sunday morning, August 22nd

It was a long night. We huddled together in the ball field, trying to keep each other's spirits up, and to stay warm. People had started several bonfires from debris, so I stayed near one of them most of the time. The tsunami waves seemed to have died down by sunset. We felt two more big aftershocks during the night, and so many little ones that I lost count. As I found out later, the school had recently been retrofitted to withstand these types of earthquakes, so it did hold up just fine. In addition, for some miraculous

reason, the water in that part of town was still on, so we at least had a place to go to the bathroom. One of our elderly guests suffered a heart attack during the second aftershock, so we had to rush her to the hospital. I think the best description of the hospital would be contained-chaos. Patients lined the hallways and the lawn was covered with people on stretchers. The staff was completely overwhelmed, but they seemed to be coping and rushed our guest into a makeshift triage area in the hospital parking lot.

Eventually, a police car came by and said that the worst appeared to be over. However, they warned against returning to the devastated area. They reported piles of unstable debris and that the fire department was still struggling to contain the fires, because most of the water mains were broken.

Saturday, August 28th

It's been a week now since I felt the shock of the first earthquake. I haven't been sleeping well because we are still feeling enough aftershocks to make us all very nervous. However, most of them are much shorter, with less shaking. Waldport, and the entire coast for that matter, is still reeling from the multiple shocks of earthquakes and tsunamis. We didn't manage to get back to the motel until Sunday night. Fortunately, even though we were only two blocks from the ocean, the motel is mainly a wooden structure, and is on a slight hill and at an angle away from the main force of the tsunami waves. So, it remained pretty much intact, but the first floor was badly flooded, and all of the motel's files are pretty much destroyed. The RV park didn't fair as well, as it is closer to the ocean. The RVs had been tossed around like toys, and one of them was eventually found lying on its top on the beach 5 blocks away. Some of them were never recovered.

My house didn't do very well in the earthquake. It is basically uninhabitable, so I have been staying at the motel, camped out on the lawn, since all of the rooms are still a mess. Poor Maria lost everything, and her daughter and husband were caught up by the first wave. They haven't been seen since then, and are presumed dead. As for our guests, we eventually managed to account for 75 of them. We know for sure that 20 of them were killed. Some had been eating breakfast at a nearby restaurant that was closer to the beach, and must have been swept away when the first tsunami hit. Several of the people in the RV park who had refused to leave are missing and presumed dead. When we finally were allowed back into the motel after the city engineers completed a structural analysis, we found 4 guests dead in their rooms. In a couple of cases heavy bureaus had fallen over and crushed them. In the other cases the deceased were elderly people who appear to have suffered heart attacks during the first earthquake.

I don't know when things will return to normal. We only got the electricity back on last night. Before that we were cooking over open fires in the fire pits in the RV park. Until the water mains are fixed, we are using the water in the swimming pool for many of our necessities. Most of the guests are still stuck here, because all of the coastal highways and the highways over the Coast Range are still blocked by major landslides. Some low-lying sections were completely washed away by the tsunamis. I was really glad that we

had stashed many of our basic supplies, like toilet paper, in a storage unit out of the inundation zone, but we are gradually using those up.

The National Guard started airlifting supplies in last night, but with Portland so devastated, as well as the cities in the Valley, most of the relief agencies like the Red Cross have been too busy to set up shelters in Waldport and the other coastal communities. But, the whole town is pulling together, with neighbors and even complete strangers helping each other. The fires are finally out and some debris has even been cleared from the main streets. We heard on the radio that part of the Newport fishing fleet was out to sea when the tsunami hit, and they have managed to pick up some survivors. We are all hoping that some of those are Waldport folks. Some of the boats are also helping to bring supplies into the ports. However, our bay is still pretty much inaccessible because the bar across the harbor is so different. The boaters want to wait for an underwater survey of the depth to the bar before they venture across. A little bit of looting took place in some of the stores away from the devastated area, but for the most part the police were able to keep things under control. I am just thankful that I, and my staff, managed to make it alive through the entire ordeal.