

The Illinois National Guard conducts multi-day, full-scale statewide preparedness exercise

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SPRINGFIELD - Imagine sleeping peacefully in bed, you're awakened by a subtle shaking. Not sure what's going on, you step out of bed to investigate, as you move through your house, the rumble intensifies to a shake, then a full-on roil. The pictures on your walls crash to the ground; the ground beneath you lurches and heaves. You look out of the window and see waves of earth travel down a nearby road.



This isn't a scene from the most recent disaster-themed movie. This is what the scene looked like in the Midwest between December, 1811 and March, 1812, when the frontier town of New Madrid in what is now Missouri, and the surrounding area experienced earthquakes ranging in magnitude from 7.1 to an estimated 8.8 on the

Richter scale. The quakes were so intense that church bells ringing in Boston were attributed to the shaking.

This year's Prairie Assurance exercise focused on an event like this occurring along the New Madrid and Wabash Valley seismic zones, the same area where a series of quakes from December 1811 - March 1812, which caused widespread damage; across seven states, including southern Illinois. The full-scale, statewide exercise in preparedness tested the ability of the Illinois National Guard to integrate with state and local emergency management agencies and first-responders to react to an event like this.

Maj. Gen. Richard J. Hayes, Jr. of Springfield, Illinois, the Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard, kicked off the event with a primer to participants, briefly explaining the end goal of the exercise.

"It's the planning and steeping yourself in the problems that allow you to be adaptive and creative when it actually occurs," said Hayes. "All of the effort we put into this is to understand the problem and recognize that when it hits, it's all going to change."

Brig. Gen. Michael Glisson of Festus, Missouri, Director of the Joint Staff of the Illinois National Guard, said Prairie Assurance kicked off with an exercise between Illinois National Guard leaders and directors of the Illinois Emergency Management Agency in Springfield, Illinois, Oct. 31 through Nov. 2.

The exercise continued Nov. 2 when the Illinois National Guard's 182nd Airlift Wing and Company B, 2nd Battalion, 238th Aviation Regiment, both based in Peoria, Illinois, started moving communications assets and personnel to Jefferson, Madison, Massac, Williamson and St. Clair counties in southern Illinois.

The exercise continued through Sunday, Nov. 4, with Soldiers and Airmen from the Joint Task Force conducting training in conjunction with a table-top exercise for senior leadership at the 183rd Air Wing and Camp Lincoln's Illinois Military Academy in Springfield, Illinois.

Lt. Col. Jonathan Edwards, Strategic Plans Director for the 183rd Combat Operations Squadron, based in Springfield, Illinois, was the exercise control group leader for the weekend.

"Basically we're acting as the simulated Joint Force Headquarters, Illinois Emergency Management Agency and local agencies for the JTF and others to communicate with," said Edwards. "Exercising like this is extremely beneficial for our units to develop and document tactics and standard operating procedures that work."

Edwards said that full-scale exercises like Prairie Assurance are one of the best ways to ensure units and personnel tasked for homeland operations are ready to answer the call and can assist when the need arises.

Glisson said the exercise scenarios and information will be used during next year's National Level Exercise hosted by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"Next year's NLE 2019 will be a New Madrid based scenario," said Glisson. "The Illinois Emergency Management Agency's part in that will be a mass casualty and mass care exercise that will have larger implications. The proficiency gained in that really applies to any number of potential 'bad days' in Illinois or the U.S., whether that's a whether event or a large-scale terrorist attack."

Darryl Dragoo, Director of Operations for the Illinois Emergency Management Agency in Springfield, Illinois, said exercises like this are necessary to figure out what IEMA may need and how the Illinois National Guard can support.

"This is a point of criticality," said Dragoo. "In this type of event, what we're using as a scenario you can't function unless you work together and partner well in advance to get the job done, which is ultimately get somebody back in their home or get a community back on its feet. The system fails unless there's that collaboration."

Dragoo said the event was going better than he expected.

"It's been awesome," said Dragoo. "The front end was great and the operational communications piece exceeded everybody's expectations. Now we're working the finer points, which is where we need to be to coordinate mission sets and really decide the best use of the Guard's forces against the mission sets of the state."

Glisson echoed Dragoo's sentiment and said in the six years he has been heavily involved in earthquake planning for the Guard, this is the most participation he's witnessed.

"We've made more headway from a planning standpoint this week than we have in a long time," said Glisson. "I'm extremely pleased and I know that the Adjutant General is as well with what we've done this week. Continued integrated planning is critical in this world to ensure good interagency relationships and to make sure we always understand each other and make sure that we're not meeting for the first time during an event."