

EARTHQUAKES

Miracles and Myths in Alaska

by our Washington Correspondent

THE great earthquake that struck Alaska late in the afternoon of Good Friday, March 27, 1964, was far less terrible in its consequences than would be expected for an event registering between 8.3 and 8.75 on the Richter scale. Only 115 lives were lost in Alaska and the tsunamis engendered by the quake took only a handful elsewhere. And just as the earthquake at Lisbon inspired Voltaire to write *Candide*, the Alaskan earthquake has moved the National Academy of Sciences, if not to such heights of philosophy, at least to the ambition of making the event the best documented earthquake in history.

Less than a day and a quarter after the earthquake had struck, a team of five sociologists from the Disaster Research Center at Ohio State University descended upon the area and began to interview the actors in the tragedy. This and much other material has been combined in a description of how people coped with the earthquake, both in the immediate aftermath of the disaster and in the following days when the initial shock had worn off. The document* is of considerable interest in showing the great resilience of human societies in the face of a major, though far from crippling, disaster.

The Alaskans attributed their energetic behaviour during the calamity to their frontier spirit: "This is a frontier country and we are used to hardship" was the verdict of radio announcers, editorial writers, and people in bars. The Ohio sociologists bluntly state that the frontier spirit is a myth. The Alaskans behaved courageously to be sure, but no better than the average behaviour in the face of disaster. In Alaska, as elsewhere, the heady heroism and altruistic gestures later gave way to private interest after the worst danger had passed. Firms that had given free supplies or equipment began to expect reimbursement and individuals demanded payment for long hours of overtime work.

The Ohio Disaster team also comments on the tendency for people to do what they are trained to do in the hour of crisis, not what most needs doing. Policemen look for traffic to direct, firemen seek fires to fight, utility workers restore utilities and administrators hold meetings, but people are disinclined to take on novel tasks such as organizing rescue parties to search the debris. Systematic search and rescue efforts did not begin until more than 12 hours after the earthquake. In Anchorage, at least, people seemed to give a greater priority to protecting property than saving lives, in the mistaken belief that there would be heavy looting. The need to assert control over the physical surroundings seemed more compelling to most people than that of digging among the rubble for survivors. Officers of the Salvation Army, for example, spent the first half hour after the earthquake helping police to direct traffic. The police department's first thought was to place security guards at intersections and buildings.

The first reaction of the Eskimo villagers was perhaps more apposite than that of the townsfolk in Anchorage. Within ten minutes after the shock the

people of Tatitlek in Prince William Sound were holding a service in their church while the walls were still shaking. As an act of God the earthquake was not wholly inopportune since for several months afterwards it revitalized attendances at the Russian Orthodox church, the prevalent religion among Alaskan Eskimos. The tsunami created by the earthquake made a particularly dramatic intervention at the village of Old Harbor on Kodiak Island, where it washed away the rival Protestant chapel but spared the Russian Orthodox church. The church's situation on higher ground did not prevent the sect's adherents from ascribing its survival to a miracle. A year previously, a small earthquake had occurred on the same night as a lay reader abandoned the orthodox church for the protestants and a whole family was about to apostasize on the day the Good Friday earthquake struck. It was little wonder that in the face of such celestial odds the protestant missionary left the village soon afterwards.

If the Eskimo villagers learnt the message of the earthquake, that was more than could be said for the businessmen in Anchorage. In 1960 the US Geological Survey had warned that much of Anchorage was built over a layer of unstable clay. These areas, some of which subsided as much as 70 feet in the

Target for Apollo 14

The cross marks the landing site in the Fra Mauro formation for the Apollo 14 astronauts, Commander Alan B. Shepard, Command Module Pilot Stuart A. Roosa, and Lunar Module Pilot Edgar D. Mitchell. NASA now says the launching will be no earlier than January 31 next year. Fra Mauro is a flattish highland area roughly 110 miles nearer the centre point of the Moon's near face than the Apollo 12 landing site in the Ocean of Storms.

* *The Great Alaska Earthquake of 1964: Human Ecology*. National Academy of Sciences, Washington DC. \$29.50.