

Sustainability & Climate Change Reporter



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Posted at 5:26 PM on May 18, 2010 by Mike Nesteroff

Where Were You on May 18, 1980?

It was a sunny spring Sunday morning on May 18, 1980, when I casually strolled into work a little before 9 a.m. and was greeted by the KOMO-TV assignment editor saying, "The Mountain blew. Really, its the big one." And indeed it was. Before long a camera crew and I were headed to Mt. St. Helens in a chartered helicopter. Flying south from Seattle you could see the eruption boiling away into the sky. This definitely was not the little puffs of ash and steam that we'd been seeing off and on the previous three months since Mt. St. Helens reawakened.

Logjam

Our first destination was the North Fork of the Toutle River where we came upon a [massive raft](#) of logs, debris, mud and ash barreling downstream. (The video we shot is starts at about 2:52 in on the KOMO excerpt and runs for about two minutes). It was a dicey proposition circling over the narrow canyon to shoot the logjam because we weren't alone -- there were at least a dozen other helicopters and airplanes also circling to get photos. I probably spent as much time spotting other aircraft for our pilot as I did looking at the incredible scene below.

Next we headed towards the town of Toutle, where we found a bend in the river and set the helicopter down on a gravel beach, tail pointed over the water so photographer Dave Mann could shoot the logjam as it came around the corner. Our pilot kept the engine idling, which was a good thing because, just as the debris boiled into view, I looked down to see water rising over the skids. We quickly got in the air and got some great shots skimming over the logjam.

House

We spent the first day flying all over the area, getting as close in to the volcano as the no-fly zone permitted, shooting the rescue helicopters at work, seeing the leveled forest and lahar-choked river, the damaged rail bridge and decimated logging camp, and then feeding all the tape back to the station by hovering in the helicopter at 10,000 feet with the doors off and me holding the microwave stinger on my lap!

At sunset we made a final run for the day up river to shoot new video for the late news and that's when we spotted a fully intact house floating downstream. We shot that from the air and with our camera batteries on fumes ran downstream to catch the house as it met up with one of the remaining intact bridges. We all thought the bridge would go, but instead the house disintegrated and we had the only video of it.

Crockett

Over the next couple of days we talked to those displaced by the eruption and to survivors, including the incredible story by KOMO-TV cameraman [Dave Crockett](#). In all 57 people died in the eruption, but it would be two years before we discovered that most of them actually had been outside the designated restricted zone.

It was an incredible experience to cover the Mt. St. Helens' eruption that week, particularly to have had as big a role with only eight months' on-air reporting under my belt (but that's what happens when you're the new kid, you get the crappy Sunday shifts). My lack of experience definitely showed, but I think we did a credible job and I still feel humbled to have been a part of such a monumental event.

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