

AIRMAN

OCTOBER 1980



The Day
the Mountain
Blew

The Day the Mountain Blew

It was a Sunday like no other
for these reservists.



by TSgt. Alan Prochoreff
photos by TSgt. John Marine

A 304th ARRS helicopter flies over the devastation.
LEFT: Ash the consistency of fine flour covered everything.
BOTTOM LEFT: A Portland pararescueman helps a survivor to safety.



The Pacific Northwest had been living for weeks in hell's back yard, waiting anxiously for the Mount St. Helens crater to suddenly burst open and spew forth its inner fury with a frightful vengeance.

Volcano!

The very word once referred to an island in the Mediterranean that, according to Roman mythology, was the entranceway to the world of the god of fire. Today the word simply means terror—in its starkest form.

Scientists had been warning right along that it was only a matter of time before the mountain in Washington state would erupt in a molten rage.

Earthquakes had begun stirring the hot liquid rock deep within the dormant peak in March, renewing five-year-old predictions that the mountain could blow at any time. For volcano watchers in close proximity, it was like standing beside a dynamite keg knowing the fuse is lit, but not knowing how long it is.

Scientists weren't the only ones watching Mount St. Helens closely. Members of the Air Force Reserve's 304th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, from Portland, Ore., 48 miles to the southwest, were also keeping a wary eye on the mountain. If St. Helens erupted, members of the unit would be among the first to be involved in rescue efforts.

For several weeks squadron members had been standing a round-the-clock alert while hoards of curiosity-seekers poured into the area despite warnings from scientists and law enforcement officials.

The volcano's on-again, off-again activity confused even the experts. While some predicted apocalyptic destruction, the more skeptical wryly observed that, sure, the mountain could blow its top, but then a comet could land in the middle of New York City, too.

The absence of a unified front, combined with relatively inactive volcanic activity, served only to attract more sightseers to the area. Privately owned aircraft filled the skies around the peak, and some helicopters actually landed on the smoldering crater, disgorging passengers who could hardly wait to climb inside the mountain's peak for a better look. One group of climbers even wore camouflaged clothing to avoid detection by authorities and made it to the top of St. Helens—to film two beer commercials!

"Nobody would listen," a county sheriff remarked later. "It didn't matter what we did to try to prevent people from reaching the mountain. They did everything they could to get around the barricades."

As late as May 17, with the mountain continuing to convulse deep within its bowels but giving no further evidence of spilling over its peak, the swarm of visitors grew bolder. Mount St. Helens was becoming something of a joke. "I Own a Piece of the Rock" T-shirts were in evidence everywhere. Campers and backpackers slept soundly amidst the mountain's virgin timberland.

Beneath them St. Helens seethed.

On Sunday, May 18th, members of the 304th were in the second day of a weekend search-and-rescue exercise in their area at Portland International Airport. Across the airfield TSgt. William Hulet was also training, but with the Oregon Air National Guard as its chief observer in the unit's weather detachment. He was busy with the daily routine when he noticed one of his instruments acting up.

The barograph, an instrument that records changes in air pressure, was erratic. Hulet was puzzled as he watch-

ed the needle jumping wildly across the paper.

He would find out later that the instrument was among the first to record the massive eruption of Mount St. Helens, the first volcano to erupt in the contiguous United States in 60 years and the most destructive ever in this country.

The mountain literally blew its top at 8:32 a.m., on May 18, turning 1,200 feet of its own peak into rubble and exhaling air from its innards in a tremendous gush. Outside air gathered in force to fill the vacuum and the turbulence was causing the barograph's wild fluctuations.

Two hours later, the Washington State Department of Emergency Services formally requested the 304th ARRS to attempt to rescue a geologist and a photographer believed to be near the crater. Unknown to the 304th at the time, the two were never seen alive again.

Two helicopters took off almost immediately, and other crews were alerted for later flights.

TSgts. Garvin Williams and David Ward were the para-rescue specialists aboard the first helicopter that flew into that area and became the first to set foot on the volcano following the eruption. Other blue-suiters would follow and provide the bulk of the rescue effort.

The two PJs were awe-struck at what they saw.

"Nobody knew what it was going to be like on the mountain," TSgt. Williams said later. "We'd all been around the mountain before, but none of us had ever been near an active volcano. All we knew was the mountain had exploded and there was a lot of ash in the area. Nobody knew what to expect, really, but I don't think anybody expected to see what we saw."

For a distance of 16 miles from the crater, massive trees, up to eight feet in diameter, had been uprooted or sheared off. A 4-inch-thick deposit of ash, a few shades lighter than cinder blocks and having the consistency of talcum powder, blanketed thousands of acres.

"There was nothing alive out there," observed Lt. Col. Thomas Jones, commander of the 304th ARRS. "Not a blade of grass, not an insect. Nothing."

"Everything was still steaming, smoking like a house that had just burned down," said TSgt. Williams. The sight, in his own words, put him "more or less into a state of shock."

The first two volcano victims spotted by the helicopter crews were lying next to an automobile, and Williams and Ward were placed on the ground to check the car for other victims.

With the mountain only a few miles away and still belching a plume of steam and ash 40,000 feet into the air, the two PJs began their trek toward the car. An indication of the intensity of the devastation was the fact that the splintered logs around them were still hot.

"I remember thinking, 'Maybe we shouldn't be here,'" TSgt. Williams said. "It was all pretty scary—one of those times when you don't know what's going to happen next."

Orbiting overhead in the second helicopter, the pilot looked toward the mountain and saw a wall of mud cascading down the side like a mass of chocolate cake batter. The two pararescuemen were in its path.

The pilot called over the radio to warn them.

The PJs got the message all right, but it had taken them 45 minutes to cross about a hundred yards of downed trees and now they were told they had only about five minutes to get out of the path of the onrushing mud.

photo by Maj. David K. Wendt



The eruption of Mount St. Helens leaves its mark everywhere. Mike Moore and his



family (below) are visited by rescuers SSgt. Rick Harder and TSgt. Charles EK of the 304th AARS.



Their only hope, they knew, was to reach one of two cars from area television stations that were parked nearby. After quickly verifying the deaths of the two people near the car, the PJs sprinted for one of the cars, only to encounter another obstacle: a stubborn reporter.

"We told him about the mudslide coming, but—can you believe this?—he said he wasn't going to leave," said TSgt. Ward.

"We really didn't have much time to argue with the man," added TSgt. Williams. "We could hear the calls coming in over the radio we had with us—'Watch that thing making a sweep of the valley!' It was only three or four miles away, so we had only a few minutes before it would reach us."

Over the reporter's protests, the three men piled into the car and raced down the twisting mountain road at more than 50 mph. All the way down, the reporter argued. To him, the situation had seemed to be well in hand.

"I finally quit beating around the bush and told him flat out we'd all be dead if we weren't farther down the mountain in five minutes," said Williams.

The PJs' HH-1 Huey was waiting for them when the car screeched to a halt. Both servicemen dashed toward the helicopter, but the reporter again stood fast, insisting he had to film the story he was sent to do. The two PJs finally convinced the man to abandon his car and climb aboard the chopper.

The aircraft was aloft only briefly when all three of them saw the wall of mud smash the reporter's car against some trees before burying it, perhaps forever. Seeing the spectacle changed the reporter's attitude but not enough to prevent him from asking if the Air Force would pay for the car.

"It's hard to talk about that wall of mud, to imagine what it was like," said TSgt. Williams. "You have to try to picture hundreds of giant bulldozers, each having the power of forty others, and then imagine them all abreast making a single sweep at forty miles an hour, taking everything in their paths. It was unreal."

The reporter was the first of 51 people rescued by the 304th ARRS during the remainder of the day following the eruption. The unit would add 10 more in the days to come, finally laying claim to 61 of the 101 confirmed rescues from the mountain over a 17-day period. Some were more memorable than others.

"On one run," recalled Maj. William Peden, "we landed on a little hill, the only high ground in an area covered by the mudslides. There were twenty-five or thirty people on this knoll, and we just kept loading them in until we were full, then away we went [the remainder were later rescued]."

"Once we were airborne, I turned around and started counting noses. We got sixteen people in our twelve-passenger helicopter, including a number of babes in arms."

The "babylift" of sorts was one of the more gratifying rescues from the mountain, but there were also bitter disappointments. One pilot reported watching helplessly as four people were swept away by mudslides never to be seen again.

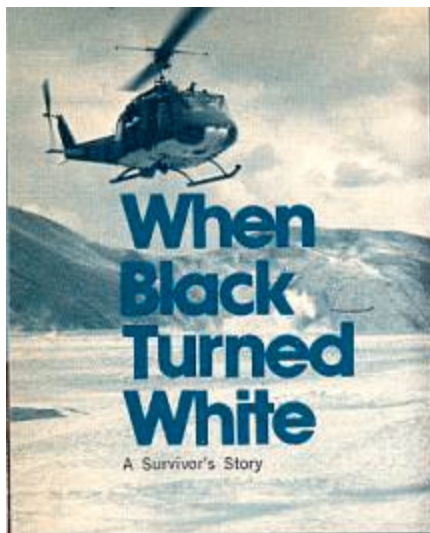
The joys and disappointments were also mixed with puzzling episodes. Several would-be rescue attempts were thwarted by people on the ground who didn't want to be helped.

"We even had people throw rocks at our helicopter," said SSgt. Rick Harder, a pararescueman, "and once, our wingman had to make a

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**TOP--MSgt Jerald "Jerry" Darrah,
LOWER--MSgt Richard "Bud" McDonald - (ART)**



When Black Turned White

A Survivor's Story

Volcanos are sometimes hard to take seriously.

Krakatoa, for example, an island volcano between Sumatra and Java, killed 36,000 who ignored its rumbling warnings in 1883. And no doubt they laughed in Pompeii, just before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

Near Castle Rock, Wash., Michael Moore was no different. He scoffed at the danger posed by Mount St. Helens as he planned a backpacking outing—a sort of volcano watch—the weekend of May 17-18. He had picked out a mountain peak 10 miles northwest of the mountain from which he and his wife, Lu, and two daughters were going to view the increasingly active volcano during the weekend.

Luckily for the Moores, they had an ace in the hole not available to the victims of Krakatoa or Vesuvius. The Moores had the Air Force and the Army on their side.

Once in place on the peak, the Moores were disappointed. Watching the volcano "just sit there" soon became boring, and the family decided to move to another area and camp for the night. It was a decision that saved their lives.

The family had backpacked and camped in the Mount St. Helens area several times and was able to choose a campsite that was far enough away from the projected danger zone should the mountain erupt.

It was a beautiful spot, nestled in lush, green virgin timberland at the bottom of a small canyon. Moore felt the trees and the three ridges between them and the volcano would be more than adequate protection.

"The most anyone expected at that point was a landslide coming down the north slope and a major eruption of

lava that would be confined to the Spirit Lake area," Moore said.

But the family was miles from either location and Moore, who has an undergraduate degree in geology and who once wrote a paper about a Mount St. Helens eruption, felt secure.

After all, his own prediction had forecast some ashfall, flooding, and mudflows near Castle Rock, but no damage in the Green River Valley where the family was preparing to retire for the night.

The next morning—Sunday, May 18—they were just finishing breakfast when Moore heard an ominous low rumbling. The former Air Force aircraft technician knew immediately that the sound wasn't coming from a single jet or a formation passing overhead. There was also pressure building in his ears.

That's when they saw the plume. "It was a rising mass of gray-black smoke and ash that seemed to cover the entire southern horizon," Moore recalled. "At that point, we knew the mountain had erupted and that it had been a massive explosion."

Ash began to fall and Moore decided to wait it out in a small, dilapidated shack about 100 yards from the campsite. The family had just moved all its belongings into the shack when the ashfall closed them in, the particles blotting out the sun and pitching the area into total darkness.

"It was worse than nighttime," Moore said. "I had my eyes wide open and held a hand a few inches away, but I couldn't see it even if I held it right in front of my face. Sometimes I couldn't tell if I had my eyes open or closed."

Storm-like thunder crackled around them, and they heard the volcano's eruptions in the distance. And, although the Moores couldn't discern the sound, 20 million trees were falling, some just over the closest ridge.

When the noise finally subsided and the darkness lifted, the Moores walked out of their shack and into a world blanketed in gray.

"I expected the most trouble I'd have was in starting my car, which we had left more than two miles down the mountain," Moore said. "We had experienced no real violence and hadn't expected to. And I thought that even if there had been a cataclysmic explosion, we were too far away to be affected by it."

"We fully expected to walk to our car, drive out, and be home within two or three hours. Our thinking was, 'Gee, this was an interesting experience. Now let's go home and get cleaned up.'"

But the Moores would soon discover that getting home would be considerably more difficult than that. The trail to their car, for one thing, had disappeared under a mass of toppled trees. Long hours of climbing lay between the family and the car. The Moores decided

to spend the night on the mountain.

"That night we heard helicopters flying near the area where our car was," Moore remembered, "but I didn't attempt to signal. I didn't have any hope at that point that we could be taken off the mountain that late at night."

The next morning as the Moores began their trek across the fallen timbers, Maj. Dave Wendt of the 304th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (Reserve), based in Portland, Ore., was flying his helicopter up the valley where the Moores had been camped.

"The whole area was generally hidden under ash and steam from the volcano," Maj. Wendt remembered.

"We felt as though we were flying in a cloud, yet we could still see outside. As we were skirting around this ash-fog, we saw four vehicles on the ground and began searching the area. I had just headed up the river when I saw one of the Moores, who was wearing a bright red jacket.

When Moore saw the helicopters, he breathed a deep sigh of relief and thought to himself, "It's over."

Pararescueman SSgt. Rick Harder was lowered by hoist to assist the family. It took him half an hour to cross the tangle of logs to reach them.

"I knew we were in a survival situation where, if we made a serious mistake, we could all be killed," Moore said. "We could get hypothermia (sub-normal body temperature caused by exposure that could lead to death), or one of us could break a leg crossing those trees. So I was a little concerned throughout this episode. But at that time just knowing the helicopter had spotted us removed that concern."

When SSgt. Harder finally reached the Moores, he discovered they had their three-month-old baby with them. "Quite frankly, I thought his jaw was going to hit the ground," Moore remembered.

But there was little time for discussion. Another ash cloud was headed toward the group. "Make sure you have everything together," Maj. Wendt radioed to Harder. "It looks like you're going to be down there a while."

The message worried Harder. "I didn't know if he meant we would be picked up today or tomorrow, and then I heard the 'King bird' [the C-130 communications plane orbiting overhead] notify the rescue aircraft that the mountain was acting up again."

The PJ (pararescueman) began moving the family toward a creek bed when the entire valley in front of them suddenly turned solid white—a "white out" peculiar to locations where heavy snow leaves few if any reference points and causes disorientation.

"All I could think at that point was, 'Here I am with a husband, a mother who is afraid of heights, a little kid, and an infant, and we're climbing over

logs trying to get away from a volcano that was ready to blow its top again," Harder said.

After two hours of little progress, another PJ, TSgt. Charles Ek, was put down to provide further help.

"We had found out the winds were going to pick up soon," recalled TSgt. Ek, "so I was put on the ground before conditions got worse."

But conditions were already more than worse. They were so bad, in fact, that the helicopter carrying him lost its bearings at first and went up the wrong valley. The pilot quickly rectified the mistake and again located the group.

From the ground, the ash-fog almost totally obscured the hovering helicopter during TSgt. Ek's descent. "Watching him come down through that stuff was really something," said SSgt. Harder. "And I wondered whether we'd get out that day. I could see that they could barely put Charlie in, so I doubted they'd be able to get us out."

At first there was talk about trying to hoist the family into the helicopter, "but they decided against it," said Moore. "Frankly, that made me feel better, because nobody in my family was too excited about going for a ride on that lift, anyway. My wife was scared to death of it and I was, too."

So the group continued to hike toward the bridge over the creek bed in an effort to find a clearing suitable for a helicopter landing. Then, almost as if in answer to a prayer, a helicopter from the Washington State Army National Guard, also participating in rescue efforts, arrived on the scene.

The pilot had landed in the area the previous day to recover the bodies of two persons who had died in the eruption and he was returning to search for others when he spotted the Moores and the two PJs.

The landing, said SSgt. Harder, was "a feat that bordered on the fine line between great airmanship and disaster." Fortunately, that fine line wasn't crossed and the Moores were flown safely out of the area. The pararescuemen who would have overloaded the Army chopper were later lifted out by an Air Force helicopter.

For the Moores, of course, it was a close call. The only injury was a slight bruise on the ankle of their older daughter.

It could have been worse. The mountain peak where they had originally set up camp was obliterated by the eruption. Had they stayed there, they almost surely would have died.

But despite the close brush, Moore is undeterred by the experience and looks forward to returning to the mountain. "I've always wanted to climb Mount St. Helens," he said, "and when things calm down a bit, I think I'll do it."

"It'll be easier now, anyway. It isn't as high to climb."

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kind of gunship run—buzzing a car—to force the driver to turn around and leave the danger area.

"Some of those people were really crazy. We'd fly in and they'd flip us a gesture and yell, 'Hell no, we won't go' like it was our fault the volcano had erupted."

Added Maj. Peden, "I don't think a lot of people fully understood the danger of being near the volcano that first day. We probably didn't understand it fully, either. In any case, we finally got everyone out who wanted to come with us."

That task required several extra long duty days from everyone in the squadron, including aircrews, mechanics, other support workers, and those who arrived from other bases to help in the effort.

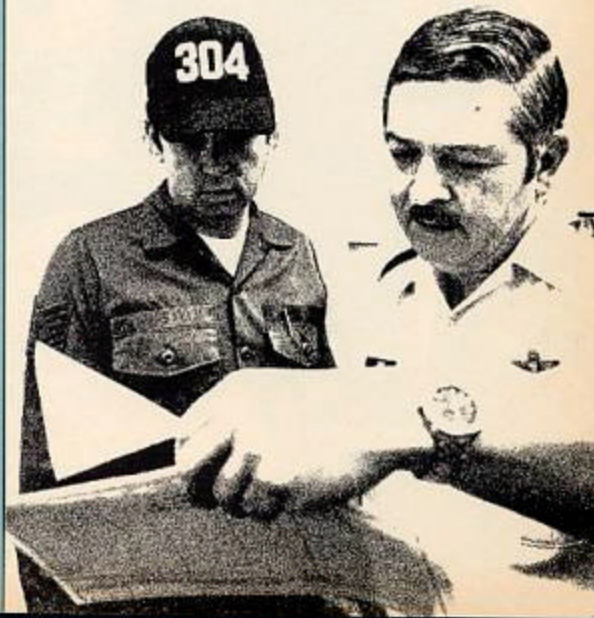
Among the many sources of assistance was the 303rd ARRS from March AFB, Calif., which sent several extra pararescuemen, a C-130 communications aircraft, and a mobile communications jeep. In all, 13 Air Force, Air and Army National Guard, Air Force Reserve, Civil Air Patrol, and Coast Guard units participated in the disaster relief.

One base that couldn't send help was Fairchild AFB, Wash., 300 miles east of Mount St. Helens. Base people had problems of their own on a day that had begun with the bright promise of a successful Armed Forces Day open house, only to have the activity end with an eerie afternoon nightfall.

More than 60,000 were on the base waiting for the beginning of the scheduled air show that would cap the day's activities when, shortly after 1 p.m., an ominous dark cloud to the southwest seemed to inch ever closer to the base. Within 30 minutes, the cloud—ash fallout from Mount St. Helens—had caused an early twilight. At the same time, the temperature dropped 11 degrees.

By the time many spectators had reached their cars and begun the drive home, the ash had completely blotted out the sunlight, creating an inky blackness. The ash, falling lazily from the sky, fouled car engines and threatened to close Fairchild.

Things also looked even bleaker the next day at Mount St. Helens when Maj. David Wendt of the 304th sidled his helicopter close to the volcano's crater to search for survivors.



TSgt Steven Merrifield, LtCol Thomas M Jones Jr. - (Unit CO).

"There was steaming ash everywhere, presenting a scene unlike anything I had ever seen before except, perhaps, in science fiction movies," he said.

Within five miles of the crater the forest wasn't just flattened, it had disappeared! Douglas firs 100 feet tall and six feet wide had been blasted completely out of the area by the force of the explosion. Left was little more than 44,000 acres of lifeless moonscape.

Maj. Wendt saw chunks of blue ice larger than his helicopter that were once part of the glacier on the mountain scattered like so much broken glass. Searing hot water rushing down the hills had cut new channels in the mudflow, sending up puffs of steam as it coursed through the dirt. Another pilot, Capt. Mike Sullivan, said it looked like the day the world ended.

Trying to reach those trapped near the mountain became increasingly more hazardous as ash continued to fall. Its consistency made flying in the air around the mountain like contending with the clouds of dusty grit at a rodeo. "You got enough of the stuff in your nose and mouth that you might as well have been eating it," said Maj. Peden. The ash hung in the air like a fog, and, when it finally settled it wouldn't stay for long because the slightest wind would sweep it into the air again.

"Because the helicopter's rotor wash would stir up the ash, we couldn't operate very close to the ground, much less land on it, so we had to do most of our work with a hoist," Maj. Peden explained. "Even so, many times we had to hover more

than two hundred feet above the ground. And even at that height, the ash would suddenly billow up and totally obscure your vision. The tremendous amounts of dirt and ash in the air also meant that the engines would quit if too much of that stuff was sucked through them, so we had to be pretty careful."

That none of the squadron's aircraft developed mechanical difficulties is a testament to the quality of the maintenance effort. Mechanics from the 304th were augmented by more than 30 other Reserve aircrew mechanics from other 403rd Rescue and Weather Reconnaissance Wing units from as far away as Homestead AFB, Fla. Some of those sent to help had never worked on HH-1 Hueys before, but they learned quickly.

The biggest problem, said CMSgt. Leslie Dunbar, the 304th maintenance superintendent, was not knowing what effects the substances emanating from the volcano were having on the helicopters. "None of us had any experience fixing helicopters that had flown through a volcano eruption before," he said.

Thorough cleanings and additional inspections of fuel, oil, and hydraulics systems often kept the mechanics laboring on the 10 aircraft long into the night as they prepared them for first-light launches at 5 a.m.

Aircrews were as ready to go as the aircraft, but they had an ever-present worry. They could never be certain whether the volcano would erupt again. The 568 sorties that were flown stretched nerves taut. The orbiting HC-130 from the 303rd kept the helicopter apprised of the ash drift and controlled all air traffic around the disaster area. Most crewmen knew that if they were flying close to the mountain and it blew again, their frail craft would undoubtedly be buffeted like a ping-pong ball in the wind.

One incident more than any other made Maj. Peden fear just that kind of incident.

"I was sitting on the ground at Toutle, Wash., a town near the mountain, and I was looking up at about a seventy-degree angle watching the mountain blowing its top. The tremendous pall of smoke was going sixty-thousand feet straight up. It was the closest I'd been to the mountain up to that point and, for the first time, I realized this wasn't something happening way off in the distance. And, to make matters worse, the town sat at the junction of two rivers that were then in the process of rising to flood stage. It all made me feel a little uneasy."

The major's uneasiness with the mountain was shared by those who had been studying the mountain since March. Few predicted the May 18th eruption, or the second one that followed exactly a week later. Fewer would venture a guess as to whether the volcano would return to dormancy following its third major activity June 12.

The mountain's continued erratic behavior still has scientists baffled. Some say the ash fallout that dusted Fairchild on May 18th and Portland several times after that could be a phenomenon area residents will have to get used to. Mount St. Helens did remain active for 20 years following its last eruption in 1857.

Others aren't so sure. "We're still going to school on this one," they admit.

For now, 304th members wait, watch, and hope for an end to the danger on Mount St. Helens. When that time comes, it'll be news they'll want to fly up and shout from the mountaintop. ☐



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LT-RT--Captain Clinton "Otto" Hyde, SSgt Richard Harder