

Staring into the Belly of the Beast - Flying Over Mt. Saint Helens

Contributed by Steve Excell, Washington State Archivist

While working for Governor John Spellman, we had to deal with managing public access to the Mt. Saint Helens area and reducing the serious flood risk downstream. Federal, state and local agencies all worked closely together to address both issues. In the early 1980s, the volcano was still very active, building a huge lava dome in the crater and venting steam and gases.

Seared into my brain are the memories of my visiting Mt. Saint Helens aboard a Washington National Guard Huey helicopter. Yes, *I brought my camera with me.*

Let me start at the beginning...

Stepping into the helicopter, I was strapped into my seat next to a .50 caliber machine gun. When the copter took off, the constant thump-thump-thump noise reminded me this was not going to be anything like a commercial plane flight. The doors were wide open and the wind added to the noise level. We could only talk to one another through headsets with microphones.



Once the pilot arrived at Mt. Saint Helens, he took us up and above the crater. The growing lava dome below was the size of the Kingdome football stadium. It was seething steam and gases. Lava-rock boulders the size of houses, trucks and cars were rolling off the lava dome. I remember having a foreboding feeling to be hovering over such a powerful natural force. No one knew if and when the volcano might blow again.





Next the pilot took us over the blast zone. The hillsides were dotted with what looked like millions of small toothpicks, except they were tree trunks stripped of their limbs and bark by the fast-moving current of hot gas and pulverized rock released by the eruption. Geologists call it a pyroclastic flow.

We then flew over Spirit Lake. The entire surface of the lake was littered with more small toothpicks, actually huge trees that remain there today.

The pilot followed the North Fork of the Toutle River downstream, which was littered with more debris...mud, trees and more "toothpicks." Looking back at the volcano, the devastation was massive and spread out as far as the eye could see.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was on-site seeking to relieve the risk of flash-floods sending huge volumes of water, mud and silt downstream by diverting water into other drainages. Only the naturally-created debris dams were holding back the accumulated water, muck and timber. Property owners downstream, the Interstate 5 Toutle River Bridge, and the shipping channel in the



Columbia River were all at risk. In 1989, the Corps built the massive Toutle River Sediment Retention Structure to stabilize the mess once and for all.



When I left the Governor's Office in 1984, I sent my Mt. Saint Helens' photos to the State Archives. Never did I anticipate seeing them again. Archivist Ben Helle uncovered them as part of the 35th anniversary of the eruption that occurred May 18, 1980.

March 29, 2007 US Geological Survey Photo by Cindy Werner



Note from Steve Excell on the Photographs: Identified in the photographs are Hugh Fowler, Director of the Department of Emergency Services (green trousers and white shirt); Paula Stewart, Policy Analyst for Governor Spellman who monitored Department of Emergency Services; men in white hardhats—US Army Corps of Engineers, working to stabilize debris dams, rechanneling water, and building new earthworks to control the risk of a mass-flooding event.

