



CENTRALIA AMATEUR RADIO EMERGENCY SERVICE TEAM

May 2020

Amateur Radio is a hobby ... Amateur Radio Emergency Service is a commitment!

40th Anniversary Of The Mt. St. Helens Eruption



May 18th, 1980, at 8:32am, Mt. St. Helens, once a beautiful conical peak, erupted changing Washington State history forever. This month I want to tell you three stories - two about the day itself and one a week later.

The first story is about two men, both ham radio operators and both ARES team members who, like many, were present on that fateful day as part of the group keeping track of daily changes on the mountain. Reid Blackburn, KA7AMF, was a 27 year old professional photographer on loan that day to National Geographic from his normal job as photo editor at the Vancouver Columbian newspaper. Blackburn had two cameras set up in different locations and was monitoring one of them on Coldwater 1, about eight miles

from the mountain, at 8:32am that morning. The other camera was to the east above Spirit Lake. News reports say that as a ham, Blackburn was perfect for this job as he could fire off both cameras at once using a radio transmitter. His log shows he took a photo at 7:11am. The mountain was quiet. The cameras show that he snapped a two photo series at 8:33am and another two photo series at 8:34am. With no time to do more, Blackburn locked his photo notebook inside his radio transmitter box and took cover in his car. Reid Blackburn's body was recovered four days later still in his vehicle.

On that same day, 64 year old Jerry Martin, W6TQF, also an ARES team member, was volunteering in the field to help the U.S. Geological Service (USGS) and was stationed 10 miles from the volcano using the tactical callsign "Coldwater 2". David Johnston, a USGS Volcanologist and not a ham, was stationed six miles from the mountain at "Coldwater 1". Johnston was the first to announce the eruption with his famous words "Vancouver! Vancouver! This is it!" before being swept off the mountain by a lateral blast. Jerry, calmly reported seeing the blast sweep over Johnston's position before realizing he himself would be next. His observation post was later found to have been destroyed by the molten volcanic ash and mudflows. Jerry's body was never found. His amateur radio call sign, W7TQF lives on and is the call sign for the Skamania County, Washington ARES team.

Interestingly, David Johnston's famous words "Vancouver! Vancouver! This is it!" were never received in Vancouver. Instead, a ham radio operator monitoring the frequencies was able to record the words for posterity. It is believe Jerry Martin's report via ham radio was the first report of the explosion. Nearly 300 amateur radio operators played a part in the Mt. St. Helens event and by the time operations were finished, they had passed over 3,000 messages.

Update On Scheduled Event Cancellations

Several events scheduled for this summer have been cancelled. As of the time this newsletter was written, the City of Centralia has cancelled Summerfest activities at Borst Park as well as the July 4th downtown parade. July 4th fireworks may or may not occur and will be a last minute decision.

The Southwest Washington Fair has, along with most other fairs in the region, cancelled their events and rescheduled them for 2021.

Amateur radio Field Day, scheduled for late June, is still undecided. Centralia Parks Recreation Supervisor Julie Liseth reports that use of Borst Park remains doubtful through June but they won't know for sure until mid-June. Things are changing quickly and more decisions will certainly happen after Memorial Day.

ARES Training Updates

It has been an unusual couple of months since our last ARES training on March 2nd. Thank you to everyone who has worked hard to change our coffee meetings to "on-air" events and to bring the team together each week for Zoom meetings.

We are gently easing back into our normal training dates with the recent "How Do I Work The Satellites" Zoom training on Monday, May18th.

We will be conducting at least a couple more Zoom training nights before we hopefully work back into being able to conduct training exercises in the field, but we have some training coming up that should at least put us back into the first & third Monday evening schedule so stay tuned and stay safe.

Working the Mt. St. Helens Eruption - Riverside Fire Chief Mike Kytta

Asked about what he remembers of the day the mountain erupted, Chief Mike Kytta graciously sent the following:

"Yes, I remember it like it was yesterday. I was 21 years old and living as a resident firefighter at the Seminary Hill fire Station. I was working full time at the Lewis County Sheriff's dispatch center and we had gone through quite a few changes leading up to the eruption. We had a group of Mtn Patrol Deputies as did Cowlitz and Skamania Counties assigned to the RED and YELLOW zones to enforce the Governor's access restriction orders. Technology? Well there were no cell phones, no digital cameras, our film had to be developed and that took a few days to get back and we had a new fax machine that was big as a desk and paid out less often than a slot machine. Of course the big difference from today is no internet or PC's. I had just got off of graveyard shift and went to the station to get some sleep. Couldn't have been asleep more than 5 minutes when Special Services Sgt Randy Hamilton called me on the station phone and told me to get back to work as the Mtn blew up. I was the easiest off duty person to find as it wasn't so easy in those days to locate people. His call wasn't thought to be very funny since I was sleeping hard but he insisted that I move my "bleep bleep" back side to Dispatch now and stay off of I-5 as the Toutle bridge was closed and I-5 traffic was being rerouted through Raymond. From the Station on this beautiful clear spring day I could see the ash cloud moving off to the East at what had to be 30+ thousand feet, lightning was also visible in the cloud.

I didn't think much about what this all meant. Duty called. When I got to work we had secured phone lines into the Packwood and Randle Forest Service offices and the Morton Substation. If we did not hold the lines open we would never get through again but this later resulted in an extensive negotiation with the phone company because the long distance bill would choke an elephant.

Radios? Well the system then looks almost identical to what is in use today. Our main East County repeater for LCSO was then and still is located on Burley Mtn South of Randle, about 5,900 feet as I recall, looking down the throat of Mt St Helen. Remember the time of year May, this site runs mainly on solar with a propane generator supplement during the snowy winter months. Well, the generator was dry from a long snowy winter, the heater on the solar panel does little to remove ash. So, we had minutes of repeater use on battery followed by periods off the air due to power limitations. Radio really stunk that day too, ash in the air and incredible lightning storms are not good for radio. One of our Deputies Grover Laseke went East on Highway 12 toward White Pas which was getting clipped by ash as was Packwood, Randle, Glenoma and Morton. He made it over the pass and ran head light to head light into a motorhome destroying his Bronco. Highway 12 had been closed at Naches at the same time that I-5 was closed but a camper was trying to get home on the West side. He couldn't use radio and had to hike back to the Ski Lodge to use an early generation satellite phone that went through an overseas operator to call in asking for help.

Within hours Salkum, Toledo and Kelso became major helicopter bases for the search and rescue missions involving regular army from Ft Lewis and Air Guard from Portland. You had quite a few Vietnam era pilots still in the mix and they weren't afraid of anything. They thought any day they weren't being shot at was a good day. Little did we know the rotors weren't going to do well in the devastation areas their rotor wash stirred up the ash in a horrible way. The landscape looked like the moon to them, uniform, gray nothing to discern any features of the land. Trees blown down covered in ash, Kidd Valley and the huge WEYCO camp flushed down the Toutle like toys, trucks, loaders, dozers, buildings and bridges. The ash covered burning trees in wells if you jumped out of the helicopter you didn't know what you would land in or on maybe waist deep in burning debris. We had three K9's at LCSO in those days, Bear, Max and Hauser, their handlers were John McCroskey, Dick Snyder and Brian Hill. They tried to use the dogs in searches but sometimes the ash was so deep you would lose the dog for a while, concern over the dogs health suspended those searches. Not sure what they could track in that stuff anyway. The one thing we had going for us was that we knew that people had survived the ash fall. Think about the morning of the 18th being in Yakima or Ritzville begin covered in ash not knowing when it would stop - pretty scary stuff. Suffice it to say it was a special time to serve, I saw incredible things later going on patrol with the deputies, 3 Sheriffs ran this great big type 1 incident for months with next to nothing but their moxie after all search and rescue is the responsibility of the Sheriffs. It was an honor to play a very small role in the response to this historic event. I will never forget those days."

Working In Mt. St. Helens Ash - Bob Willey

While everyone remembers May 18th when Mt. St. Helens first erupted, most don't remember the May 25th eruption when Western Washington was blanketed with ash. At 2:30am, the mountain erupted again sending volcanic ash nine miles into the atmosphere. To make things worse, it gathered moisture and came back down as a wet, sticky mud. I-5 was closed from Longview to Olympia while WSP dealt with a 20 car pileup just north of Centralia caused by slick, muddy roads. It was Memorial Day weekend and everyone was travelling. Folks in Western Washington awoke to a nasty, messy surprise.

As things dried out over the next few days, the ash turned to a powdery, flour like dust. As a new police officer I dealt mostly with calming down those who were sure the world was ending and enforcing the speed limit that had been reduced to 15 mph. Any higher speed would create clouds of ash dust. After day one, our dark blue uniforms were pretty well shot and from then on we wore uniform shirts, jeans and a mask. Some days required changing masks eight or ten times a day. The ash was everywhere. It was in your car, in your house, and in your clothes and shoes. Entrepreneurs began selling baby food bottles of ash at \$3 each. One man I stopped had 30 bottles of ash and was headed to Oregon. He said he could get \$10 a bottle there.

Ash caused problems with electrical transmission lines, telephone circuits, and cars. The Centralia City Shop warned the police

Department that exposure to the ash could destroy patrol car engines in just days. Several filtering ideas were attempted but we had no choice but to keep running them. The shop changed out air filters daily. Somehow the cars kept running.



Nancie Willey Shoveling Ash Into The Street
May 26, 1980

Fear of the ash was everywhere and rumors were rampant. The public was told to get the ash off the roofs of our homes. The fear was that with a good rain, the ash could turn to concrete clogging gutters or ripping them off homes. People used brooms to clear off their roof and then shoveled ash from around the house for days finally dumping it in the streets. An elderly neighbor was up on his roof for nearly a week with an empty coffee can and a spoon clearing his gutters. Next came the problem of getting rid of the ash. Help came to Centralia, as I recall, from the City of Tacoma which sent street sweepers and tankers that washed and helped clean the streets. I remember seeing one woman out vacuuming ash off her lawn with a shop vac.

Often folks would just refuse to drive their cars in the ash choosing to stay at home for weeks rather than damage their vehicles. I knew a local man who went out and bought an older junker of a car to drive so he could leave his expensive automobile in the garage.

As nature often does, the ash found its own solution. Over time, it simply sifted itself into the grass and became part of the soil. People cleaned up as well as they could and left the rest to take care of itself. For months, when the wind would kick up, ash would recover Centralia.

Throughout the summer, people were on edge. Would Mt. St. Helens erupt again? While on patrol one Sunday afternoon, the police dispatcher put out over the air that someone had called to report that Mount Rainier was erupting. Information like this was usually not put out over the radio as hundreds if not thousands of people listened to the scanners. Normally dispatch would have requested a phone call. Within seconds the switchboards lit up with people asking how to evacuate and where to go. What the caller had actually seen was the white steam cloud from the nearby Steam Plant which coincidentally was right in line from the caller's house to Mt. Rainier. It is amazing how quickly fear can travel.

Volcanic ash is a strange substance. The public was warned to always wear masks when outside because the ash crystals had very sharp edges and breathing them could damage your lungs. Schools and playgrounds were open to the public and it was beginning to be summer. I witnessed one mother at a playground in Centralia chasing her child who was about three years old and yelling "Put your mask on right now or else!". The little boy thought it was just a game and ran all the faster. Any pile of ash was simply a sandpile to a child and learning that children weren't likely to die if that thumb they were sucking was now covered with ash wasn't easy for most parents to understand.

As summer slowly turned to fall, the fear lessened. The hoards of tourists quit scraping up ash off ground anywhere they could find it and the rains finally stopped the ash problem for good. Even today, if you dig down in any garden you will find that thin whiteish layer of ash. It doesn't go away, it just becomes part of the soil.

If you have never been to the Johnston Ridge Observatory at Mt. St. Helens, it is well worth the trip. Go on a clear sunny day. Cloudy days obscure the mountain and you may not see anything but clouds. Go inside and watch the 10 minute video about May 18th. When the video is done, sit tight. They will open curtains previously closed when you entered the theater and you will experience one of the most breathtaking views you will ever see. From wall to wall, floor to ceiling, is a picture window with Mt. St. Helens filling the entire view. Amazing to see.

By the way, I still have several bottles of Mt. St. Helens ash for sale somewhere in my basement. Just for you, \$10 a bottle. Inflation you know.

Wildfire Season Is Here

Wildfire season has arrived in the Pacific Northwest. We'll be doing some response refresher training during the month of June which hopefully will include a "safe distancing" field exercise.

A Little Humor Never Hurts

A beautiful blonde was weed wacking in her yard when she accidentally cut off the tail of her cat who was hiding in the grass.

She gathered the poor animal up along with its tail and rushed to her neighborhood Wal-Mart.

Why Wal-Mart you ask?

Helloooooooooo!

Wal-mart is the largest retailer in the world !!