

Postcard From The Mountain of Fire

The Indonesian Island of Java is located on the legendary 'Ring Of Fire', the belt of volcanoes which encircle the Greater Pacific Region and Mt. Merapi a.k.a. 'The Mountain of Fire'. As a team of HD cameramen and crew defied the harrowing dangers to document the possibility of an imminent eruption, they had no idea just how close they were...

By Laurie K. Gilbert s.o.c.

The 'Mountain of Fire' sits in the center of the island, only 27 kms from the 500,000 people who live in the city of Yogyakarta. It is the most active volcano in Indonesia, and on a global scale the eruptions are so frequent that scientists include it as one of only 16 designated as a *Decade Volcano*.

Many of the current population of Yogyakarta still remember vividly the 1994 eruption when more than 6000 people had to be evacuated from their homes and 43 people died and as pyroclastic flows travelled 7.3 kms from the summit of the mountain enveloping villages in deadly gases superheated to a temperature in

excess of 800°C. Most of those killed lived in the region of the Krasak and Boyong Rivers and those who survived still carry the physical and psychological scars from the extreme trauma of the event. The current activity of the volcano is a vivid reminder of this ever-present potential for disaster.

In the hot zone

The activities of the volcano may bring death to some, but it also brings life and comparative prosperity to millions who live in the region. The dark, volcanic soils that originate from the mountain are both rich and fertile and they support a



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multitude of agricultural crops that feed the third largest population on earth.

Exploration Productions Inc. is the production division of Discovery Channel Canada and earlier this year they decided to make a one-hour television documentary on the day-to-day reality for these intrepid villagers as they live within minutes of death and destruction, with little or no warning.

Director Elliott Shiff and his production team needed an experienced High Definition camera team operating in the region and they contacted American audio expert Will Hemmerle of Jungle Run Productions in Bali, producer Ruddy Legoh of Bali Satria Films. I was called upon to be the director of photography.

The telephone call came in at 10pm on Friday night, 20 May. By 9 am Monday morning, all members of the new team were collecting their cases off the baggage carousel at Yogyakarta airport and making the mutual introductions. The equipment included a Sony F900 Cinealta camera from Nic Koh of A&T Camera Rentals in Singapore, an ingenious but lightweight documentary lighting kit, a Vinten Fibertec tripod equipped with the Vison 100 head and the invaluable Cinesaddle.



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Leaving the airport, we set off for the Melia Hotel and on the way we discussed the potential imagery that would tell the unique story of the people of the region with everyone injecting their own creative ideas into the mix. Throughout the project this interesting process of unscripted, opportunistic film making was greatly enhanced by the fact that several of the members of the crew had a solid professional background in international current affairs, a television discipline that develops the ability for rapid situation analysis and the skill to tell an evolving story succinctly and economically.

Once at our hotel, Will and I organized our production equipment as production manager Ruddy sourced the local seismic experts and vulcanologist who could communicate a scientific perspective and Elliott concentrated on finding the villagers who would illustrate the contrasting human, social and spiritual story. Leads led to contacts and contacts led to interviews and within hours video tape was rolling through the Cinealta as we began to document the story of the unpredictable relationship between the ominous mountain that seemed to greet us every time we turned a corner and the photogenic villages that nestled in the tropical countryside.

A sound & light show unlike any other

Every morning at dawn the villages and

their markets come to life around the base of Mt Merapi. Children leave for the local school and farmers plant and till the soil, with the ominous rumbling activity of the volcano only kilometers away. Many times a day, the sun is blocked by an menacing cloud of dust and debris that reaches miles into the sky – a sight that is always accompanied by the constant thundering of gigantic boulders as they roll down the slopes from the caldera which is continually building, evolving and collapsing. At night, the school children watch in naïve fascination from their homes as spectacular, glowing lava streams down the mountain side in a continual *Son Et Lumière* show that far exceeds anything a man made theatre could emulate. It is dangerous and it is incredibly unpredictable. But for the spiritual Javanese people, it is their home and they draw a fine balance between the benefits and the fatal risks every day of their lives.

For the next five days we rose at 4 a.m. every morning and headed to different vantage points to see the sun rise and illuminate the mountain as it energetically spewed rocks and clouds of debris higher and higher into the atmosphere. Once we had this daily dawn show on tape, we headed to the local markets to film the villagers going about their daily business, seemingly oblivious to what was happening only kilometers away.

Our research eventually led us to Maridjan, the official 'spiritual keeper of the mountain', a venerable, white haired old gentleman who climbed its winding slopes almost every day to tend to the public pathways, clear the critical water courses and assess the ever changing moods and the risks created by the mountain for those who lived and worked at its base. Each time the vulcanologist thought the signs of a pressure build up indicated a possible eruption and they initiated an evacuation of the local population, Maridjan would disagree with them as he said the mountain was simply "cleaning its house" and in his opinion the villagers were safe from any harm.

At sunrise on the Thursday morning, Maridjan guided us several thousand feet up the slopes of Mt. Merapi to an observation point where he then gave

us an interview that described in depth the enormous spiritual identity that the mountain has for those who live in its shadow. As he laughed and talked about how one of his sons would soon have to take over his awesome responsibility, he sought to reassure us that the activity we could all see so close behind his head, was just the volcanic pressure dissipating and it presented no threat to those of us standing, farming or even living on the slopes of the mountain.

During the week we talked to vulcanologists and seismic experts, many of whom had come to Java simply because their science implied an eruption seemed imminent, and they detailed the process of local data collection and international analysis of that data. We filmed the vibrating needles of the seismic instruments as they monitored and recorded the activities at the top of the mountain and we visited the observation towers high above the towns and villages, where long lens cameras were constantly trained at the fragile edge of the caldera above the molten magma chamber.

We also visited the camps where villagers had been relocated off the mountain by the authorities into tents and temporary facilities. But every day they would defy the authorities and head back to the mountainside to spend the day tending to their crops and feeding their animals. By Friday night we had nine full videotapes of images, interviews and graphic illustrations of how the mountain dominated every aspect of the lives of the brave and deeply spiritual Javanese population.

The day of terror

On the last day of shooting, Saturday, 26 May 2006, we again rose from our beds at the Melia Hotel in Yogyakarta and drove for almost an hour to a location that was to offer us the most spectacular view of the mountain. When we arrived at 5.45 a.m. the mountain was considerably more active than we had ever seen it and we were quickly rolling video tape of the long, revolving clouds (known as *Curly Sheep*) that we could see created by the massive boulders hurtling down the mountainside. As we worked, a deep and very menacing rumbling got louder and louder and suddenly the earth literally began vibrating violently underneath our feet. The rolling camera shook dramatically on the tripod, power poles weaved from side to side, power lines tensed, relaxed and then tensed again. Within seconds the adrenaline was pumping in all of us and the air was suddenly filled with noise of chattering radios and strident warning bells as the observation tower tried to warn the neighbourhood of an imminent eruption.

The roads were filled with screeching motorbikes evacuating frightened villagers who needed cloth masks covering their faces just to allow them to breath in the billowing dust clouds. If the mountain was about to erupt, and all indications implied it was, it was very likely we would never make it off the mountain alive and with an intense feeling of doom, we documented the panic and the fear around us, including our own.

Almost as quickly as it had come, the vibration under the earth disappeared and the mountain looked very dramatic – but it also looked stable. All around us people stared at the mountain in genuine fear and babbled nervously as we began to interview them. They had every reason to be fearful as one man so vividly illustrated as he rolled up his sleeve in front of us and exposed an arm burned and disfigured by the extreme heat from the 1994 eruption.

We had come to Java make a film about the potential of an imminent volcanic eruption on the local population, but had experienced and filmed an unpredicted force 6.3 earthquake that they suffered instead. As we watched, waited and worked our craft in HD, reports started coming in on the radio that the powerful earthquake had devastated parts of the city of Yogyakarta and almost all of the coastal villages that were closest to the epicenter. After an hour we realised that the mountain appeared dormant and was less likely to erupt now so we headed back towards the city of Yogyakarta, only to be confronted by four lanes of oncoming traffic as thousands of frightened people used every lane of the highway to evacuate the city and flee for their lives.

As the congestion slowed the traffic to a nervous crawl, helping hands assisted running pedestrians to clamber onto the outside framework of buses and onto the backs of construction trucks and flatbed delivery vehicles. In a frantic attempt to communicate with friends and family, they stabbed at hand phones even as they were running in desperation from the horror behind them and even I sent Nic Koh in Singapore a brief SMS message to reassure him about the condition and safety of his Cinealta F900 camera! As we drove, filmed and discussed how the unpredictable events unfolding around us affected our documentary, Will was able to receive a continuous supply of updated information via SMS from his office in Bali who were monitoring the live television reports.

Don't know what hit them

Suddenly another unexpected terror reached us because we could recognize the word 'Tsunami' in the local radio



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broadcasts and this then explained the mass evacuation we were witnessing from the city of Yogyakarta. Those that couldn't escape what they imagined to be an imminent wall of water approaching the confines of the city climbed onto the "relative safety" of the high motorway bridges, but this of course was the worst place to ever retreat to in an earthquake of this intensity. The rightness and wrongness of their actions vividly illustrates the complexity of frightening scenarios the people of this region are exposed to every day. They literally don't know if the horror they are experiencing is a volcanic eruption, an earthquake or an imminent tsunami. Or even worse, a combination of all three.

Our information from Wills' office in Bali indicated the epicenter of the earthquake was nearer to the coast than the city center, so after filming the devastation to the hotels, shops and business centers in Yogyakarta, we drove to the villages which had received the most damage and which held the most casualties. The earthquake had struck the population as they were rising from their beds, taking a bath and making their breakfast. Along the road every single house and farm was flattened and people were standing dazed, confused and bewildered as they tried to comprehend what had happened and how many members of their family were now missing or dead.

We interviewed one man who explained how he had rescued his son and his daughter as his house had literally collapsed around them, but as he talked to us, his neighbours appeared behind him carrying the dead body of his sister who had not been as fortunate. He made his apologies and took his leave from us because as he explained, he now had to prepare the body of his sister for her imminent funeral. As we turned away from the scene, a second lady stood staring in shock at the ruins of what had been her family home only hours before. Underneath the rubble were the bodies of her husband and her seven year old daughter, but the damage was too extensive and the debris too heavy for her two young sons to locate them.

From the devastation of the coastal

villages we returned to the city and located one of the city hospitals where the bodies of the injured lined all the corridors, gardens and even overflowed into the car parks. By 4pm we had as much material as we needed for our rapidly evolving documentary and we made our way back to the Melia Hotel to recover our equipment and our luggage, only to discover that the hotel was actually situated on the fault line and had suffered major structural damage in our absence. By using the fire stairs, we were eventually able to locate and access our hotel rooms to recover the invaluable master tapes of our documentary film from the rubble that then confronted us.

Director Elliott Schiff had been in constant contact with his production offices in Toronto throughout the day and between them they now made the executive decision to withdraw us from Java and get the raw material back to Toronto for editing as fast as possible. With the main runway damaged and the airport out of commission for several days, we hired a car and driver from the hotel and contemplated the prospect of a 13 hour night drive, in heavy rain and aggressive traffic, on top of a 12 hour working day. Had we actually wanted to sleep, there was little chance of it as soon as the Canadian News Networks discovered one of their own had actually been in the middle of the earthquake and could be contacted in person on my hand phone!

The scramble to air programme

As we drove through the night, every live telephone interview Elliott conducted and every discussion he and I had together, clarified the extraordinary events of the day in our minds. Elliott started to assemble the foundation of the script and the film structure in his head as we talked and by the time we arrived at the Jakarta Airport Hotel at 8 a.m. Sunday morning he was ready to call the production house in Toronto and put his script ideas and research and graphics requirements into motion. At 6am Monday morning we both left Jakarta International Airport for different destinations. I had a Cinealta production

outfit to return to A&T Singapore and Elliott had 11 x 40 min. HDCam master tapes to get to Toronto that contained all the location material for his production. His flight transited through Hong Kong and from the airport he was able to dispatch a script outline and update his immediate production requirements to his associates in Canada.

Exactly seven days after Elliott left Jakarta, the hard working staff of Exploration Production Inc in Toronto completed the post production of *Panic In The Ring Of Fire* and Discovery Channel Canada aired the HD documentary programme the same night to expectant viewers throughout Canada and the USA. Following its initial release, the programme is now on offer to global television networks world wide.

When the one-hour programme went to air internationally only eight days after the actual event – to a very positive response – the entire production team in two continents had time to relax and communicate their impressions about the different challenges and solutions they had encountered. It became apparent to everyone involved that two critical elements contributed to the on-air quality and fast turnaround of this unique production.

- With the exception of stock footage, every single image was shot and mastered to the highest possible, broadcast quality on the Cinealta HDCam system and when the time came to use the camera in a fast evolving, documentary situation, the camera and the post production system was up to the challenges. The considerable experience of the camera team in operating in full HD allowed them to originate on this format in very challenging conditions, when other organisations may have been tempted to originate on smaller, "easier to operate" formats.

- The extensive experience several team members had shooting global current affairs, on *reversal film*, gave them an extraordinary advantage in how they were able to shoot and then blend two different, fast evolving, unscripted stories and get them on air, one week later, in the opposite side of the world with full High Definition production value. This specialist experience engenders

unique disciplines and economies in photo journalistic communication that then benefited the post production team in Toronto when unexpected deadlines affected the post production workflow. Elliott left Indonesia with only 11 x 40 min camera tapes and consequently the editors only had to digitize and edit 7 hrs of original material from Java. This makes the final 'shooting : on-air ratio' very close to 11:1 – a ratio which make the editors' work, very much easier as they face looming deadlines.

In the words of David Rowe, Senior Editor, CTV Specialty Television, the viewers were "awestruck by (the volcanoes') beauty and terror". In his letter of appreciation, David complimented the team on the quality of the footage and accompanying audio, saying that it helped immensely to ease the editing process, which work normally revolves around making sense of disparately acquired sequences. In this case – and it was especially critical in having to turnaround the post as quickly as they did – the footages were clean and "just waiting to be put together". He imbues in writing:

"The portrait shots of the villagers were stunning and the scenic shots brought me to tears. Every frame was a masterpiece. Not only did the film look wonderful, it sounded incredible."

From the initial enquiry call, to actually broadcasting this quality of on-air programming on the other side of the world, took a total of only 15 days! Even I was impressed by this achievement and how our global experience in High Definition enabled us to bring an audience the *Global High Definition Experience*. ♦

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Laurie is a film and HD production Director of Photography operating globally from Singapore shooting feature films, commercials and documentaries. He has 28 years experience shooting motion picture material in 48 countries and has won multiple awards for his craft in Europe, Australasia and America. He is accredited in Hollywood as a helicopter aerial and offshore marine cinematographer.

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