

*Mount Merapi: the volcano shows its anger*



# Postcard from Fire Mountain

Demonstrating his usual knack of being in the 'right place at the right time' GTC member Laurie Gilbert was to find himself just a lava throw away from the epicentre of the recent Yogyakarta earthquake – and of course, as a true professional, he just happened to be turning over in HD at the time.

The Indonesian island of Java is populated by a deeply religious, spiritual people, none more so than Mbah Maridjan, the guardian of Mt Merapi, the legendary 'Mountain of Fire' – currently the most active volcano on planet Earth.

### Brooding presence

A devout Muslim, Maridjan makes the pilgrimage to the local village mosque five times a day to pray for the safety and well being of his family, his friends and the millions of people who live in the volcano's

shadow. When he is not praying at the mosque, he is climbing his beloved mountain with broad bare feet that know every rocky path and eyes that recognise the subtle changes in the daily mood of this large and very dangerous mountain.

The local villagers believe that Maridjan understands the very soul of Mt Merapi and even when government officials tell them to leave their homes for the relative safety of the tented refugee camps, they trust his opinion enough to stay on its fertile slopes caring for their livestock and tending their

flourishing crops.

In the fields and villages within a 100 mile radius of the mountain, farmers, traders and families live each day keeping a watchful eye on Mt Merapi's exhibitions of billowing clouds, known as the *wedhus gembel*, and dramatic glowing lava flows. The volcanologists say that the pressure is building in the giant magna chamber deep in the heart of the mountain, and that it could erupt at any time with cataclysmic results. Maridjan says not today, not tomorrow and not any time soon – so life in the village goes on.

### Ring of fire

Late one Friday evening, I was in Singapore, when a call came from Exploration Productions, the Toronto production division of Discovery Canada, who wanted to know if I could travel to Java almost immediately to shoot a documentary about the Indonesian villagers living in the most active region of the 'Ring of Fire'.

Three days later, Canadian producer, Elliott Shiff and I arrived in Yogyakarta to meet up with Bali-based sound recordist Will Hemmerle and production manager



LAURIE GILBERT



ELLIOTT SHIFF

Laurie shooting street scenes on the Cinealta



ELLIOTT SHIFF

Laurie and Elliott with the guardian of the mountain, Mbah Maridjan

Ruddy Legoh.

For the next five frenetic days Ruddy, who had family in the town and a great knowledge of the area, drove us hundreds of miles at warp speed to get us to the best locations to shoot the ingredients of our film. As a fixer the man was a genius, but as a driver he was a demon!

A chance meeting with Sky cameraman Phil Hooper, who was actually heading home because it didn't look as if the mountain would blow on his watch, revealed that the mountain only

photographed well at dawn. So, thanks to Phil, we rescheduled our wake-up calls to 04.00 to enable us to get to the base of the mountain for the hero shots at sunrise – and he was right because at the end of the one hour, death-defying daily drive, the mountain looked absolutely spectacular through the long HD lens.

### Talking to Maridjan

As the human face of Mt Merapi, Maridjan was a critical ingredient in our film. At dawn on Tuesday, after performing his daily prayers, he escorted us through the quiet village of Kinahrejo to a narrow track where we began to ascend the smoking volcano. Now well into his late seventies, Maridjan has climbed the

mountain almost every day of his life. His bare feet keep him in close contact with the fertile soil and as he walks he uses a hoe to redirect the rainwater from the pathway into the valley below. Ninety minutes later we cleared the tree-line and came face to face with his awesome responsibility – The Mountain of Fire.

In a long and very honest interview, he talked about the consequences of that responsibility and how the local villagers recognise that they live with a similar balance between life, death and nature that a fisherman has with the sea. To Maridjan, the mountain was angry with those responsible for the industrial sand mining on its slopes and the dramatic eruptions each day were its way of registering disapproval. After more shots of the current eruptions, we followed our guide back down the mountain to find farmers and the local media awaiting his daily assessment of the mood of the mountain.

Over the next four days we travelled the countryside seeking out storytelling images of rice planters, duck herders, schoolgirls and market vendors, all going about their daily lives against the backdrop of the ominous, smoking mountain; we talked to Indonesian vulcanologists about the balance they seek between their own scientific knowledge and the spiritual beliefs of the people around them; and we interviewed a man who had survived the last great eruption of 1994, now living with horrific scars from 80% burns on his body. By Friday night we had the makings of an interesting, very visual human film – but we were still lacking real drama.

## Right place, right time

The hotel missed my wake-up call on the Saturday, but the crew made sure I was dragged kicking and screaming to a watchtower just seven kilometres from the summit of the mountain. It was located directly in the path of any lava flow and if there really were to be a serious eruption, we would be enveloped in a super heated cloud of searing gas and sediment in less than a minute.

As soon as we arrived, the mountain began to emit ominous rumbling noises and the biggest lava cloud we had ever seen indicated that something was dramatically wrong. Suddenly, while we were actually turning over, the camera and tripod started to vibrate violently and, through the viewfinder, power lines swayed erratically. The whole hill in front of us was shaking from side to side.



*Laurie and soundman Will Hemmerle carry on filming regardless*

Many different things happened at once. The locals thought this was the big eruption and the noise of people screaming, bells ringing and horns blowing all added to the atmosphere of tension and panic. The sound recordist shouted at the driver to turn the van around for a fast escape and motorcyclists appeared on the road in front of us racing for their lives, their faces covered in cloth masks against the lava and dust. As fast as the earthquake had occurred, it then stopped. Everyone started talking nervously, all the time staring at the peak with frightened eyes. Mt Merapi belched forth ominous lava clouds, but nothing more.

## Panic in the city

Once we had finished filming the shocked reaction of the mountain watchers, we headed back to Yogyakarta to find out the effect on the city. Ruddy was all the time translating local radio reports and giving us a running commentary as

events unfolded. Someone had said the word 'tsunami' on the radio and suddenly the worst fears of the entire population of Yogyakarta were raised. As we headed into the city on a six-lane highway, we were confronted with a spectacular wall of traffic coming towards us across all six lanes. Our intrepid driver had little choice but to execute a rapid 180 degree turn and join the flow of evacuation traffic, with us filming all the time. It was a scene of absolute mayhem as pedestrians pleaded for lifts, grasping hold of roof racks and climbing onto the roofs of buses and construction trucks. The understandable fear of a huge wave of water drove thousands of people to congregate in the relative safety of overhead motorway bridges as ambulances transporting injured victims to overflowing hospitals forced their way through the apprehensive crowds.

For several hours, we drove, stopped, filmed and drove again,

until at about 10.00 we left the city for Tegalán, the coastal village closest to the epicentre of the quake. Throughout the countryside we encountered total devastation and misery as blood-covered parents clawed at piles of rubble in futile attempts to find children trapped underneath the wreckage of their homes. We interviewed several of those who had escaped with their lives but lost everything else. We also rolled discreetly as a man returned to the wreckage of his home carrying the lifeless body of his dead sister.

Our last destination was one of the local hospitals which was desperately trying to find ways to cope with the thousands of badly injured people lying covered in blood on mats in every corridor, on the lawns and even in the car parks. As we left, we heard two nurses say they had just run out of oxygen.

## A lucky escape

By 15.00, having recorded all the dramatic images we could ever need, we headed back to our hotel – only to find that it had been built on the fault line and was literally one of the worst affected buildings in the city. The main building was still standing but there were large cracks in all the exterior walls while every floor exhibited severe structural damage. We headed up the emergency stairs and I managed to recover a pile of very dusty master tapes from the rubble that had been my hotel room.

Back in the comparative calm of the hotel lobby, Elliott made a series of executive decisions about the story we already had in the can and concluded that we should leave the challenges of Yogyakarta to the news crews and get our footage back to Canada for what was suddenly a very high pressure edit. With the local airport out of commission, he quickly organised a car and driver for the marathon overnight drive to the comparative luxury of the Jakarta Airport Sheraton, ready for our flights home.

Exactly six days after he had set off with a head full of script ideas and a bag containing eleven rushes tapes, Elliott rang to say the film was fully edited and ready for world release by Discovery Canada with the title *Panic In The Ring Of Fire*.

The speed with which they were able to turn this product around was nothing short of astonishing, but with the benefit of hindsight there were several significant elements which worked in everyone's favour.

### With hindsight ...

The feedback from David Rowe, the editor on the project, suggested that although there were only eleven tapes, the material was extremely comprehensive and, more importantly, was shot in a manner that made his job of constructing sequences easy.

As it happened, both the team and the equipment deployed by Exploration Production, at very short notice, were almost ideally matched to the project. The director, Elliott Shiff, came from a background in current affairs – he had been the CTV Middle East bureau chief in Israel for many years – and was very flexible and clear thinking in unpredictable evolving situations. American sound recordist Will Hemmerle operates all over the world but has lived with his family

in Bali for 11 years and speaks Bahasa. Javanese production manager Ruddy Legoh was as skilled, talented and professional as they come and, as I've said, had just graduated from the Jacques Villeneuve School of Driving! And I have a solid foundation shooting international current affairs and documentaries on 16mm reversal film, and just live to team up with a good director to have fun telling a great story – the cinematography craft comes from Australia, the story telling from Ireland!

I also believe that the best foundation a cameraman can have for shooting HD is comprehensive experience shooting reversal film. This teaches you the importance of precision with exposures and of protecting the highlights. The current affairs training makes you decisive, accurate and able to cover action, events and sequences economically in a way that gives the editor what he needs.

Because of the nature of the shoot, the Cinealta camera was stripped down to its basics for weight and ergonomic reasons. We

didn't use a matte box or an Astro top monitor because this makes the camera longer and more awkward in a small Asian transportation van. For exposure decisions I relied on my experience and the camera's two sets of zebras. The lens was a Canon HJ22x7.6HDTV lens which operated perfectly at the wide end while shooting inside the van and, at the long end, was able to see streams of molten lava and rolling rocks hurtling down the mountain in the darkness of night. As usual, the Cinealta lived in the protective embrace of the Cinesaddle anytime it wasn't on the tripod, especially when travelling on the rough roads. The foundation for interviews and the long lens imagery was a Vision 100 Head with Vinten Fibertec legs which gave extraordinary stability, a critical ingredient for HD acquisition, and well designed portability, essential when climbing large dangerous mountains with a small crew.

This tripod combination was a joy to operate and even the director was impressed by the lightness of the load he was asked to carry and

its suitability to the demands of the job.

On this unexpectedly exciting six-day shoot, crew, equipment and story elements all dovetailed together to produce exactly the client's requirements even when events evolved and the pressure was suddenly cranked up. It doesn't always happen this way, but all credit to a talented, multinational team that made *Panic In The Ring Of Fire* the extraordinary product it is.

Director: Elliott Shiff  
[www.exploration.ca](http://www.exploration.ca)  
Director of Photography:  
Laurie K. Gilbert [www.limage.tv](http://www.limage.tv)  
Audio: Will Hemmerle  
[www.jungle-run.com](http://www.jungle-run.com)  
Production Manager: Ruddy Legoh  
[www.balisatriafilm.com](http://www.balisatriafilm.com)

Programme information:  
[http://discoverychannel.ca/\\_home/](http://discoverychannel.ca/_home/)  
or  
<http://discoverychannel.ca/nature/earthquake/diary/>

## Live & Learn



### Brian Rose

Shooting a romantic scene on a feature film, tinged with sexual excitement... Our hero has just returned from the War. Are he and his wife still in love? (It's been three years). It's a very difficult scene, a key scene in the whole film.



Director: Let's have a red light and bell then. DRING DRING: Absolute silence (this was the days before mobile phones).

1st AD: Let's keep it quiet.

D: OK folks. Now remember, this is the first time you've met since the War. I want to see the doubt, the passion, I want to see love... right. Let's go for it.

VERY, VERY TENSE ON SET ...

D: (whispering) And... turn over sound.

Sound: (very quiet) Sound running.

1st AC: Speed.

1st AD: (almost silent) Mark it.

I PUT THE BOARD IN, VERY, VERY QUIET, VERY SOFT CLAP.

Clapper Loader: 351. Take one.

AS I VERY CAREFULLY, VERY SILENTLY, VERY SLOWLY MOVE OUT OF SHOT ... I TRIP OVER A LAMP. WELL NOT ONE LAMP EXACTLY... THE WHOLE LOT COME DOWN... THE CRASHING AND BANGING SEEM TO LAST FOR MINUTES.

D: (Still very quiet, very concentrated)

And, thank you Brian,

And... cut. Erm, I don't think we need to print that one.

Me, I blame it on the DoP, too many flags and lamps all over the place. I won't say who it was other than to say that he's a Past President of the BSC!

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