



Eruption!

January 3, 1983, 7:05 a.m. I was lying comfortably in bed at the Alokea Plantation home in Hilo, watching *Good Morning, America*, when the phone rang. It was the NBC television affiliate calling from Honolulu. “Dave, there’s a pretty awesome eruption in progress from Kilauea’s east rift zone. We can have a cameraman at your hangar by 8:30. Are you available to fly?”

“I’ll be there. How bad is it?” I asked.

“Hard to say at the moment. It began at 12:31 a.m. and is fountaining more than a thousand feet in the air.”

My plane was always fueled and ready to fly. By the time I showered, filed a flight plan, and got to the airport, it was 8:20. As I pulled the plane out of the hangar I could see Ray Lovall, the cameraman, running toward me, lugging his heavy equipment. After the preflight inspection, we loaded his gear. We strapped in, and the engine sprang to life. I grabbed the mike and pressed the transmit button. “Hilo ground control, Cardinal three zero five niner niner request taxi for takeoff.”

“Five niner niner, cleared to runway eight. Wind, zero eight zero at five knots.”

It was a cloudy morning with showers from the northeast. At the end of the runway I ran up the engines, checked the magnetos, and switched to the tower frequency. “Hilo tower, Cardinal five niner niner ready for takeoff runway eight.”

A clear, confident voice boomed back, “Five niner niner cleared for takeoff.” I requested 3,500 feet of altitude to climb over the clouds, and a frequency change to radar vectoring as there was already heavy traffic heading for the eruption site.

Within 20 minutes the clouds parted, revealing a scene that could have come out of Star Trek, or perhaps hell. It was as if Madam Pele, the fire goddess, was spewing red-hot cinders the size of bricks a thousand feet into the air.

“Get as low as you can, Dave, I’d rather not have to use the telephoto lens any more than necessary; you know how it amplifies any movement,” said Ray. Lower. Right. Monitoring traffic, I obtained clearance to lower our altitude to 2,000 feet. With the terrain about 1,000 feet we were only 1,000 feet above ground level, and about as close to the Dragon Lady as I cared to get. The turbulence was horrific and pieces of burning cinder were flung close to the aircraft. What a sight! While Ray shot footage, I fought the controls to keep the plane level. We could feel the heat inside the plane. It was exciting, but I was glad when Ray told me he had enough footage, and we could get back on the ground.

That night some of that footage appeared on both local and national television. I received a phone call from *USA Today* for an update on the eruption. It appeared that this was the Big One, one that might continue for years.

My telephone answering machine was taking calls 24 hours a day. I had to turn off the ringer at night to get any rest at all. Nearly every morning when I checked the messages, there were at least a half-dozen requests from people who wanted to fly over the eruption site. Because I never use marijuana when I’m flying, I didn’t smoke grass for weeks. I had no withdrawal symptoms, by the way.

“A bad birth”

One night a lady doctor phoned from Honolulu. She wanted the plane to herself: no other passengers on her flight over the eruption site. I said that would be fine, and we went on to agree that a night flight would be especially dramatic. At the hangar she noticed me admiring her. She was very attractive, with long blonde hair and deep blue eyes. She appeared to be in her mid-thirties. I had never seen such white smooth skin. “You’re probably curious why I didn’t want any other passengers in the plane. And now you notice my appearance. My white skin. Am I correct, Mr. Ford?”

“The name’s Dave. And yes, I am curious.” In a soft, even voice she said, “I’ve always wanted to see an eruption. This is a very special night for me and I didn’t wish to be distracted by other passengers. You see, I’m dying. I have leukemia, and about a month to live. I just wanted to have this time without others talking or laughing.”

I felt like wrapping my arms around her and holding her tight. I didn't. I just said, "I'm terribly sorry. My Cardinal is going to give you the most exciting ride of your life, doctor."

We flew for about an hour. I showed her the city lights, and magnificent Mauna Kea silhouetted by the moon. "If you count from its base on the ocean floor, Mauna Kea is the highest mountain in the world, rising 32,000 feet. Over 13,000 of those feet are above sea level. In winter, if you set up a good telescope at Hilo Bay you could see people skiing on the slopes of Mauna Kea, then lower the telescope and watch surfers riding waves in the warm Pacific ocean.

She nodded, and smiled at my obvious pride in my home island. She said, "Your island grows fine cannabis."

"Yes, it does," I replied. "Have you tried it, doctor?"

"I have. It superbly eases the fear of dying and is one of the world's safest medicines."

We headed for the eruption site. Red lava was gushing out of the growing cinder cone. The doctor's face was ashen. "How do you feel, doctor?" I asked.

"It's certainly a thrill of a lifetime, and I'm OK. But it reminds me of a bad birth."

When we landed, I asked if she minded if I gave her a hug. She was a fine hugger, and we both had tears in our eyes. I drove her to the main terminal for her last-ever flight back to Honolulu.

As I drove home, the sights we'd seen replayed in my mind's eye. The rivers of lava glowing angrily in the dark and moving slowly down the mountain were frightening. They looked like rivers of blood that were all too ready to give Royal Gardens a transfusion. Shortly after arriving home I fell into a deep sleep. I dreamed I was flying three passengers directly over the eruption when the engine quit. The 2,000-degree heat of the lava drew the plane like a magnet into the volcano's bloody mouth. When the plane plunged into the lava and exploded, I awoke with a scream. Thereafter, I restricted flights to daytime only. Whenever time permitted and seats were vacant I invited Sandy, David, and my daughter-in-law, David's bride Cathy, to join the flights.