



## CRAIG HOSKING

### The pilot who crashed inside a volcano (Hawaii, 1992)

Craig Hosking works as a Hollywood camera pilot and has filmed many famous action scenes for blockbusters featuring characters such as James Bond, Batman and Indiana Jones. It's a dream job for someone like Hosking,

who has been passionate about flying and photography for as long as he can remember – he was only sixteen years old when he qualified for a licence to fly helicopters.

In 1992 he was hired to fly cinematographer Mike Benson and camera technician Christopher Duddy. They needed to film scenes of boiling lava for a movie called *Sliver* and had chosen Kilauea, the most active of the five volcanoes on the island of Hawaii. The two men planned to spend one Saturday recording a large plume of smoke from a vent called Pu'u 'O'o, and a pool of glowing lava nearly a hundred feet inside the crater.

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Hosking flew the camera crew down into the six-hundred-foot deep crater several times, but on the third low-level pass the helicopter seemed to lose power. A warning light flashed on the control panel but the malfunction was so sudden that the three men were instantly plunged into a dense cloud of smoke and steam from the volcano. Emerging from the cloud moments later Hosking realised he had no choice but to land the helicopter immediately.

With just seconds to act before the loss of power became catastrophic, Hosking's professional experience told him that flying clear of the volcano was out of the question. He also knew that he couldn't land too close to the pool of boiling lava. If he did the steep gradient would cause the helicopter to roll over, which would almost certainly kill all three of them. The only option was to aim for a flat area close to the centre of the crater.

Hosking's plan was far from ideal but he thought it might work as long as he could avoid the bubbling lava and another large area strewn with rocks.

Unfortunately, during the helicopter's rapid descent, the main rotor struck the crater wall and broke free of the fuselage. Hosking managed to get the machine down in one piece, but the men were now stranded inside the volcano and at least 150 feet below its rim.

When they emerged, dazed and in shock, from the crumpled wreck of the helicopter, they saw what looked like a scene from one of the disaster movies they helped create. The air was thick with choking, poisonous fumes, and the sound from the molten rock bubbling up to the surface added to the fearsome display. At times it made ominous gurgling noises, at others it was like waves breaking on shingle. In the gloom of their rocky prison they witnessed a terrifying lightshow from the eerie glow of the boiling lava pool.

All three realised that the gases surrounding them were extremely dangerous. These included hydrogen sulphide (which is poisonous, highly corrosive, flammable and explosive) and a toxic irritant called sulphur dioxide. A little fresh air seemed to be coming down from the rim, but suffocation was a very real prospect unless they got out of the volcano soon. There was no sign of a rescue party yet, so Duddy and Benson decided to scale the walls of the volcano in the hope that they might find a way out. Hosking, meanwhile, chose to remain with his wrecked helicopter, believing he could repair its damaged radio and call for help.

Duddy and Benson quickly found that climbing up the inside of a crater was a nerve-wracking challenge – neither had any experience of this sort of

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thing, let alone any expertise. The brittle walls of the crater were crumbling, and any careless move could easily start a landslide that would carry them deeper into danger. Treading very slowly and carefully they made their way up the crater, but soon became separated, stranded on ridges at least sixty feet short of the rim.

Hosking was having better luck. Working in the choking air, after several setbacks he eventually fixed the helicopter's emergency radio and summoned help. When a courageous local pilot risked a second flight into the crater Hosking scrambled aboard.

Rescuing the other two men was much harder. Benson decided that the most sensible option was to sit tight and wait for a rescue team. The air was cleaner at this height, and he felt that continuing the climb would be too dangerous. Instead, he secured himself in a narrow crevice and waited for help to arrive.

Duddy chose the alternative. Convinced he would die if he stayed in the crater much longer, he opted to struggle on towards the rim. At one point during his slow ascent he had a terrible

shock: a man-sized object suddenly appeared through the gaseous cloud before crashing to the bottom of the crater. Horrified, Duddy thought it was one of his companions falling to a violent death. In fact, it was proof that a rescue attempt was at last underway. The large object was a survival pack, thrown over the rim in the hope that it might land close to the men trapped below.

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The incident badly unsettled Duddy, but eventually he reached the rim at around two-thirty the following afternoon: Coughing and wheezing from the effect of the gas, he was at least safe, like Hosking. But more than twenty-four hours into the ordeal Benson was still trapped in his crevice and was beginning to suffer.

Having lost contact with the other two, his biggest fear was that he might now be the only one still alive. This made him even more anxious

about his chance of being rescued, and the sound of volcanic activity below only unnerved him even more. He tried to take his mind off these fears by using little tricks, such as reciting the alphabet backwards. He had no food

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and hadn't eaten for many hours, but by cupping his hands and reaching out from the crevice he was able to catch some rainwater to drink.

At one point Benson started hallucinating, imagining he could see the figure of Pele, Hawaii's spiteful goddess of volcanoes. He thought she was reaching out to him across the crater, but fortunately he still had some fight left in him. More than once he got to his feet and screamed at her to leave him alone.

By Monday morning Benson was still trapped, but then the haze and smoke cleared momentarily. The improved visibility enabled the pilot of another helicopter to spot the missing man, if only for a second or two. With the smoke thickening once more Benson's shadowy form vanished as quickly as it had appeared, but at least the rescue team knew his approximate position.

Flying down into the crater for a third time was considered too dangerous in the circumstances. Instead, a large net at the end of a 150-foot cable was slowly lowered towards the ridge. Manoeuvring it into position required expert flying and it took a while to get it right. Finally Benson managed to reach out to the net and clamber into it. By mid-morning, nearly two full days after the initial helicopter flight had come to grief, he was airborne once again and on his way to the nearest hospital.

Nearly a week later Benson was still coughing painfully, but, remarkably, he and the other two men suffered only a few minor cuts and bruises. Following an ordinary crash landing this would have been an extremely lucky outcome, but after coming down inside an active volcano it seems nothing short of amazing.

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