



Winter flooding along the Interstate 5 interchange in downtown Chehalis ultimately shut down this major artery.

Record snows, rains wreak havoc in western Washington

CAP pilots document a major disaster

By Janet Adams

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First came the snow in early January in the Pacific Northwest, piling up across the hills and in the valleys of western Washington. More snow fell than in the disastrous winter of 2006-2007, when flooding from winter rains and melting snow destroyed roads and farms and damaged houses and buildings, many beyond repair. The winter of 2008-2009 continued the flooding pattern, spawned by the triple forces of heavy snows, warming temperatures and heavy rains, exacerbated by slopes devoid of vegetation.

Hours of heavy rains — 7 inches in 24 hours at Marblemount in the foothills of the majestic Cascade Mountains — led to landslides. Clear-cut hillsides could not break up the avalanches that roared down slopes nor keep mudslides in check as these twin forces

swept into rivers and valleys, causing rising waters. In the town of Snoqualmie, more than 30,000 people left their homes as more than 10 inches of snow at Snoqualmie Pass melted in 12 hours, triggering more flooding, according to reports in the *Seattle Times* and other newspapers.

A 20-mile stretch of a major artery, Interstate 5, was closed by flooding, and in the Cascades major east-west routes were forced to close as avalanches and mudslides blocked roads. Emergency rescues by boat and helicopter and stories of stranded families and animals were documented daily in the *Times* and on local TV.

Given the need for immediate assessment of present and potential damage, the state Department of Transportation turned to CAP to photograph the aftermath using the DOT's own digital imaging equipment. The agency's aviation emergency coordinator, Tom Peterson, had spent 22 years in CAP's Oregon and Washington wings, including four years as director of operations for the Washington Wing.

Peterson served as incident commander for the mission, during which 19 members from five composite squadrons — Fort Vancouver, Mount Rainier, Renton, Paine Field and Seattle — made 21 flights over two days to provide aerial imagery and damage assessment. In all, the CAP aircrews flew five aerial photo sorties totaling 16.7 hours, yielding about 800 images of the flooding.

Maj. Harlan Zentner of the Renton Composite Squadron spent 2½ hours airborne as observer on one high-bird flight. His plane served as the communications platform for the other CAP planes during what he described as “the tail-end of the major portion of the storm.”

The devastation below was unforgettable. After flood-

ing like western Washington experienced, “A narrow river becomes a very, very broad lake, and it takes out everything in its path. There were bodies of water where they're not supposed to be,” Zentner said.

“We saw a lot of trailer homes and pastures flooded out.” Particularly striking, he said, were such sights as “a barn sitting in the middle of a lake” that hadn't been there before.

While the aircrews were in flight, technology kept Washington Wing's director of operations, Lt. Col.

James Furlong, and director of emergency services, Capt. Tony Porterfield, on top of the situation from the ground.

Furlong was at home in Federal Way, between Seattle and Tacoma, monitoring things by computer — especially via CAP's Web Mission Information Reporting System, or WMIRS — and telephone. Porterfield's base was the Department of Transportation's 40-foot portable command trailer in Olympia, which provided him and others with full communications, Internet and office resources.

After the mission, state officials reported a 58 percent usability rate for the CAP aircrews' photographs — an

impressive figure, Porterfield said, considering they were using the DOT's digital photographic and tracking equipment rather than the CAP equipment on which they had been trained. “They did a really good job using someone else's equipment,” he said. “Their dependability and flexibility was a credit to them as aircrews.”

Porterfield then added what may be a pilot's ultimate compliment: “There's not one of those aircrews I wouldn't fly with myself.” ▲

Washington Wing Public Affairs Officer 1st Lt. Ruth Peterson contributed to this report.



2nd Lt. Joseph Coppick, left, and 1st Lt. Edgar Rojas of the Washington Wing's Mount Rainier Composite Squadron and Maj. Harlan Zentner of the wing's Renton Composite Squadron prepare for a high-bird flight during a photographic assessment mission in the wake of major flooding.