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Tuesday, July 26, 2005

Peter V. Hobbs, 1936-2005: Scientist took to sky to study clouds

By [TOM PAULSON](#)
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Most atmospheric scientists study the subject with their feet on the ground, looking up.

The University of Washington's Peter V. Hobbs made his discoveries flying an airborne laboratory directly into clouds over the Cascades, volcanic dust in Alaska, oil smoke in Kuwait or whatever else in the sky he and his colleagues wanted to study.

"He was an enormously successful and entrepreneurial scientist," said Mike Wallace, a UW colleague who was co-author of a popular atmospheric science textbook with Hobbs.

The renowned UW researcher died yesterday of pancreatic cancer at the age of 69.

Hobbs came to Seattle from Britain in 1963 and, through his work, helped build up a fledgling UW department into one of the leading atmospheric science groups worldwide.

"It was one of the largest programs at the UW," said Wallace, referring to Hobbs' Cloud and Aerosol Group -- which continues but ceased airborne sampling projects in 2002.

As a scientist, Hobbs was perhaps most well known for discoveries that changed the way we look at clouds. He discovered, for example, important information about how ice particles form and multiply in clouds.

That was before he achieved his dream of working in a flying laboratory. In the early days, Hobbs and his colleagues used to have to set up in a high camp on Blue Glacier in the Olympics in order to get their equipment into a "cold cloud." They braved ice storms and mountain weather to advance the science.

In 1969, Hobbs was able to get his hands on a twin-piston-engine Douglas B-23 (originally owned by Howard Hughes) and equipped it for airborne testing. Some of the first projects were focused on snowfall patterns in the Cascades, cloud behavior during winter storms as well as studies of volcanic emissions and atmospheric chemistry.

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But Hobbs also took his airborne lab and colleagues well beyond the Pacific Northwest.

With an upgrade to a Convair-131 in 1984, he flew above the Arctic to study air pollution. When other airplanes were diverted away from the erupting Alaskan volcano Redoubt in 1989, Hobbs and his gang flew up and into the ash plume. When the Kuwaiti oil wells were set on fire following the 1991 Gulf War, the UW scientist flew into the thick, black smoke to help ascertain their environmental effects.

"This is as close as I would like to get to hell," Hobbs joked at the time. In 1997, the UW clouds-and-aerosol group obtained a C-580 and flew worldwide until 2002. The UW group is now focusing on analyzing the data from the many flights.

Born May 31, 1936, in London, Hobbs grew up in a working-class family that suffered the privations of World War II. Hobbs, by his own account, was not initially academically inclined.

"He ran with a sort of wild crowd as a young man," said Sylvia Hobbs, who met and married this man with his head in the clouds about 40 years ago when both were then students at London's Imperial College.

Hobbs also was a boxing champion and avid athlete.

In addition to his wife, he is survived by three sons: Stephen, Julian and Rowland and three grandchildren.

The family plans a private ceremony. The UW has tentative plans for a celebration of Hobbs' life at the start of fall quarter.

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