

Hunga-Tonga Games: Unravelling the Timing and Size of the Biggest Volcanic Explosion in 30 Years

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1. Introduction: The 2022-01-15 eruption

USGS located a Ms5.8 volcanic non-double-couple earthquake at Hunga Tonga – Hunga Ha’apai (HT-HH) with an origin time of 04:14:45, and a depth of 0-6 km beneath the sea floor. A **Lamb wave** (Fig. 1), presumably from a very powerful explosive eruption, propagated around the globe several times, and was recorded on barometric and infrasound stations, and induced ground-coupled airwaves and meteo-tsunamis. But a crucial question is which came first, the earthquake, or the explosion?

A first step towards understanding the eruption is to determine the relative timing and size of different phases from the geophysical signals recorded. But the closest station is MSVF on Fiji, 757 km NNW. We have to correct for travel time (including supersonic travel), and geometrical spreading on curved Earth.

Related papers: Yuen et al. (2022) found that there were 4 similar earthquakes within ~300 s of the USGS origin time labelled E-1, E-2, E-3, and E-4. Zheng et al. (9 am talk in this session) model these as sets of vertical forces, and link these to ‘magma hammer’. McNutt et al. (4:30 pm talk in this session) uses results from this poster to estimate instrumental VEI.

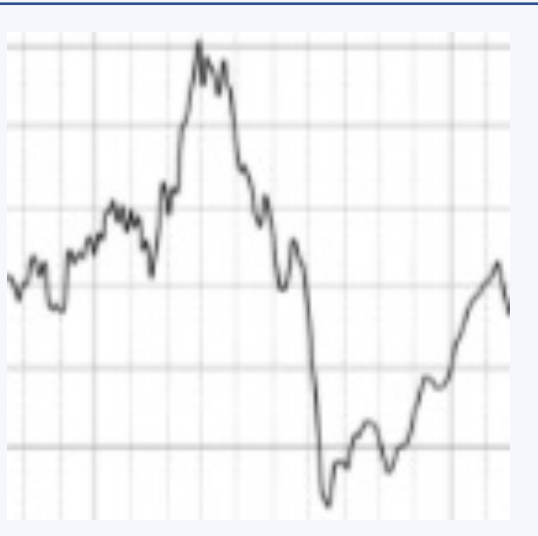


Fig. 1: This N-shaped waveform is an atmospheric Lamb wave that propagated around the world many times. Onset is emergent, duration 30-40 minutes. (Vertical lines are 3 minutes apart)

3. What about supersonic shockwaves?

Near the source, atmospheric waves would have been non-linear, supersonic shock waves. So how much does reduce travel times?

We can compute shock wave travel times using equation 4-26 from Kinney & Graham (1985):

$$M = \sqrt{1 + \frac{(k+1)\Delta P}{2kP}} \quad (1)$$

where k = specific heat ratio (1.4 for air), ΔP = overpressure, P = ambient pressure, and M = Mach number.

First we have to estimate the overpressure, ΔP , as a function of distance. This is difficult to constrain, given that the nearest station is 757 km. We use a model like:

$$\Delta P(r) = \left[\frac{a}{r} + \frac{b}{\sqrt{r^2 + r_c^2}} \right] \quad (2)$$

In brackets are near and far field terms, which model spherical waveforms locally and cylindrical waveforms at global distances. Here, r is the radius of the wavefronts, which on a spherical earth ranges from 0 to 6378 km, and back to 0 km at the antipode. It is always less than distance measured along the Earth’s curved surface.

A metric commonly estimated by the volcano infrasound community is reduced pressure, the overpressure estimated 1 km from the source. Fig. 5 shows two lines extrapolated back to 1 km, which we consider to be limiting cases.

- Setting $a=b=1$ in Eqn. 2, r_c is then a cross-over distance beyond which the cylindrical wave term dominates. The solid line in Fig. 5 corresponds to $r_c = 100$ km, approximately the maximum altitude that infrasound energy propagates to. Upper limit for reduced pressure = 170 kPa.
- The dashed line corresponds to $a=0$ (near field term ignored). We estimate a reduced pressure range of 23 – 170 kPa. Lower limit for reduced pressure = 23 kPa.

Using the upper limit (Fig. 5, solid line), we then use Eqn. 1 to estimate Lamb wave speed as a function of distance (Fig. 6). We estimate shock wave speeds of up to 500 m/s. However, this falls asymptotically to the distal Lamb wave speed of 314 m/s, and we calculate that the shock wave only arrives 26.6 s early as MSVF.

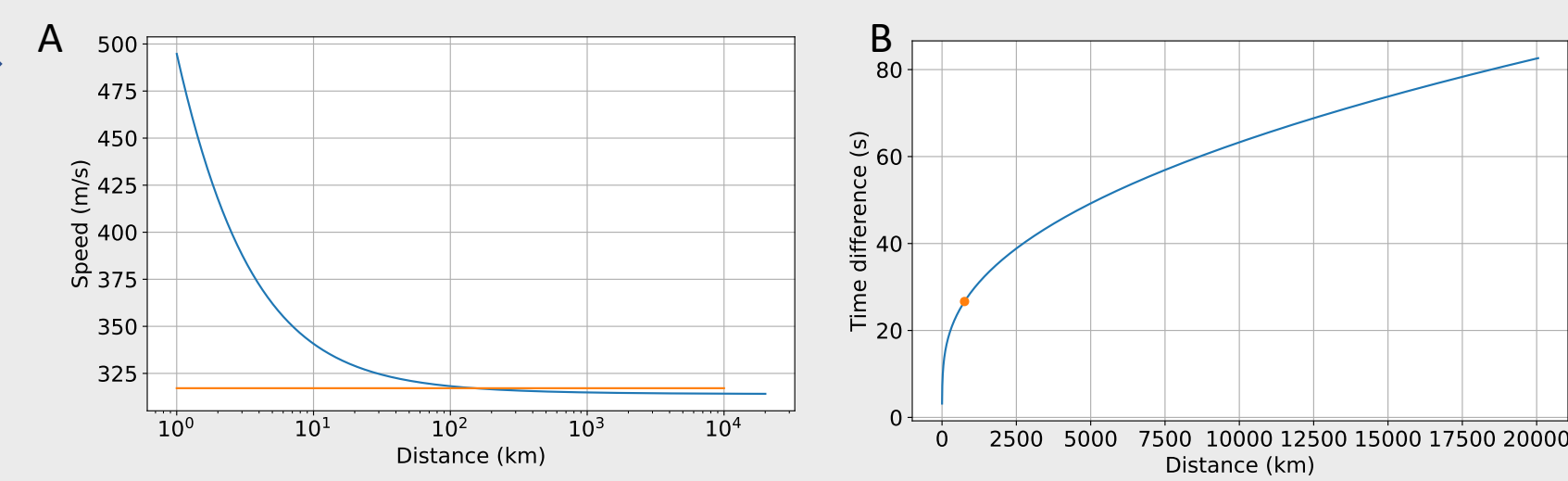


Fig. 6: (A) Lamb wave speed versus distance. Beyond 100 km, non-linear effects can be ignored. (B) How many seconds early does the shock wave arrive? Answer: 26.6 s at 757 km

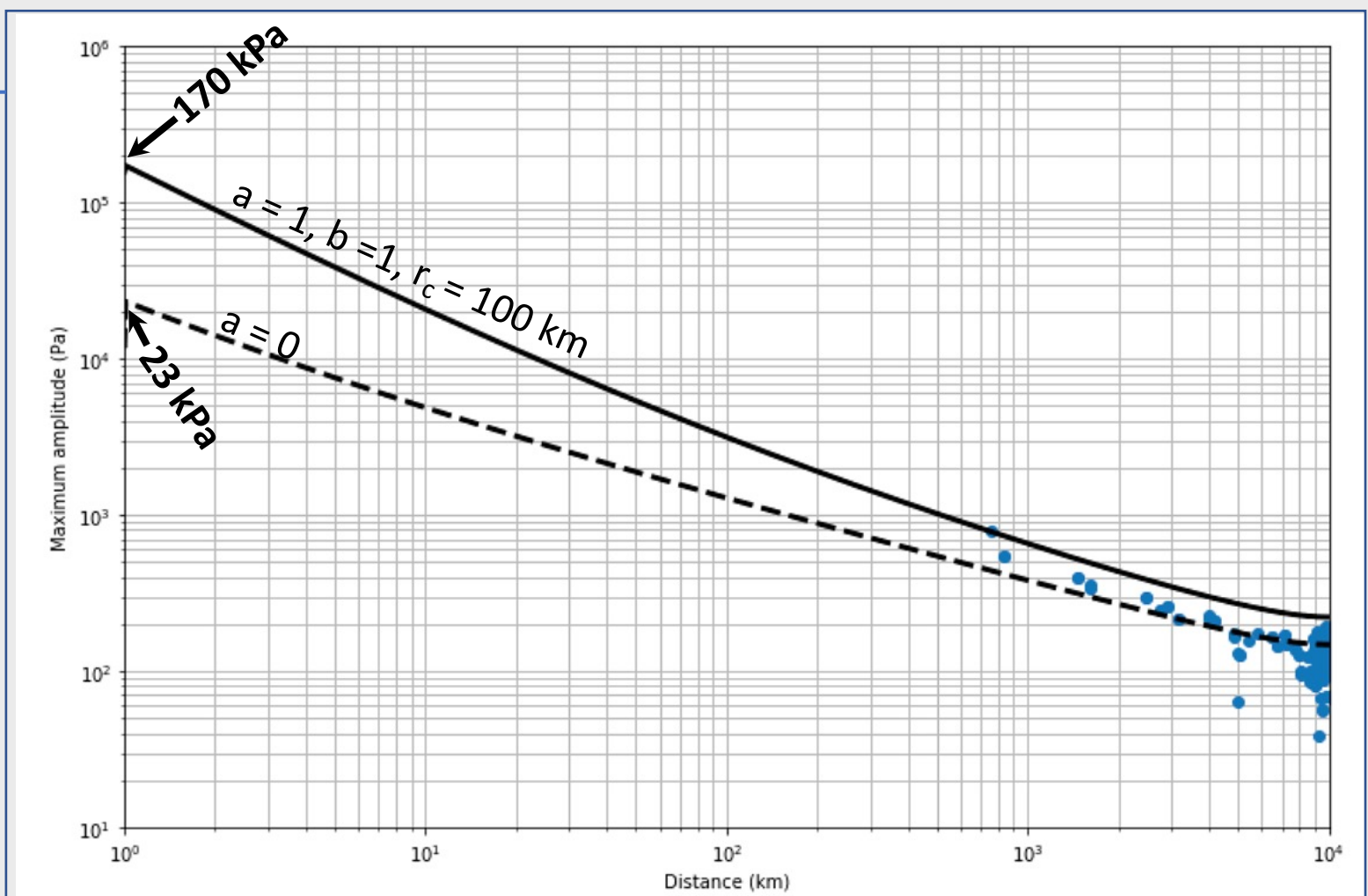


Fig. 5: Peak overpressure amplitude of the Lamb wave vs. distance, modelled with equation 2. Blue dots show zero-to-peak overpressure amplitude measured on waveforms from 156 barometric stations available from the IRIS DMC.

2. What came first? The earthquake or the explosion?

A crucial question is which came first, the earthquake, or the explosion? This is not easy to answer, because of the lack of local stations; the emergent, ultra-low-period (30-40 minute) Lamb wave dominating the barometric and infrasonic recordings; and the uncertainty in infrasound wave travel times.

Independent evidence for explosive eruption timing comes from satellite imagery and lightning data.

Satellite imagery (Fig. 2) provides unambiguous evidence of ash column height and radius, but only at 10-minute sample intervals. Lightning data have a very high sample rate, but previous work suggests there is a delay of 4-12 minutes between explosion and detectable lightning by the Vaisala GLD360 network.

We combine seismic and barometric data from MSVF with global lightning data (Fig. 3). But we need to remove travel times, to unravel signal times at the source. Record sections (Fig. 4) show speeds determined from least-squares fit to picked seismic and infrasound arrival times. EM radiation travel times (for lightning data) are < 0.1 s.

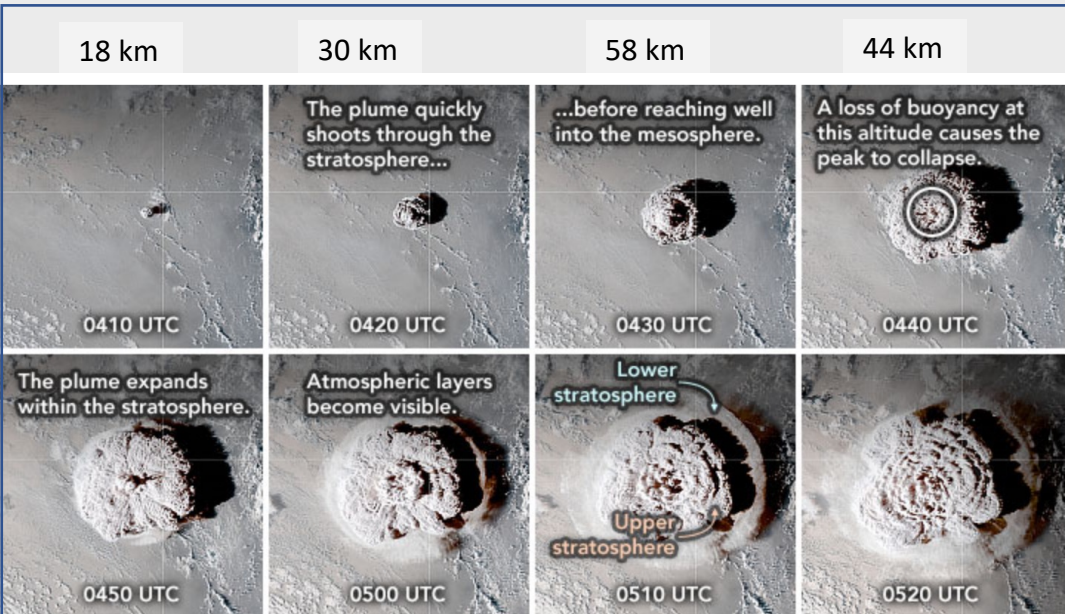


Fig. 2: GOES-17 satellite imagery from 04:10-05:20 UTC. The ash column reached 18 km by 04:10, and peaked at 58 km at 04:30, before collapsing.

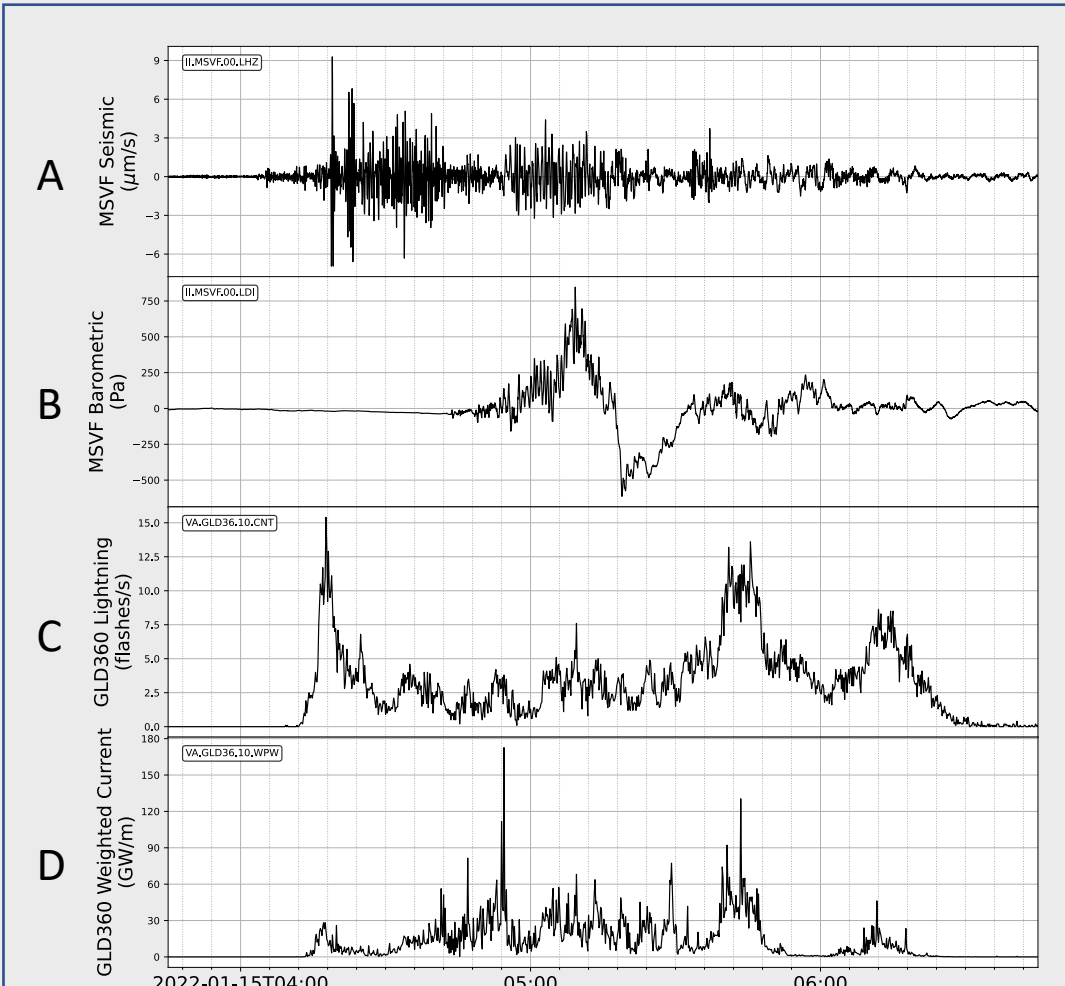


Fig. 3: Seismic (A) and barometric (B) data from GSN station MSVF on Fiji, 757 km from HT-HH, compared with GLD360 lightning network data from Vaisala, Inc. (C) shows detected flashes per second within 15 km of the volcano. (D) is related to electrical power in the center of the ash column.

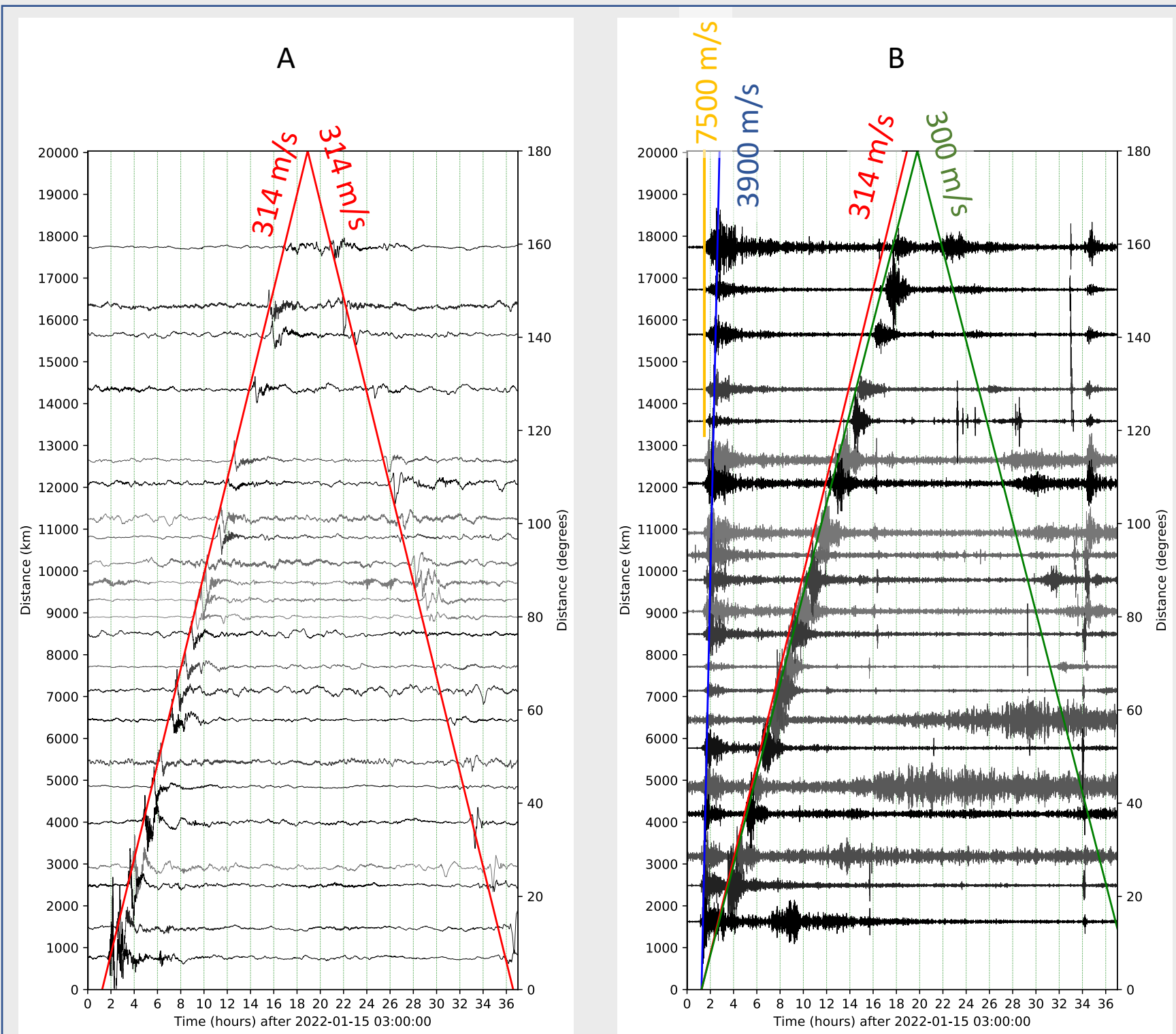


Fig. 4: Record sections of selected barograms (A), and seismograms (B). Barograms, filtered from 0.1 mHz to 0.1 Hz, show infrasound waves with a characteristic N-shaped waveform (a Lamb wave), propagating around the globe at a speed of ~314 m/s (red line). Seismograms are filtered from 1 mHz – 0.1 Hz, show P waves (gold line, 7.5 km/s), surface waves (blue line, 3.9 km/s), and ground-coupled airwaves (green line, 300 m/s) induced by the infrasound waves. Barometric and seismic data are from IRIS DMC.

4. Results: signals migrated back source

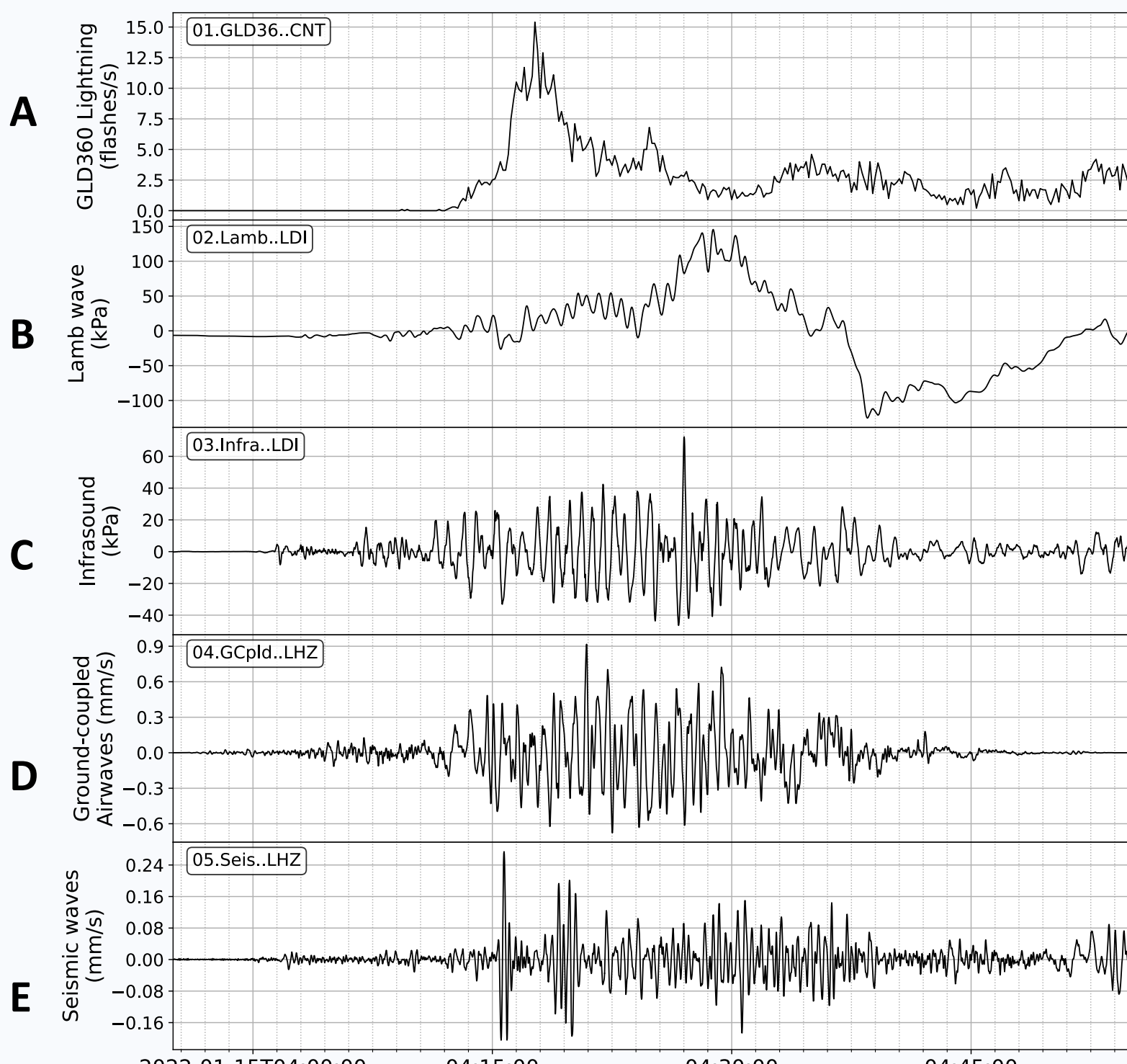


Fig. 7: Signals time migrated back to 1 km from source & corrected for geometrical spreading. Source dimension was likely greater than 1 km, but this distance as it is widely used for in volcanic infrasound community.

5. Conclusions

Table 1: Proposed eruption timeline

| Time (UTC) | Description |
|----------------|--|
| 04:00 | No ash cloud, no evidence of eruption. |
| 04:01:30 | Surtseyan activity began, as evidenced by simultaneous seismic and infrasound activity. |
| 04:07 | Escalation in infrasound. Vulcanian? |
| 04:10 | Ash cloud reached 18 km, radius 5 km. |
| 04:11 | Escalation in infrasound. Sub-Plinian? |
| 04:12 | Ground-coupled airwaves began (Infrasound generating seismic Rayleigh waves). Lightning detection rate started to climb, likely in response to 04:07+ ash cloud. |
| 04:14:45-04:16 | Main earthquake activity (E-1 sub event) and onset of Plinian eruption / cataclysmic explosion. |
| 04:16 | Lightning flash rate shot up, either in response to 04:11+ ash cloud, or Plinian eruption at 04:15+. |
| 04:17 | Lamb wave signal began to emerge. |
| 04:18 | Lightning flash rates (within 15 km of volcano) peaked, and slowly began to decline. Possibly because ash cloud is also spreading laterally and flashes near center are being masked by those at expanding edge? |
| 04:18-04:20 | More earthquake activity (E2-E4 sub events). |
| 04:20 | Ash cloud reached 30 km, but this was likely the event at 04:15+, so it rose at average speed of 100 m/s. |
| 04:28 | Lamb wave peaked. This likely coincided with ash cloud peaking at 55 km. So since 04:20 it rose at average speed of 52 m/s. |
| 04:30 | Narrow ash column seen at 55 km, with umbrella at 38-40 km. |
| 04:37 | Sharp negative phase of Lamb wave might suggest ash column at 55 km began cascading downwards rapidly for next 2-3 minutes. |
| 04:40 | Ash column seen at 44 km. Infrasound and ground-coupled airwave energy, and seismicity were waning rapidly, suggesting eruption de-escalating. |
| 04:50 | Ash column had risen slightly – perhaps oscillating? |
| 04:52 | Lamb wave ends. Perhaps just ongoing low level eruption at this time. |

The main earthquake and cataclysmic explosion likely occurred within tens of seconds of each other. We cannot be certain which happened first, given the resolution of the data.

Reduced pressure estimate of 23 – 170 kPa suggests a VEI 5-6 eruption (McNutt et al., this session). Ash cloud ascended at average speed of 100 m/s to 30 km from 04:15-04:20, likely supersonic initially.

References:

- GF Kinney and KJ Graham, “Explosives Shocks in Air,” 2nd Edition, Springer-Verlag, Berlin, 1985.
- DA Yuen et al. Earthquake Research Advances, 100134, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.egres.2022.100134>.
- Y Zheng et al. “Early Episodic Eruption Characteristics...”. (9am talk in this session today).
- SR McNutt et al. “Using infrasound and umbrella cloud radius...to estimate VEI?”. 4:30 pm talk in this session.

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