Q & A for NHC

JOHN PAVONE

AIRCRAFT COORDINATOR METEOROLOGIST

Chief Aerial Reconnaissance Coordination All Hurricanes

By Dennis Feltgen
Public Affairs Officer
National Hurricane Center

How did you get to be a meteorologist?

Actually, I was not really interested in weather. I had a math and science background when I came into the Air Force. They were just building up the weather force for the Vietnam conflict and they told me I was going to go to Texas A&M to study meteorology. I told them I wasn't interested in rocks, and they told me I had a lot to learn. And I certainly have.

Did you end up getting the degree?

No, I got enough credits to meet their criteria and off I went. They needed the bodies because of Vietnam. But I actually went the other way to Germany. I worked in an underground bunker where there were French, Canadians, English and Germans working alongside Americans. Our group served as a backup for the European Forecast Center.

Were there areas you were actually forecasting for?

Yes, the Cold War was going on at the time, so we were forecasting weather for the Soviet Union Eastern block of nations, which were behind the Iron Curtain, as well as

the local TAFs (Terminal Air Forecasts) for France and Germany. I did that for three years.

Then what happened?

Well, at the time, the 53rd Air Weather Reconnaissance Squadron was based in Bermuda, and they decided to move it back to Puerto Rico. Three of the guys there had to finish out their overseas tours and came to the forecast center. They saw how much I liked to travel and fly, and decided I should try to get into weather reconnaissance. So, I volunteered. I ended up in Sacramento, California, flying the 135s. The mission was weather, but we were also sampling nuclear debris to see who was developing atomic weapons. This was the late '60s. Eventually the nuclear debris sampling mission spun down and we did more weather. I ended up going to Guam and flying typhoons.

We don't hear anything about flying into typhoons anymore.

No, we don't. And the reason is we got out of the business after the Vietnam War. The folks in the Pacific decided they could do everything with satellites and didn't need airplanes anymore. So the unit on Guam closed down in 1987. Three years later, one of the guys who helped to get rid of the airplanes became the director of the Joint Typhoon Warning Center, and he tried to get the airplanes back. It didn't happen.

So how did you end up here?

I consider myself very lucky. Usually in Air Force weather reconnaissance, a person only gets one or two assignments at most. I was very fortunate to get eight assignments. I spent the rest of my career flying airplanes and administrating flight evaluations to other flyers. I retired from the Air Force in 1985. After that, I traveled on military aircraft, exploring the world for three years. I was on my way to China in 1988 when my old boss, General George Chapman, called me while I was on Guam and said he needed me at the Hurricane Center right now. I'd never been to China, so I went there for a visit first, and then came to Miami.

What is CARCAH all about?

CARCAH stands for Chief Aerial Reconnaissance Coordination All Hurricanes. It is about getting airplanes to where forecasters want data when they see a developing storm. The satellites are their first tool, but they can only give an estimate of what is going on. The airplanes can give us measurements, which is really important when a storm is going to impact land, people and property.

When a forecaster comes to you and requests an aircraft, what do you do?

We get with the two units that fly the storms. The NOAA guys over at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa and the Air Force guys at Keesler Air Force Base at Biloxi to see who

can satisfy the requirement. Usually the Air Force can do it because they have more airplanes, and we then work closely with the crews to get the job done.

What happens next?

The data from the aircraft comes to us instantaneously thanks to satellite delivery. We quality control it and give the most important stuff to the forecasters. Some of the data is then used to prepare visual products. Lastly, we send (the data) to the rest of the world. This all happens in about five minutes.

It certainly did not used to be that fast.

When I showed up here, we had two telephones and a teletype. We copied everything by voice and then had to type it into the teletype to send it out. We now get ten times the data we did then, and are able to get it out to everyone who needs it relatively quickly. Automation is a wonderful thing.

Even with all of the advances in technology, could you see the airplanes going away?

I don't see them going away. When I got into the business in 1968, the people in personnel at Air Weather Service told me that I'd better enjoy the assignment because weather reconnaissance was going to be gone in two years; the satellites would take over. That hasn't happened and I don't think it will happen in my lifetime.

What happens outside of the hurricane season?

We work winter storms. It's a full time job from the beginning of November to the middle of April. We've been doing this for the last ten years.

Where are these missions flown?

We fly in the Gulf of Mexico and up the East coast for storms that may impact the Northeast. We're also in the Pacific out of Alaska, Hawaii, and even Japan this last year. What's going to impact the United States three, four, five days downstream? The data from the planes is going into the computer models to help forecast rain on the West coast and snow in the Midwest and eventually the Northeast.

Between the tropical cyclones and the winter storms, these are tax dollars well spent?

We think so. It is a relatively inexpensive program. With these devastating storms having so much of an economic impact, the forecasts have to be good, and the airplanes help make them better.

What do you do when you are not here?

I travel the world. I am working on my next adventure, to South Africa!

Send comments to: nhc.public.affairs@noaa.gov