

Q & A for NHC



WALLY BARNES

Meteorologist

**Tropical Analysis and Forecast
Branch**

National Hurricane Center

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When I look over the records here at NHC, I see your name a lot. You must be one of the old guard.

Normally, everyone calls us the dinosaurs. We're already on our way to extinction.

How long have you been here?

At the hurricane center, 15 years. I was in the Miami WFO (Weather Forecast Office) before that, '88 to '95.

Let's go back to the beginning. Did you always have an interest in weather or was it an afterthought?

I have always liked weather. I started my meteorology courses with my Bachelor of Science degree in mathematics. When I graduated, I took the Air Force scholarship in meteorology for graduate courses, and finished that.

So, you're an Air Force brat?

Well, not brat, but certainly hurricane fodder for the Air Force. They were looking for volunteers about 1965 for the hurricane hunters, and at that time they did have many. I joined in and flew with them for five years.

What were they flying then?

The Navy flew the Constellations then, but the Air Force was flying the C130s like they have today.

Are there any memorable storms for you?

All of them! In a way, it's all experience you get from them and you fall in love with them like anything else. It's like taxes. They are there, you don't like them, but somebody has to pay them, so you go out there and do it.

What happened after the military?

I got promoted to a civilian. I was a consultant on the environment, with such organizations as ERT (Environmental Response Team), the local government in Puerto Rico, and ultimately the WHO (World Health Organization).

Where were you living at the time?

I was in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Dr. Colon, who was the head of the WFO there, kept encouraging me to come to work at the office. So in 1980, I took it. It's been federal history since then, almost 30 years now.

You can't be far away from retirement.

I am entertaining the thought. I see others retiring and the old dinosaurs fading away, so I say that's my destiny.

What is it in TAFB (Tropical Analysis and Forecast Branch) that you look forward to the most when coming on a shift?

Any threats that are there that could flip the boat, create havoc or pose some danger to someone in the middle of the ocean. I'm a mariner myself, I have been out there and seen the seas stirred up and what the danger is that surrounds a mariner. I live by my own word. I forecast what it will be like out there, then go out and live it. So whenever I am wrong, I suffer through it, too.

You have no doubt seen some dramatic changes in TAFB. Tell me about some of them.

I've seen changes in the methods that we use to forecast and to figure out what is going on. Modeling has definitely made a large impact with more accurate forecasting. But I would say there is possibly too much reliance on the models and less and less of the forecaster skill applied to it. In other words, I think it's not going to be there and the model says it is going to be there, and most people would put it there without thinking. Sometimes I am reluctant to put something in that the model is saying it is. I have to have reasons to support my contention to go against the model.

You're going to be using grids here soon. Is that a plus?

Yes, and it's a similar way. Here is what the models say, see what you can fix or say differently. And if you do say differently, you're going to support why you're going a different way. I do not believe in hunches. If you've got a hunch, you've got to support it

or you don't put it down. If you think something might be happening that would put mariners in peril, it is your responsibility to look for a justification to put or not put out a warning. Lives depend on this.

You clearly have a passion and enjoyment for what you do.

Oh yes, otherwise I would have retired a long time ago. If I do leave TAFB and retire, it's not going to be fade away into oblivion. I will continue in weather somewhere else.

What would you like to do?

Possibly become a hurricane analyst for a TV or radio station. It would be something part time because you only work six months a year. I can do anything I want during the other six months. It will keep me in the field and keep me abreast of the new technology and new concepts. I don't plan to just walk into the sunset.

And you're a boater, too.

I enjoy going out boating, island hopping all through the Caribbean. I used to do it before, and I want to do it again. I'd have six months of the year to do that.

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