



News Release

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

437th AIRLIFT WING PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE
102 East Hill Blvd., Rm. 223, Charleston AFB, S.C. 29404-5154
Phone: (843) 963-5608, 5588 or 5589 Fax (843) 963-5604

PAO email: edmund.memi@charleston.af.mil
After duty hours, call the base operator or
command post (963-2531) & ask for a PA rep

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HURRICANE HUNTERS VISIT CHARLESTON AFB

CHARLESTON AFB, SC -- Most people would probably agree that the idea of flying a plane into the eye of a storm is crazy. But that's exactly what members of the Air Force Reserve's 53rd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron, known as the Hurricane Hunters, do for a living.

Based out of Keesler AFB, Miss., this specialized unit performs a role in surveying tropical disturbances and hurricanes in the Atlantic (west of 55W), Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico for the National Hurricane Center in Miami, Fla.

On July 19, two WC-130 weather reconnaissance planes performed a training flight from Charleston AFB over the Atlantic Ocean, to simulate flying into a hurricane and to collect data to forecast this year's storm season.

"This is a very interesting job," said Maj. Ron Marx, chief pilot who has flown six variations of C-130s over the past 15 years. "We are the only people in the world who do this."

The Air Force uses ten WC-130 aircraft to accomplish the weather missions.

"The aircraft are all H-model planes that have not been modified to fly the missions, they just contain special weather equipment," said Marx. Each of these weather missions average about 11 hours and can cover almost 3,500 miles.

Six people comprise the crew: aircraft commander, co-pilot, flight engineer, navigator, weather officer and a dropsonde system operator. Hurricane Hunters gather weather data from areas where it is impractical or impossible to operate ground observation stations, or where weather satellites cannot provide complete information, according to the Hurricane Hunters website.

After the aircraft flies into a storm, the dropsonde system operator fires out a canister, which resembles the shape of a large Pringles chip can, from a tube located in the back of the aircraft. The canister, also known as the dropsonde, acts like a "mini weather station," according to Master Sgt. Steve Day, dropsonde system operator. The navigator and weather officer decide the exact time to release the canister. After it is dropped, it falls to the ocean and a parachute deploys. After deployment, the dropsonde begins to transmit back to the aircraft a vertical atmospheric profile of the temperature, humidity, barometric pressure and wind data every half second.

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The dropsonde collects information that goes into a coded message format and is put together with information from the weather officer's computer (outside temperature, dewpoint, altitude of the aircraft and barometric pressure at that height) and sent via satellite to the National Hurricane Center, said Day.

Marx said the job the Hurricane Hunters perform is a very useful service to the nation, helping the national weather center predict hurricane landfall with 20-30 percent accuracy.

The job is important for evacuation purposes as well as helping with the "boy who cried wolf" syndrome that can cost an area millions due to bad storm predictions, said Marx.

"Every storm is unique and has its own personality," said Marx. "There is not a typical storm to fly through."

Marx stated that he has only been scared three times in his Air Force career. Twice when he was in special operations and once in the WC-130 during Hurricane Michelle.

"One day we went into it (Michelle) and it was as calm as can be, and the next day it was so violent that it required both pilots ... it was something else," said Marx. "I had my hands on the controls, but I was a passenger."

Marx also said weather systems need to be respected because they have the potential to be very dangerous.

Hurricane season runs from June 1 to November 30 with most of the hurricanes and tropical depressions coming off of the coast of Africa (Cape Verde), said Marx. Charleston AFB, Homestead AFB and Patrick AFB, Fla., are all alternate locations for the Hurricane Hunters in the event a storm hits the Gulf near Keesler.

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