

Q & A for NHC



Brian Maher

**IT Specialist
Technical Support Branch
National Hurricane Center**

*By Dennis Feltgen
Public Affairs Officer
National Hurricane Center*

You have your hands in a lot of things at NHC.

I do a little bit of everything. I am a member of the Technical Support Branch as an IT Specialist. I've worked at the National Hurricane Center for 25 years. I was here, on site, for Hurricane Andrew in 1992. My main responsibility is to keep the computers running, including the forecaster work stations and the computers they use to put out their forecasts.

There are a lot of computers here.

We have some very large systems here. We do a direct ingest from the GOES satellite imagery, so we maintain that. We grab a lot of data from very large supercomputers in the Washington DC area. I maintain the data flow and make sure we are in timely receipt of the data, and the forecasters get the data they need to put out their forecasts.

You do all of this from 9 to 5?

Yes, but we are constantly on call. The phone may ring at any time of the day when a forecaster may not have received the data, or they're having some hardware or software issues. There's a group of three of us that handle the after-hours calls.

Do you have to come in?

There are certain times when we have to come in. But in this day and age, there's a lot we can do remotely from our living rooms. That has really improved over the years.

You mentioned being at NHC for 25 years. This building has not been here that long. Which building did you start at?

The first location was in Coral Gables across from the University of Miami. I came here in 1984 out of the Navy. My initial position here was as a chartist. I would plot the meteorological data on a large paper map and give that to the forecaster. He would analyze that by hand with a pencil. Nowadays, everything is done by computer and computer-generate CAD software.

How did the data arrive?

We received that data via very slow teletype lines. We used to have to rip teletype paper off of the machine to get data. So, we have a very large unit that did that. I was one of about 13. As time went on, we received more and more computers and came into the automation era. I was a key play in automating a lot of processes. I assisted with automaton of plotting data, as well as the ingestion of satellite imagery, and computer-generated plots of aircraft reconnaissance data. Then in the late '80s my boss, who had a masters in computer science, got me involved in something new called the World Wide Web. I actually started the first web page for the National Hurricane Center in the late '80s. Now it has grown to the number one source for disseminating our data, and assisting emergency managers and our users.

I believe it is the most view web site in all of NOAA.

Yes, I believe it is. I travel all over the world and that's the first thing people do is comment on our web site and its ease of use. One thing the National Hurricane Center and I am very proud of is creating web-based products, such as the new Graphical Tropical Weather Outlook. That is getting rave reviews from everyone.

Where did you get your meteorology training?

I was formally trained in the United States Navy. I was an Aerographers Mate. We handled all of the earth sciences, oceanography and meteorology. I was stationed on a helicopter carrier in the Western Pacific. We spent most of the time in the tropics, but went anywhere from the Aleutian Islands down to the southern part of the Indian Ocean.

I gather you went through a few typhoons.

I spent three years in the tropics there and experienced and tracked quite a few typhoons. We actually went through a Supertyphoon when we were on anchor in Hong Kong. That was quite an experience!

Was your interest in meteorology generated in the Navy, or did you have it when you were younger?

I always had an interest in weather and science when I was growing up in what we call the “mid-lats” of the Washington DC area, and saw lots of different types of weather. I did a lot of backpacking and camping in the Appalachians, so I definitely respected the weather. So when I went into the Navy, there was a very specialized field for meteorology and oceanography. It look very interesting, especially to do it on a moving ship. The weather was always changing so it was always a challenge because the location was different every day.

The passion in your voice tells me you really enjoyed the naval experience.

I really did! It gave me a great background in meteorology, and every day was different. We did everything from chasing submarines, dropping bathythermographs, launching weather balloons, oceanography, and meteorology. It was great satisfaction briefing the pilots directly and I got real-time feedback on how good the forecast was.

Did you ever consider making the Navy a career?

At one point I did. But at that time I came from a family of civil servants, and at the point I was getting ready to stay in the Navy, it was suggested I try to get into the Government. It was overwhelming. I put out one blanket application and it came back with 13 jobs. At that point I decided to be a civilian and am very pleased I made that choice.

There are stacks of boxes in the building, all dealing with technology.

We don't get a lot of free time at the National Hurricane Center. Technology is rapidly changing and we're been very fortunate that NHC has been keeping up with the technology, so we're always migrating and upgrading to new systems, retiring old systems, looking at ways to do things better and faster.

Where do you go from here?

I have been here 25 years, about seven years out from retirement. We are going through a large attrition stage here right now. We have a lot of new young people coming in here with new ideas coming from the field or directly out of college. You only see this occur every 10 to 15 years in the government. I'd like to stay here, finish my career at the Hurricane Center and work with this new breed, assist them with moving forward, and perhaps some of my experience can rub off on them.

When you are not training the new folks or keeping the ship running smoothly, what do you do to relax?

I spend a lot of time out of the country, fishing. I have some friends with some very large boats that go anywhere from Venezuela to Costa Rica to the Bahamas. My interest began about 15 years when I flew down to St. Thomas with some friends. We brought a large boat back and starting catching a lot of Blue Marlin. I caught a 116 pound Wahoo, and that is where is all started!

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