



ISLANDER ENVIRONMENT

# WILD *is the* WIND

By Martha Watkins Gilkes



*Master Sgt. Lee Snyder  
under the Hurricane Hunter sign*

**There is an old time  
Caribbean saying  
relating to hurricanes:  
June too soon,  
July stand by,  
August it must,  
September-Remember!**

The official start of the hurricane season is June 1st, although rarely do hurricanes develop this early. To be ready is the mission of the Hurricane Hunters who fly into the eye of a hurricane to gather data on the storm. They are considered "minutemen" as they have to be ready at a moments notice. Towards this end, annually, just before the start of hurricane season, the Hurricane Hunters open their Caribbean headquarters on the island of St Croix in the US Virgin Islands.

My first feature for THE LIAT ISLANDER on the Hurricane Hunters was written in 1996 and is now posted on the World Wide Web at <http://stormcarib.com/hurhunt.htm>. The article was so popular and well received that THE LIAT ISLANDER decided to produce a follow-up. In covering this sequel, I was fortunate to visit the Headquarters for the opening of the 2002 season and gained first hand information on the important role the Hurricane Hunters play.

As the Caribbean saying goes, June is generally too soon but "September - Remember" is no longer the case as the season is rarely over this early. In fact, early September is the peak of hurricane activity due to a number of factors, including the warming of the seas during the summer months which fuels the energy which drives a hurricane. A hurricane develops in warm waters and air, which is why the tropics are known for hurricanes. Around the core, winds grow

**WILD** is the **WIND**  
continued

to great velocity, generating violent seas. If the system develops, a definite eye is formed, around which the most violent activity takes place; this is known as the "eyewall". The centre of the eye of a hurricane is relatively calm.

The world famous Hurricane Hunters, the only such military organization in the world, play an important role in tracking the direction and severity of hurricanes, which can so violently affect the Caribbean islands and the USA coast. In the earlier part of the century many lives were lost to hurricanes, largely due to the lack of ready warnings. There is much better forecasting and warning today. However, even without deaths, (although that is certainly the most tragic aspect associated with this natural disaster), the impact of great personal damage and disruption is very trying. The economic impact can be up to one million dollars per mile in densely populated developed areas such as the USA Gulf Coast.

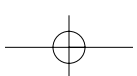
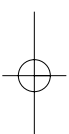
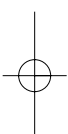
I have had a close association with the 53rd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron, also known as The Hurricane Hunters, for more than 10 years. These are the brave men and women based out of Kessler Air Force Base in Mississippi, my own home state in the USA. For over 50 years, they have been performing one of aviation's most unique and perilous missions: flying into the eye of hurricanes, the world's most powerful weather phenomenon of spiralling thunderstorms between 300 to 600 miles wide. Since 1998 I have had official permission to fly a mission into the eye of a hurricane with the Hurricane Hunters, and I shall be joining a mission during the 2002 storm season. This will provide me with first hand knowledge of how much valuable information is provided by the Hurricane Hunters in their weather data gathering. Operated by a crew of six professionals, the aircraft actually penetrates the eye of the hurricane at different altitudes to gather weather data on the hurricane. This data is analyzed by the Miami Hurricane Center to predict the storm track and impact of the hurricane. This information is invaluable in protection of lives along the storm's course.

One of the most senior crewmen, Master Sergeant Lee Snyder, has been flying hurricanes longer than any other military person, with over 11,000 logged flying hours. Snyder has flown hurricanes for 33 years,

*Master Sgt Snyder training a dropsonde trainee in dispersment of sonde.*



*Martha Watkins Gilkes  
pictured with C130 Hurricane  
Hunter Aircraft at mission  
control base, St Croix*





*Master Sgt. Lee Snyder (in the blue with the shovel...) who is the most senior Hurricane Hunter, planting a tree to commemorate Hurricane Camille...*

penetrating some 300 hurricanes. As the Dropsonde Systems Operator, he is responsible for the launching of the dropsonde instrument from the aircraft through a pressurized tube. The location for the drops is determined by the National Hurricane Center in Miami. During an average hurricane approximately 10-20 sondes are dispersed. The sonde drops through the atmosphere at a rate of 2500 feet per minute, recording the barometric pressure, wind direction and speed, temperature and humidity - all factors which determine the strength of the hurricane. The sonde is biodegradable and does not cause harm as it disintegrates. The information the sonde gathers is relayed back to the aircraft by a transmitter and is forwarded to the Miami Hurricane Center to be analyzed. It is this information which is used in the decision to issue a hurricane watch or warning to protect lives in the projected path of the storm.

When there's potentially violent weather approaching a landmass, the local government Met Office issues advice to the public. The guidance to do this is provided by the Miami Hurricane Center based on the data the Hurricane Hunters have gathered about the system.

With today's "information highway" much information can be obtained on

hurricanes. There are many sites of interest, but a few of the better ones, which also have links to many others, are listed below.

One of the best sites for over all information and also to receive hands-on data from reporters on the islands during an actual hurricane is STORM 2002 [www.stormcarib.com](http://www.stormcarib.com). Another interesting site to check out is that of the Hurricane Hunters themselves ([www.hurricanehunters.com](http://www.hurricanehunters.com)) where you can actually take a virtual reality flight with them into the eye of a hurricane. There's also the Miami National Hurricane Center's site ([www.nhc.noaa.gov/](http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/)).

*The author, Martha Watkins Gilkes, has lived in the Caribbean, moving from her childhood home of Mississippi, for 25 years. She is based in Antigua. She has witnessed a number of hurricanes and her own property was devastated by 1995's Hurricane Luis and again in 1998 by Hurricane Georges. She then witnessed Hurricane Jose and Lenny in 1999, and has experienced the eye of two hurricanes passing directly over Antigua. The author wishes to thank the Hurricane Hunters and especially Master Sergeant Lee Snyder of the Kessler Air Force Base for help with information for this article.*