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A NOAA pilot at the controls of a P3 turboprop that is heading for the eye of Hurricane Isabel. (ABCNEWS.com)

Thrill of the Storm

While Most Flee, Meteorologists Race to the Scene

By Amanda Onion

Sept. 18— The winds were gusting to 55 mph, huge waves were smashing over the boardwalk, rain had just started to pour down in sheets and Jan Dutton was exactly where he wanted to be — in the thick of it.

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Dutton, a meteorologist with the online weather information service, WeatherBug.com, had parked right next to the boardwalk in Ocean City, Md., in a big white truck topped with an array of weather instruments. He, another meteorologist and a technician had been there since Tuesday, barely sleeping and eagerly recording the oncoming chaos of Hurricane Isabel.

When most residents flee the rage of oncoming storms, it is the meteorologist's duty — and often, passion — to head straight into it. Weather instruments can operate remotely, but as Dutton says, "nothing beats being there" when it comes to accurate forecasting.

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Plus, you never know when your instruments are going to break down.

In fact, one of the instruments propped on top of the WeatherBug.com Dodge Durango had just stopped working — the one that measures wind speed — and Dutton had nearly broken his neck trying to replace it.

"It was a little slippery," Dutton said as he dried off from the venture. "At one point there was a really strong gust and I lost my balance and almost fell forward and did a face plant. Luckily, that didn't happen."

Flying Into the Eye

Besides the wind speed instrument (which Dutton managed to replace despite the gusts), the WeatherBug truck also hosted tools to measure temperature, wind direction, rain rate and barometric pressure. The readings that Dutton and his colleagues record from the truck are then conveyed to WeatherBug.com's desktop weather application used by more than 25 million people nationwide.

He and the others had also been doing live radio reports for a local radio station during the graveyard shift — 12:30 a.m. to 4:30 a.m. — when most are getting a sensible night's sleep.

"We haven't really slept much for the last two days," he said.

Other weather people, like Harris Halverson, go to even greater extremes. Halverson is a pilot with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration whose specialty is flying into the very place most pilots do their best to avoid — the center of the hurricane.

"We got some bumps today," Halverson told *ABCNEWS'* Mike Von Fremd on a recent flight into Hurricane Isabel. "I anticipate we will get at least as much, maybe some more."

Halverson then guided the Lockheed P3 turboprop on a very shaky ride through the turbulence surrounding the storm to allow the crew's instruments to collect data. All the information was transmitted mid-flight by satellite to the National Hurricane Center in Miami, where researchers then calculated Isabel's projected path and speed.

Once the crew reached the hurricane's eye, Von Fremd reported it became eerily calm — and stayed that way for more than 100 miles across — an unusually wide eye by hurricane standards. At that point Halverson and the crew realized they had recorded the fastest wind speed ever recorded by a reconnaissance aircraft — 236 mph.

Weathering the Storm

NOAA has flown dozens of such harrowing missions so far to scope out Hurricane Isabel since it first began building steam off the coast of Africa. It may seem suicidal, but as NOAA's Sim Aberson pointed out, "We haven't lost a plane in the Atlantic since 1955."

Meanwhile, back in Ocean Park, Md., Dutton was anticipating waves would begin washing over the boardwalk with greater force and more frequency and would soon start slapping the sides of their truck.

Moving out of the way might have seemed like a good idea, but it wasn't one that occurred to this weather crew.

"Move? No, we'll probably stay right here," Dutton said with quick breaths. "It's just starting to get exciting." ■

ABCNEWS' Mike Von Fremd contributed to this report.

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