

# Q & A for NHC



## Bill Read

Director

National Hurricane Center

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**You have said that the job as NHC Director was not your dream job, but it's been a great ride.**

Oh absolutely. Most people, when they start out in their career, start thinking about where they might want to go, having a general idea. I was one of those when I was 28 years old and told my first MIC (meteorologist-in-charge) "I want your job someday". The MIC job in Houston was my dream job, it's the one I planned for and took promotions, transfers and what not in preparation for most of my career. When this (NHC) job came up, it was literally out of the blue. Max Mayfield called me up when he had decided to retire, and asked if I'd consider putting in for it. I'd never thought about even being remotely qualified for it.

**Did you apply when Max retired?**

Yeah, I was one of the candidates. I didn't get it the first go-around, but the opportunity came up again. By then, the hook had been set in my jaw, I couldn't spit it out, and so I threw my name in the ring again.

**Any regrets?**

Are you kidding? This has been an awesome experience! How many jobs do you have that will send you all around the Caribbean, put you on hurricane hunter airplanes, meet all kinds of dignitaries, brief two Presidents, and get to meet the top guns in the tropical business?

### **You trace your roots back to a “defective weather gene”?**

If you ask most of us who work in operational meteorology, I think you will find the common connection that somewhere during the early years, like elementary school, was when we first got the bug about weather, and ended up focusing that by going to college and getting a career in it.

### **How much influence did your parents have on your early fascination with weather?**

They pretty much would let me be what I wanted. My father wondered if I could be gainfully employed in that, he being an engineer. There wasn't much media exposure of the weather business then. It was still called the Weather Bureau. It wasn't like the “in your living room” capability that we have today.

### **Most of your dream job was as MIC of the Houston office.**

When I went to Houston, I thought I made my nirvana and, sure enough, I spent 16 years there. I was able to implement the NEXRAD radar - it was the fifth one on the Gulf coast. The office was spun up from a small one-city local warning office to a full-fledged forecast office, and then, as the final thing as MIC, I orchestrated a colocation of the Galveston County Emergency Management in a hurricane-resistant facility.

### **Where was your first exposure to hurricanes?**

When I was in the Navy, I flew into (1972's) Hurricane Agnes in a super constellation in the Gulf of Mexico, and then in a P-3. It was the first time Navy had used a P-3 for that.

### **Is there something that stands out from the hurricane hunter days?**

It was something totally foreign to me. I had been on four airplane rides in my life up to that point. When you went on family vacations in the '50s and '60s, you went by car. Even good-employed people like my dad did not make the kind of money that it cost to fly on airplanes back then, for the fun of it if you will. I didn't know squat about flying and I enjoyed what I did while I was there. I was basically a draft-induced welcomed enlistee into the Navy. The fact that they made me a weather officer and I got to spend four years doing that was great, but that wasn't my be-all end-all career. I wanted to be a weather forecaster at the time.

### **Was the Navy an option?**

My Navy career was marked by one outstanding feature: every job I had was done away with. Two years into the program, Vietnam was winding down and budget cuts were hitting the Navy. So, they stopped flying weather in the Navy. I was transferred to Iceland, which at that time as a 30-plus person fleet weather facility. I was there seven months when they decided they were going to cut it down to a 16 person detachment. Then they sent me down to Kingsville, Texas, as officer-in-charge. I was a lieutenant JG

and relieved a lieutenant commander, and I was relieved by an E-7. Every job I did in the Navy was done away with.

**When you first arrived at NHC as its director, were there things you set out to accomplish?**

All of the previous directors had grown up through the hurricane program. I looked at this as an opportunity to bring the flavor of weather forecast offices into the hurricane center operations and see if we could improve collectively as an agency in the hurricane program. I think, by and large, we've been successful. We got a number of product changes that meshed with those needs, and we are well underway for making a modernized collaborative technique when we get some workstation equipment during the next several years.

**The explosion of social media has had a big influence.**

How that social media gets used over the next several years is very intriguing. It's one area where we may not have to do a whole lot as far as what it costs to get it done. We use social media as a dissemination tool, letting people know what we're sending out via a Facebook and Twitter account. Well, what if we could learn in real time what is being amongst each other said in the community? For example, in Vermont during (2011's) Irene, it wasn't until after the storm that we got feedback that people underestimated the threat there, even though we hadn't. We knew there was going to be a bad flood there and thought we had communicated that threat quite well. Maybe if we could get feedback from the social media during an on-going event that indicates something other than our message, then maybe we can turn the messaging back to get the right response in a difficult situation.

**What was the best part of your job as NHC?**

For me, the rhythm of coming in every day and interacting with a bunch of energetic people with ideas and knowledge of the tropical program is the thing I will miss the most actually.

**And the worst part of the job?**

It's planning, budgets, paperwork and answering e-mail. Guess what, everyone in management will say that.

**I hear you have some plans for your Blackberry once you leave here.**

Right now, it's a paperweight. I have an old metalwood club that's holding up a garage wall back in Texas. I may tee that sucker up and give it one more swing, and the Blackberry can be a one-time golf ball.

**So, it's back to Texas?**

Our lease here is good through July first, so we'll probably take a leisurely approach to leaving beautiful Miami in the dead of summer and move back to our house which we still have in League City, Texas. The only things I know for sure that I am going to do is join the Golf Club, get a new set of clubs and some lessons on how to use them, and try to lose the 30 pounds I've gained during the past four years.

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