

A Flight on the *Wild* Side

Flying into the eye of a Category 4 Hurricane

By Martha Watkins Gilkes

Inside of the eye of category 4 Hurricane Fabian

**Who wants to go into the eye of a hurricane?
"I do!" said Martha Gilkes...**

On Wednesday September 3rd 2003, I had the most incredible experience of my life. I flew into the eye of Hurricane Fabian, a category 4 storm, with winds up to 155mph

Eight years ago on this same date, I personally experienced the powerful category 4 *Hurricane Luis* on the ground in Antigua, when the eye also went directly overhead; it caused terrible damage, and my life has never been the same since. In 1998 *Hurricane George* passed directly over

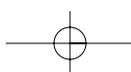
Antigua, and I went through the eye of a hurricane on the ground for the second time! 1999 brought *Hurricane Jose* with a third eye over Antigua. *Hurricane Lenny* followed *Jose* in November 1999! It seemed my destiny involved a large number of hurricanes!

HURRICANE HUNTING – the thought is sheer madness. Most people run from hurricanes...many people are evacuated in US coastal cities with hurricane warnings. However, there is one group of elite aviators who seek out storms - *The Hurricane Hunters* of the Air Force Reserve 53rd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron. This is the only such group of men and women in the world! The invaluable data they gather while exploring hurricanes provides information regarding storm movement and intensity to masses of people – and allows for evacuations to be organized.



Martha and Crew after flight into HURRICANE FABIAN

Why did I want to fly into the eye of a hurricane? There were a number of reasons; I wanted to face my own fear - having developed a severe 'hurricane phobia'. I wanted to face the hurricane on its own turf - somewhat like getting back on a horse after a fall! I felt this would help me understand and accept hurricanes and be better prepared for them. As an avid environmentalist I wanted to experience nature in her "element" and get a deeper appreciation of our planet earth. It was also a major challenge to organize. Obtaining the necessary permits and awaiting the time



to be called to fly is very complicated and time consuming, and only for the determined and strong of will! For me personally the whole process took approximately four years!

After a long wait, "my storm" was finally born on August 28th 2003, at 5 p.m. It started as tropical depression number 10, forming as it came off the African coast near the Cape Verde Islands. Following behind *Fabian* was the beginnings of the monstrous *Hurricane Isabel*.

On August 31st, *Fabian* was upgraded to a category 4 hurricane 500 miles east of Antigua. During those six days I would come to know *Fabian* well. I do storm reporting for Antigua on www.stormcarib.com so had been carefully monitoring the advisories put out four times a day by the National Hurricane Center in Miami. The northern Leeward Islands watched and waited with trepidation to see what course this monster hurricane would take. All models predicted a north turn, away from the islands which finally came. (Two days after my flight, *Fabian* hit Bermuda, causing millions of dollars worth of damage.)

On September 2nd I travelled to St Croix in the US Virgin Islands, home base of *The Hurricane Hunters*, to join the flight into *Fabian*. I was prepared for a "wild ride" as I had heard stories from The Hurricane Hunters of the turbulence encountered in such a storm. However, being strapped securely in the seat there is little chance of personal danger.

It was an incredible six hour flight. An hour out of St. Croix we encountered rough weather. We then entered the eye wall which has the strongest winds swirling directly around the eye. With tornadoes throughout the eye wall, this would be the bumpiest part of the ride. The eye wall of *Fabian* was 15 miles wide and took the C-130 airplane 3 minutes to pass through into the *Eye of the Storm* - the dead calm in the centre.

The *Eye of the Storm* was a circular wall of thick puffy white clouds which completely encompassed us, and the beauty and majesty of it all took my breath away - I felt wrapped in white cotton candy. I could look up to the top of this amazing wall at about 40,000 feet and see over the edge to the clear blue sky above, a stark contrast to the most violent sea imaginable below.

I feel *blessed* to have had this experience, as it has enhanced my understanding and acceptance of these monster storms and somehow made it easier to just get on with the business of living in an area of the world sometimes referred to as



Celebration Dinner for flight into Hurricane Fabian. Pictured on left, Lee Synder (Senior Hurricane Hunter), on right Lt. Col. Mike Odom and Martha Watkins Gilkes.

hurricane alley. Although hurricanes can cause massive damage, they also serve some positive purpose such as bringing rain to areas of major drought and relocating intense heat from the southern to the northern hemispheres. The hurricane season lasts from 1st June through to 30th November.

Martha Watkins Gilkes is an adventure travel writer based in Antigua and specializes in the marine environment and scuba diving. Her two guides are published by Macmillan Books; Diving Guide to the Eastern Caribbean and shipwrecks of the Caribbean. Two previous articles on The Hurricane Hunters for THE LIAT ISLANDER MAGAZINE can be found at <http://stormcarib.com/reports/2002/hurricane.pdf> and <http://stormcarib.com/hurrbunt.htm>

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