

Keesler Hurricane Hunters unveil new C-130J at airshow

by MSgt. Tom Allocco

The toughest weather forecasters in the world and their breakthrough new airplane were introduced when the "Hurricane Hunters" of the 53rd Weather Squadron, Keesler AFB, Miss., brought one of their new C-130J models to the Great New England Airshow August 12-13.

The aircrew and maintenance team has a lot to brag about. Theirs is the only squadron in the U.S. given the often hair-raising missions of flying up to 600 miles off the coast to track and measure hurricanes. They fly the revamped C-130J, loaded with advanced technology that will carry the proud old Hercules line far into the next century. And, in the best tradition of "Total Force," the airmen with the big job of safeguarding lives and property are all Reservists.

The Hurricane Hunters have garnered plenty of newspaper headlines and TV specials for flying into the eye of ripping ocean storms that send all other planes and ships fleeing. The 53rd Weather Squadron's profile was recently boosted when film clips of one of their planes was featured in opening scenes of the movie "The Perfect Storm," the 1990 death-dealing North Atlantic catastrophe off Cape Cod.

The squadron flies a dozen C-130s and are transitioning from "H" models to "J". During hurricane season, from June through November, they may be called out from two to 12 times to fly into storms off both coasts. Typically they operate out of St. Croix in the Atlantic and Hickam AFB, Hawaii.

"Right now one of our planes is working the Atlantic," said crew chief TSgt. Kenneth Judie, who has been out twice.

The eye of a hurricane is usually surrounded by a solid ring of thunderstorms called the eyewall, which is where the strongest winds are usually found. Sometimes the clouds and rain are so thick, the aircraft's wing tips are barely visible.

"It's a rough ride. It's a long mission, eight hours, in and out of the eye, getting tossed around. You've got to have confidence in the pilot, aircraft, maintenance, the whole team," he said.

When Lt. Col. Glenn "Doc" Stowe tells friends about his roughest day in the cockpit, he recounts 1995's Hurricane Hortense.

"There was lightening everywhere. We were a couple hundred miles southeast of Pope AFB, N.C. It was the middle of the night and we were surrounded by lightning. Just as we got to the eye of the storm we saw



HURRICANE HUNTERS — Crew chiefs TSgt. Kenneth Judie (left) and TSgt. Mark Pinkkney kept busy answering questions about their new C-130J weather plane and their squadron's unique mission.

a radar pattern that looked like a tornado and we left," Judie said.

Unpredictability makes a storm dangerous. "You can have two crews. The first flies in and six hours later the second flies in and it can be completely different. It certainly can be rough," Stowe said.

The Hurricane Hunters have been called out from Maine to the Florida Keys. Storms commonly spring up in the warm waters of the South Atlantic from Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula to the Cape Verde islands off Africa, and build up strength as they track into the Carolinas and track north.

Flying at 5,000 to 10,000 feet, the Hurricane Hunters find the eye of the storm by flying in and out. They drop a "sonde," a tube-like monitoring device that sends back to the aircrew readings of temperature, barometric pressure, wind velocity and direction. They send the information to a satellite which forwards it to the National Hurricane Center in Miami.

The Hurricane Hunters have a plane to match the mission. The most obvious distinction are the two additional propeller blades, giving the "J" model six blades which are automatically feathered on the ground.

More significant are the advanced avi-

onics which eliminate the flight engineer's job. "The heads-up display is the primary flying reference. Other planes have a HUD, but not as primary. I believe that's unique among aircraft, certainly among transport aircraft," Stowe said.

"It far and away outperforms the 'H' model. On takeoff the 'J' performs probably twice as well, in a shorter distance and faster," Stowe said.

"It's just like a new car. We took delivery in November. It still smells new," said Crew Chief TSgt. Mark Pinkkney. "I think it'll be a lower maintenance job," he said.

"It's a tribute to the engineers this nation brought up in the 1950s that we're still flying an airframe designed with slide rules, which could not be improved upon," Pinkkney said.

"But they don't fly themselves. It still takes teamwork between operations and maintenance," he said.

"Storm deployments are a fact of life," Pinkkney said. Storm season can be hard on family life, but there are rewards to being a Hurricane Hunter.

"We're proud of being unique and doing something of direct benefit to taxpayers. Because of our mission, people get better warning for preparation which saves lives and property," Stowe said.