

Stacy R. Stewart retires from federal service

Served as senior hurricane specialist and U.S. Navy Reservist



Editor's note: Stacy R. Stewart joined the Tropical Analysis and Forecast Branch of NOAA's National Hurricane Center in 1999 as a lead forecaster, and became a senior hurricane specialist the next year. Stewart is a retired 40-year U.S. Navy Reservist with the rank of Captain. He served as an Enlisted Reserve Forecaster, and as a Naval Reserve tropical cyclone forecaster in Guam and Pearl Harbor. He was called to active duty in 2007 for a 20-month period to aid in the troop surge in Iraq. In 2009, Stewart was again deployed, this time to Afghanistan as part of the 2009 troop surge in support of "Operation Enduring Freedom". Stewart participated in more than 80 combat missions and accumulated more than 3,000 ground convoy miles traversing the dangerous roads of Kabul and much of Afghanistan. He was awarded the Bronze Star Medal and Combat Action Ribbon for his distinguished service to his country. He sat down with NOAA Communications Officer Dennis Feltgen for, at times, an emotional interview about his career and retirement effective January 1, 2022.

You'd often said you wouldn't retire until it was time for the next generation to run with the ball. That time is now?

Yes it is. My body is tired. Because of surgeries and post-surgical effects, it's just harder to get up and go to work. Fortunately, we'd been able to telework from home and that made quite a bit of difference. But it would have increasingly more difficult for me to come into the office and work. If I hadn't been injured in that roadside bomb, I probably would have worked until I was 70. But now it's time to get healthy.

You're a South Floridian. Was tropical meteorology what you always wanted to do?

Being a native Miamian, one of the few from the '50s, my first experience was Hurricane Donna in 1960. We were living in Melbourne, Fla., at the time. It blew down my favorite climbing tree in the front yard. I always wondered what the top of my tree looked like, now I knew because it was on the ground. I was fascinated that the weather could do something like that. Then we moved down to the South Miami area and went through Hurricanes Cleo ('64), Betsy ('65) and Inez ('66). That kind of peaked my interest. We move to the Ocala National Forest area in 1968 and had a rare hurricane named Gladys. People there had never been through a hurricane and didn't know what to expect.

Your path took the military route.

Although I made excellent grades in high school, I didn't apply for any college scholarships and my parents couldn't afford to send me to school. My stepfather had been in World War 2 on the aircraft carrier USS Intrepid and his stories always fascinated me. So I found the best of both worlds in meteorology and hopefully see the world by joining the U.S. Navy. I became an aerographer's mate in 1973. In 40 years of active and reserve duty though, I never went to sea, but I did see a lot of the world – the jungles, the deserts and the mountains.

You're known for writing very methodical tropical cyclone discussions.

When I started working as a reserve duty officer at the Joint Typhoon Warning Center on Guam, I wanted to make myself as competent as the active duty people. I developed a systematic approach. I would start my shift by zooming out and looking first at the big picture – what's going on at the global scale. Then I'd break it down to the synoptic scale and then to the storm scale. Computer models are much better now but they are not perfect. There are times when a hurricane specialist will make a big contribution.

Why is teaching so important to you?

I've seen a lot of death and destruction in my life, so hopefully some of the experiences I've had have made me a little more attuned to meteorology. I try to teach people to look for things that are not obvious. It's the little things, not the big things, which make the difference. Pay attention to details when preparing the forecast. Sometimes the best forecast is the previous forecast. If it isn't broke, don't fix it.

What would you consider your greatest career accomplishment?

When I put out subsequent forecast through the years, I'm always thinking about the people that will be affected by it. I can honestly say, with all truthfulness, in my 48 years of forecasting for the Navy and for the National Weather Service, I never worked a shift where I said "Close enough for government work". I never did anything less than a hundred percent.

What will you miss the most?

I will miss the comradery. I worked with a lot of great people through the years. Even those that weren't quite so great, I still learned from them. And I'll miss the work. I've always been one to challenge myself in life, mentally and physically. And meteorology, especially tropical cyclone forecasting, was a great challenge.

And the least?

The midnight shifts. It comes with the job, and I won't miss it.

What are plans now?

Nothing immediate, but I want to get healthy again and be more functional. While I'm doing that, I will also visit my family. I have three children, and I haven't been able to spend much time with my grandchildren. I also want to travel the U.S. with my wife. She's from Columbia and there is so much for her to see in this country.

Any parting thoughts?

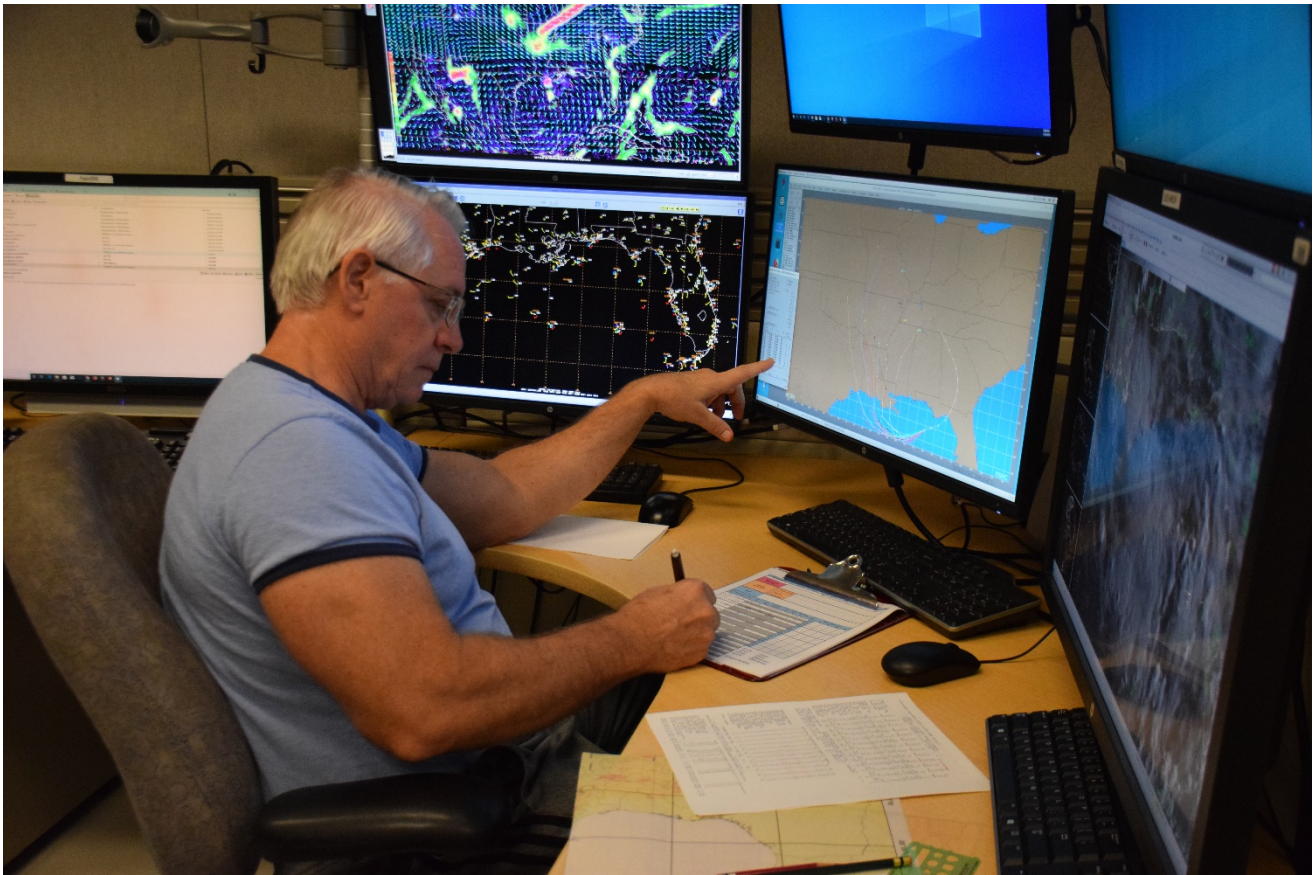
There's a great crop of new people that have come into the hurricane center here. There's good leadership too. I foresee a very promising future for the center and its remaining the preeminent organization that it has been. To work as a typhoon forecaster in the Pacific, then as a hurricane specialist at the National Hurricane Center not far from where I grew up, I just never dreamed something like that would happen to me. To me, walking into this building was walking on hallowed ground. It was always special.



Stacy Stewart provides an interview regarding hurricane preparation to KRGV-TV5 in Brownsville, Texas during the first stop of the NOAA Hurricane Awareness Tour in April 2006.



Stacy Stewart is interviewed by Al Roker on The Weather Channel's "Wake Up with Al" program, discussing his being awarded the Bronze Star Medal and Combat Action Ribbon for his distinguished service to his country, March 15, 2010



Stacy Stewart at the Atlantic forecast desk in the NHC hurricane operations area during Hurricane Barry, July 10, 2019.

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January 3, 2022