

Weather center bustles at airport

By Judith Tillman
Staff Writer

Keeping pace with swirling Diana, the National Weather Service office at the New Hanover County Airport has been intensely active.

The weather service staff, which usually works eight-hour rotating shifts, went to 12-hour shifts when Diana headed toward North Carolina. At the height of the storm threat, some men were working 20-hour stretches.

Eleven men worked Thursday, including a three-member research team.

In the NWS radar room, a narrow beam of light revolved on a dark screen, outlining the storm. Weather specialists watched the screen almost constantly, taking down information at 20- to 30-minute intervals.

In a corner, a research team from the Atlantic Oceanographic Meteorological Laboratory in Miami recorded storm data on reel after reel of tape.

"We're recording off the National Weather Service at Charleston and Wilmington, gathering research data off their radars," said Paul Bogert, a meteorology technician at the laboratory. "We did the same thing with David, Frederick and Alicia. We will be making a color film."

The research will add to knowledge about hurricanes and eventually will be used to educate the public about them, Bogert said.

Peter Dodge, another team member, flew through the eye of the storm over the weekend, before it reached hurricane strength.

The rising winds in the storm spiral occasionally pushed the plane up, creating a bumpy ride, he said.

Observers fly into the hearts of hurricanes in P-3 aircraft, Dodge said. The airplanes were designed to search for submarines, he said. They can travel long distances without stopping and can fly at low altitudes. Dodge flew into the storm

at 1,500 feet, recording location and wind information.

"It was beautiful flying in," Dodge said. "At one point it looked as if the ocean was being blown flat. It was all spray, beautiful streaks of blue spray."

In the calm eye of the storm, the ocean surface was smooth, with few whitecaps, Dodge said.

Diana's offshore stall and southwest backtracking are unusual, Bogert said. Those factors will make the storm "a lot harder to analyze,"

Dodge said. "This thing has been doing loop-the-loops. We don't know what's causing the unusual pattern."

In the room next door, volunteer ham radio operators maintained communication between the NWS office and emergency centers and agencies around the region. They also tried to answer personal inquiries from around the state about the welfare of people who weathered the storm.

About 12:30 p.m., radio operator Dwight Peay approached weather service specialist Russ Ketterman: People in emergency centers were anxious to return to their beach homes. Were the beaches safe? No, Ketterman said. He recommended that they wait.

With radar readings and wind, rain and damage reports in hand, weather service specialists in the operations room prepared their next announcement.

Ketterman organized the information and gave it to Michael Carter, a sociologist with the National Weather Service in Washington. Carter arrived in Wilmington Tuesday to help the local weather staff prepare bulletins.

"We've done a lot of study on how the public responds and what kind of information they need," Carter said. "I try to make sure we put that in."

He handwrote a statement on yellow lined paper. Ketterman typed it on a word processor and sent it out.

In North Carolina

3B ★ Duplin, Onslow, Pender: Aside from flooding and a pruning job on trees, counties to the north of New Hanover escaped Hurricane Diana's fury with minimal damage.

4B ★ Raleigh: As highway crews cleared roads and National Guard troops delivered generators to areas without power, state and federal officials flew to Southeastern North Carolina Thursday afternoon to assess damage from Hurricane Diana.

9B ★ Asheville: A Buncombe County Superior Court jury sentenced William Razor to life in prison Thursday.

