

# Fair-Weather Friend

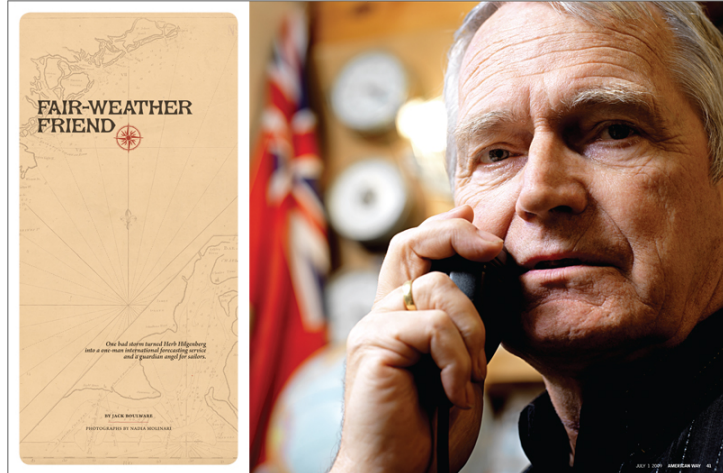
by Jack Boulware

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One bad storm turned Herb Hilgenberg into a one-man international forecasting service and a guardian angel for sailors.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NADIA MOLINARI

Down inside a yacht anchored off an island in the [Caribbean](#), skipper Jason White shows off a state-of-the-art computerized control center. He points out a marine single sideband (SSB) radio, somewhat of a sailing-instrument anachronism amid modern technology like satellite phones and weather faxes.



And then he tells me about Herb. Somewhere out there, on the frequency 12359 kilohertz, is a man named Herb who will give any boat a personalized weather forecast upon request. He's more accurate than any weather service, say the mariners who rely upon his expertise. But very few sailors even know he exists.

"He only says it once, and he talks so fast, you have to record it and listen to it later," says White, holding up a small digital recorder. "I use him all the time. But if you bug him too much, he'll just ignore you."

In November 1999, Hurricane Lenny developed south of [Cuba](#) and then moved west to east, the first Caribbean tropical storm in recorded history to do so. It would eventually smash through several islands, causing hundreds of millions of dollars in damage. Herb was in contact with a number of boats in the danger zone and immediately directed them around the Category 4 storm. Except one.



"There was one guy just sitting north of Puerto Rico," Herb Hilgenberg recalls. "A Swiss couple and their dog. I talked to him and said, 'You're gonna have a hurricane in front of you, and it's gonna approach you in the next six hours.' "

The sailor radioed back, saying, "I need to get off the boat; I can't make it. My engine's not working." In six hours, he, his wife, and their dog were going to get ravaged by a hurricane with wind speeds of 150 miles per hour and be pounded to pieces. And they couldn't move.

Herb called the U.S. Coast Guard based in [Puerto Rico](#), but they had already lashed down all their helicopters for the storm. They managed to establish contact with a nearby commercial vessel, and it was able to approach the boat and rescue the couple and their dog.

Herb says he averages 20 to 30 life-or-death cases each year. He has been providing this service since 1987 -- for free. And he does it all from his home outside [Toronto](#), Canada.



**THE REASON HERB TOOK UP** this forecasting hobby is simple: The now-retired engineer was once there himself. In 1982, he and his wife and two children set sail from [North Carolina](#) to the [Caribbean](#),

comforted by a perfect weather forecast. Or so they thought. No more than five miles offshore, their boat and 14 others were hammered by extraordinary winds, and the next thing they knew, they were trapped in storm-force conditions in the Gulf Stream, tossing and churning for five very long days.

They finally arrived safely at St. Thomas, [Virgin Islands](#), and were brave enough to continue cruising the Caribbean for six months before returning home. It was during this time that Herb became obsessed with weather and forecasts. After following a local amateur radio operator's suggestion to get a ham (amateur) radio license, Herb started giving advice and assistance to other sailors in the area. Eventually, he moved to a marine sideband frequency.

"Basically, I provided a source of information that in those days was really not available to the average sailor," Herb explains. "I was the only person. There were professional services, but nobody could afford one unless they were large shipping companies or unless you had very expensive equipment to download Navy facsimile charts."

Herb was based in [Bermuda](#) at the time and began working together with the U.S. Naval Air Station (now closed) in Bermuda and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) High Seas NWS Service. These official agencies wanted to get the "ground truth" from Herb -- what were the winds, the sea conditions? He provided up to 14,000 reports a year to the NOAA. Herb got the data from scouring all available weather forecasts; there was no Internet then. His best sources for conditions were the sailors themselves.

Herb would provide the service seven days a week, often talking to 90 boats a day, guiding them through the Atlantic waters. Each time they checked in, he asked what the conditions were at their location and then included the data to update his forecasts.



Times have changed since then. Forecasts are now easily downloadable from the NOAA. E-mail and satellite phones allow boats to communicate directly with the National Weather Service and the National Hurricane Center and to receive data instantly. Several people now provide a similar service to the one Herb pioneered, but they often charge money for the information.

However, the computerized forecasts most sailors download are still very simplified, are often several hours old, and need to be interpreted with a trained, experienced eye. That's why Herb is still on watch.

"There may be some convection activity around; there may be a trough in the area that's not being picked up. And that is where I come in," Herb says. "The people who talk to me are the ones who've talked to me for 20 years -- because they know I do not give them what they can already get."

**MOST 72-YEAR-OLDS WOULD** be content to relax and putter around the house. But Herb is definitely *not* like most septuagenarians. Incredibly, he customizes a weather forecast for each and every boater he talks to. He downloads raw data from the NOAA and other weather services throughout the world, interprets that information hour by hour, and then comes up with a detailed microanalysis for every sailor.

Seven days a week, Herb gives each of his boats a four- or five-day forecast. And every day, he asks each boat how accurate he was for that day and then revises the next forecast.

"I usually sit down at noontime to start looking at all the information, downloading the most current data, and then I start doing my analysis."

Around three o'clock, Herb finishes analyzing weather patterns. He looks at his log to see which boats are still on the water and if any new boats have checked in. Sailors know that they must call between 3:30 and four p.m. At 3:30, he turns on his radio and listens as each boat alerts him that it's on radio. At four p.m., he calls each boat back with a personalized forecast, starting with those in the [Caribbean](#) and then sweeping east toward Europe.

For example, a boat will check in, give its position and weather conditions at the time, and ask what to expect. "I might say, 'Okay, you're near the Gulf Stream, so you'll probably end up picking up a little extra current tomorrow. That should give you another extra knot or two in boat speed. Winds are gonna get light, probably shift a bit more west-northwesterly tomorrow, so if you stay in the region of that current, you'll make up for some of the loss in speed that you would otherwise have from a better wind field. By

tomorrow night, a front will approach you; the wind should start to pick up. And behind the front, you might pick up possibly 25 to 30 knots from the northwest. If that's too much for you, you may want to push a bit more southeasterly and get out of the Gulf Stream.' "

Herb will answer any questions, and then he'll sign off with, "That's it; we'll see you again tomorrow night. Have a good watch."

**HERB'S FORECASTS** are very rarely off base, and the slightest variation will prompt some immediate feedback.

"A guy once said to me, 'Herb, when's the front gonna pass?' I said, 'Maybe around eight o'clock this evening.' The next day, he came on and said, 'Herb, you were 10 minutes off,' " Herb says, giving a big belly laugh over the phone.

His peak season is between April and July. Requests ease off during the summer hurricane season and then pick back up in October through January. These days, he advises between 10 and 60 boats at one time. Numbers are lower because there are more sources of weather information; more convenient forms of communication such as e-mail, text messaging, and satellite phones; and also because of the effects of a changing atmosphere, which have limited his frequency range.

"I've never seen anything like it over the last 20 years," he says. "It's almost like there's no ionosphere. So right now, my traffic is down."

When atmospheric propagation is best, extending his radio range, Herb can cover the north and south Atlantic, as far north as Greenland, as far east as [Madagascar](#), and as far west as Baja, [California](#), and Easter Island.

People who depend on Herb sail watercraft that range from yachts to family boats to commercial vessels. Of the latter, many cross the Atlantic to deliver war supplies for American troops in [Iraq](#). Herb really has only one caveat -- you must contact him via SSB.

"I get these phone calls saying, 'Herb, I'm gonna leave tomorrow for [Ireland](#), and I want to maintain contact with you. I have a cell phone.' I say, 'I don't do that. I work strictly via radio.' That's what I enjoy. It's unique," he says. Ironically, Herb doesn't sail anymore. He and his wife will travel to visit family, but he prefers to stay home, maintaining the garden and the fish pond. And talking on the radio. "I know what it's like to be in 40-foot seas. So I don't need it anymore. But I feel like I'm on a boat when I talk to these boats. Every day. It's amazing. I feel for the boats. It's rough out there."

One added bonus of being the world's secret weatherman is that some of his contacts are actually pilots for [American Airlines](#) who tune in to his frequency. As they fly overhead, they often call him and ask for a quick forecast on the jet streams so that the plane can pick up some mileage.

"When I was living in Bermuda," Herb says, "I was flying back from [Miami](#), and the captain recognized me on the flight. He invited me to go up forward and sit with them in the cockpit -- all the way to Bermuda!"

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***From the SEO,***

*Weather class begins in September. Call or email me at 815-455-9551*

*dpdeli@comcast.net to make a reservation.*

*This is a brand new course and it will be a lot of fun.*

**David Delahunty, SN SEO**