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Newsday

COMING SUNDAY

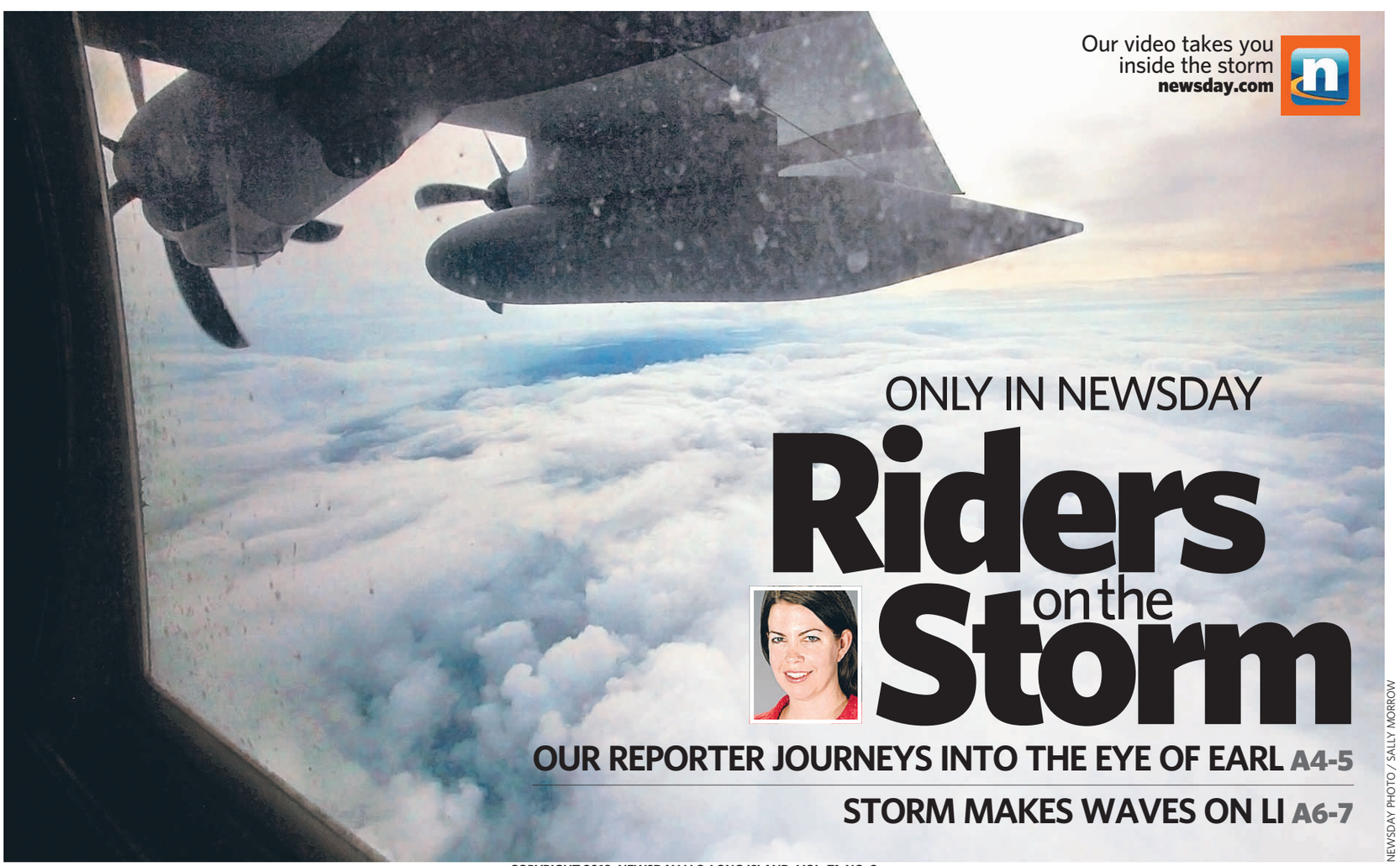
LI FOOTBALL
THE PREVIEW

MSG VARSITY

ECONOMIC BRIGHT SPOT

LI's Big Spenders

Sales-tax revenue rises sharply in Nassau and Suffolk A2-3



Our video takes you inside the storm
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ONLY IN NEWSDAY

Riders on the Storm

OUR REPORTER JOURNEYS INTO THE EYE OF EARL A4-5

STORM MAKES WAVES ON LI A6-7

NEWSDAY PHOTO / SALLY MORROW

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TRACKING EARL

THE FORECAST

SATURDAY 81°

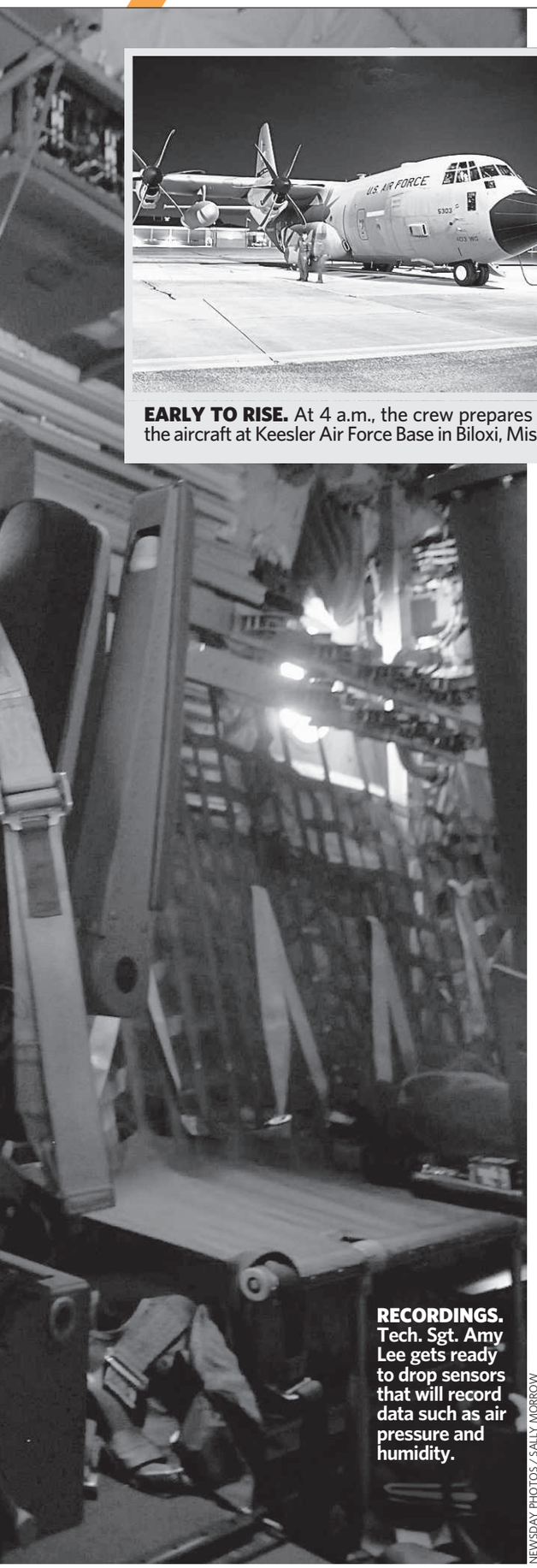
SUNDAY 74°

MONDAY 76°

TUESDAY 85°

WEDNESDAY 84°

Into the Eye of Earl



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / SALLY MORROW

EARLY TO RISE. At 4 a.m., the crew prepares the aircraft at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Miss.

CALM IN THE STORM. Pilots maneuver their way into the eye of Hurricane Earl.

NOTHING TO FEAR. Meteorologist Lt. Col. Roy Deatherage says Earl was not as strong as expected.

Newsday reporter **Jennifer Smith** and videographer **Sally Morrow** on Friday flew with the "Hurricane Hunters," an Air Force Reserve crew tasked with flying into the heart of Hurricane Earl to collect data as it tracked north off the East Coast.

Smith

Morrow

BY JENNIFER SMITH | *jennifer.smith@newsday.com*

TEN THOUSAND FEET above the Atlantic on Friday morning, the airplane ride to the eye of Hurricane Earl seemed curiously smooth for a storm that earlier this week was bent on blowing down power lines from North Carolina to Cape Cod.

"Not as strong as he wants to be," said Lt. Col. Roy Deatherage, the meteorologist on Friday's mission by the Air Force Reserve's 53rd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron, after the specially equipped aircraft passed through Earl's eye just before 9 a.m.

Some hurricanes throw reconnaissance planes around like playthings as pilots struggle to punch through to the relative calm at the center. Not this one. In fact, the plane's civilian passengers — ears plugged to drown out the deafening sound of the WC-130J Hercules' four turboprop engines — barely noticed the shift as aircraft commander Capt. Byron Hudgins left the eye and headed northwest, where conditions were supposedly the worst.

"Earl's getting a little puny," Deatherage remarked from his post just outside the cockpit.

While Hurricane Earl may still inflict its share of wind, rain and flooding in the Northeast, at this point in the morning the weakening storm was pretty small potatoes to seasoned pros such as Deatherage, who has flown 222 hurricane missions in the past 22 years.

Known as the Hurricane Hunters, the 20 aircrews that make up the 53rd Squadron spend their days during hurricane season headed straight into the maelstroms that coastal residents fear. Their mission: gathering real-time data about the strength and direction of hurricanes and tropical storms for the National Hurricane Center in Miami. Sophisticated computer software and parachute-borne sensors collect detailed measurements that are relayed by satellite to forecasters on the ground. The resulting advisories, issued every six hours, are what local emergency managers rely on to make critical decisions in the hours before a large storm hits.

This particular run was the 16th air reconnaissance mission since Earl started brewing more than a week ago. The crew members met at their home base, Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Miss., for a 1:30 a.m. preflight briefing and took off at 4:40 a.m. for the 11-hour run, a Newsday reporter aboard.

As the plane chased the storm, Deatherage sat at his station in the plane's cargo area, checking the radar and occasionally flipping through a sheaf of printed maps. Across the aisle Tech. Sgt. Amy Lee readied sensors called dropsondes that resembled cardboard poster tubes. Inserted into a launching device on the cabin floor, each 2½-pound sensor kicked into the air with an audible clunk, its descent slowed by a parachute to about 2,500 feet per minute as it recorded air pressure, humidity, temperature and wind speed and direction before hitting the water.

Hurricane missions can be terrifying, but they also involve a lot of downtime. It took more than three hours flying at nearly 400 mph to catch up with Earl, then a Category 2 storm traveling through the mid-Atlantic off North Carolina. The crew tracked the storm for the next five hours, flying in an X-pattern that crossed the eye four times and making passes through quadrants whose corners extended out 105 miles from the center.

From the pilots' talk, Hurricane Earl seemed a bit anticlimactic. "On a scale of 1 to 10, I'd give this maybe a 2," said Lt. Col. Doug Fairtrace, navigator to the six-person crew.

Still, Hudgins said turbulence felt inside a plane as sturdy and slow-flying as this one does not necessarily indicate the strength of a storm. Some flights through Category 4 or 5 hurricanes can be easier than passage through a smaller but more vertically violent storm, he said.

Hudgins pointed out the window to the roiling Atlantic far below. Weakened to a Category 1 or not, Earl was something to avoid for anyone not traveling in a modified warplane.