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WHAT AILS THE WEATHER BUREAU?

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(This is the first in a series of articles discussing the work of the Weather Bureau, its achievements, its failures and what it needs to improve its service.)

1—Meteorologists in action

Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it. This quip, mistakenly attributed to Mark Twain, might have been true when Charles Dudley Warner made it in an editorial in the Hartford, Connecticut "Courant," some 70 years ago. It could hardly be true now.

Many things are being done about the weather. In the Philippines hundreds of people from 48 Weather Bureau stations are recording all its manifestations — temperature, wind velocity and direction, atmospheric pressure, visibility, dew point, etc. — in a 24-hour watch.

Thousands more all over the world are doing the same thing, gathering all these data which are relayed to different meteorological offices where they are plotted and interpreted in the preparation of weather forecasts.

In the Philippines the Weather Bureau Forecasting Center (WBFC) at the Manila International Airport is the main meteorological office. It is the focal point of all weather forecasting activities.

And to see just how WBFC operates, let us follow its activities during the weekend of June 25 and 26 when typhoon "Olive" came and went.

On the morning of Saturday, June 25, Virgilio F. Balagot, the senior meteorologist on duty at the WBFC, was routinely plotting on a weather map the atmospheric pressures at the different Weather Bureau stations of the Philippines.

Amador Hukom, the weather observer at Catarman, Samar, reported an atmospheric pressure drop of 1.6 millibars during the last 24 hours. A drop of two millibars in one day is one of the signs of an approaching storm. Balagot called the attention of Jesus F. Flores, the WBFC officer in charge, to the report and recorded it on the map in red ink — a danger sign.

The two meteorologists at once knew that a bad weather disturbance was brewing somewhere in the Pacific, the place where more than half of the typhoons that lash the world in a year are born.

The next thing to do was to locate the disturbance, determine its strength, speed, and direction of its movement. But the two forecasters were handicapped because for days they had not had a single weather report from the Pacific area near the Philippines.

Ordinarily, these reports come from ships that ply the Mindanao-Japan route carrying Philippine logs to Japanese plywood factories. These reports are sent to Tokyo and then relayed to Guam. Guam in turn

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broadcasts these reports for all those who need it.

These broadcasts are picked up by the Philippine Civil Aeronautics Administration communications center for the WBFC. But at that time, the CAA radio receivers lacked crystal tubes and could not intercept these weather reports.

The only thing to do then was to sit and wait until the disturbance would be near enough so that Philippine weather stations could pick up more data necessary to forecast its strength and direction.

At about noon Saturday, a break came in the form of a report from the "s.s. Louise Lykes," a ship bound for Japan from Mindanao. Among other things it reported winds of 25 miles per hour blowing from the South. That confirmed the typhoon. And they christened it "Olive."

According to the meteorologists, winds of that strength are not normal for the area for one thing. From that meager report, the WBFC was able to make the following bulletin:

"Typhoon warning for the Bicol Area, Eastern Visayas and Southern Tagalog provinces, advisory for the rest of Luzon and Visayas—At 12 noon today typhoon Olive was located 200 miles east of Catanduanes. Maximum winds of 120 miles per hour near the center. Typhoon Olive is moving towards Luzon at about 12 miles per hour and will begin to affect the Bicol Area late tonight or early tomorrow. Signal Number Two is hoisted over the Bicol Area and Signal Number One over Southern Tagalog and Eastern Visayas regions. Take necessary precautions."

Two hours later, at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, weather observers Tolentino Bachiller at Legaspi City and Hukom at Catarman reported light rains. Other data, especially the wind directions, enabled the forecasters to give more definite information about "Olive." A bulletin issued at 2 p.m. stated that the typhoon was moving west northwest at 13 mph with 140 mph winds in the center.

At about this time, the WBFC requested the Bureau of Telecommunications to keep open their stations at Casiguran, Baler, Lucena, Infanta, Aurora, Daet, Virac, Naga City, Sorsogon, Calapan and Romblon so that the weather stations at these places could wire in their reports and in return receive bulletins from the forecasting center.

Because of CAA communications difficulties the first WBFC bulletin was not received at Legaspi City until 3:30 p.m. But Bachiller promptly notified the man in charge of the town siren to sound typhoon Signal No. 2. He also notified the local constabulary detachment and radio station DZAL which immediately broadcast the typhoon warning.

Bachiller also called up the office of Governor Nicanor Maronilla-Seva but it was a Saturday afternoon and nobody answered his call. Anyway, the WBFC bulletin had forwarned the threatened areas at least 12 hours before the typhoon hit them.

At 8 o'clock that evening Hukom at Catarman reported a barometric drop of 5.5 millibars. Domingo Bagadiong at Virac, Catanduanes, recorded a 4.1 millibar drop, while Juanito Felebrico at Catbalogan noted a drop of 2.5 millibars. All reported heavy rains. The bulletin at this time reported "Olive" 170 miles east of Daet with 140 mph winds. It was still moving west northwest at 13 mph.

The first definite data about the typhoon at 2 o'clock in the morning of Sunday. Bachiller at Legaspi reported 50 mph winds, while Bagadiong at