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Pioneer Storm Spotter

Weather service honors 82-year-old ham radio operator

By: Jo Sandin of the Journal Sentinel staff

Nobody at the National Weather Service could count the lives Sherman Carr saved in the last three decades, but they know that he never missed a tornado.

At the weather service's office southeast of Sullivan on Tuesday, people gathered under a dazzling clear sky to honor the 82-year-old Hartford resident who forged the alliance between meteorologists and amateur radio operators (hams) they today warns Wisconsin when the skies are threatening. His efforts were duplicated around the nation.

"There is no way of knowing how many lives he has saved because he got us the information we needed in a timely fashion," said Joe Sullivan, 35, regional warning coordination meteorologist for 14 states in the central region headquarters, Kansas City.

But Sullivan, a ham radio operator himself, said there was no doubt that lives had been saved and property protected because of the network Carr organized.

"We're charged with the responsibility of getting timely warnings out to people," said Ken Rizzo, 49, meteorologist in charge at Sullivan. "We couldn't do it alone."

Carr received a Special Service Award for helping create the ham radio SKYWARN program, which relays on-the-spot weather observations from amateur radio operators to forecasters in time to change a severe weather watch into a warning. They're the folks who translate "Looks out!" into "Duck now!"

Carr's admirers Tuesday referred to 30 years of service, dating from the 1968 official nod of approval given to Wisconsin's SKYWARN network by the service's regional office in Kansas City.

However, Carr, whose call letters are W9NGT, had formed an informal link between hams and forecasters long before the connection became a program.

"Before the Berlin tornado hit in 1954, I was watching dew points and barometer readings and they were just about off the charts," Carr recalled. "I got in touch with some other guys (on the radio) and we ran a network comparing notes for about eight days."

After that, he got to thinking.

"There might be a situation where we could do something really useful," Carr said.

Indeed they could.

By 1959, R.W. Harms, a ham radio operator and, later the meteorologist in charge in Milwaukee, had wangled a radio set for the forecasting office at Mitchell airport. Fixed to a 6 foot rack, the vacuum-tube unit was a far cry from the compact radio now occupying a corner of the computer-packed Sullivan office.

Dominic Scaffidi, 63, of Cudahy, former weather service area manager, remembered when the shortwave radio was the most sophisticated piece of technology at Mitchell, then the major forecasting station for the whole state.

In those days weather watchers based their forecasts on Teletype readouts from a World War II-vintage radar system in Madison and a slightly newer model in Chicago.

The ham unit was impressive enough in 1967 to wow new meteorologist Dave Theophilus, now 58 and meteorologist in charge of the service's Omaha, Nebraska office. He returned for Tuesday's ceremonies.

By the next year, Theophilus and Carr had worked out on-air procedures, trained operators in reporting standards and organized a system of volunteers who would feed real-time severe weather reports to the National Weather Service forecasters via a volunteer stationed at Mitchell.

"They seemed to think that the procedures were good," Carr said. "Although the severe weather criteria have changed, the procedures themselves haven't changed much."

Tom Kucharski (KA9EWJ), 33, of Elkhorn, who has expanded the SKYWARN network since Carr retired last year, said, "We're building on a really solid foundation."

Stan Kaplan, 63, of Port Washington called Carr "as much a pioneer as the first astronaut"

Kaplan is now section emergency coordinator, the volunteer position Carr held when he pioneered the SKYWARN program. For Wisconsin's emergency management network, Kaplan also serves as chief officer for RACES, Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Services.

Stan Kaplan, 49, warning coordinator meteorologist at the Sullivan weather service office, said that it was hard to determine whether Carr was the first to use the technology as a weather warning. Ham operators were relaying weather observations to government forecasters as far back as the 1930s, he said.

But Kaplan said the state's current network of more than 5,000 storm spotters has been the natural outgrowth of the system started by Carr and Theophilus.

Sullivan said: "Regardless of whether it was the first (ham-forecaster network), your efforts have been duplicated across the country."

Theophilus said: "We've reached a point at the National Weather Service when I don't think we could do our job without amateur radio operators."

Carr's wife of 57 years, Marianne, provided a non-stop supply of coffee and sandwiches as her husband sat for hours, glued to his headphones during severe weather watches.

Playing second fiddle whenever Mother Nature was on a rampage was of no concern to her, she said, explaining: "It was important to him and to everybody else in Wisconsin. He wanted people to be safe."