

Oklahoma Tornado Outbreak

May 3, 1999

A look back by Dave Lugo W5TAZ

On May 3, 1999, multiple super cell thunderstorms produced many large and damaging tornadoes in central Oklahoma during the late afternoon and evening hours. Some of these storms were killers, including the twisters which moved through or near Dover, Shawnee, Perry, Bridge Creek, Moore and the southern Oklahoma City metropolitan areas. Additional tornadoes also hit areas in south central Kansas, eastern Oklahoma and northern Texas, with over 70 tornadoes being observed across the region.

The current tornado count makes this outbreak the largest ever recorded in Oklahoma. The latest statistics show that 44 people have died in Oklahoma due to the twisters and 675 were injured. Many homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed throughout the affected areas with a total damage estimate of \$1.2 billion. Five deaths, 100 injuries and heavy damage were also incurred in the Wichita, Kansas metro area.



"The Big One" rumbled through Central Oklahoma leaving a trail of devastation nearly 40 miles long. Before finally dying out, this dangerous storm drove its' attack down the western edge of Tinker Air Force Base, finally dying just north of Tinker AFB. From there the storm set it's sites on Tulsa and every point in between was to be affected.

Though the storm has consistently been referred to as an "F5 tornado", it spent less than 10% of its' life span in the F5 range of the Fujita Scale. A F5 tornado is a tornado that produces wind speeds estimated between 261 and 318 mph. This particular storm actually touched every point from F1 to F5 on the Fujita Scale, but it spent just over 50% of its' life span as a "F4" tornado, which by definition is a tornado that produces estimated wind speeds of between 207 and 260 mph. There was some discussion as to whether the tornado entered into the realm of the so far unrealized territory of a "F6" tornado, but the F6 status has since been written off.

Nearly 80% of all storm related damage in Oklahoma on May 3rd was a direct result of "The Big One", during its track through Cleveland and Oklahoma counties in Central Oklahoma. The damage from the May 3rd outbreak is staggering, In Cleveland and Oklahoma counties alone,

"The Big One" went down in the history books as the most costly tornado in history in terms of the overall dollars and cents of recorded damage.

Mark KD5DLL has shared his prospective on the day's events with us, here is what he recalls.

May 3 1999 started out as just like any other Monday night for me. Every other Monday Boy Scouts meeting was that evening although this night it was Committee meeting night No young men, Just the adult leaders sitting around the table discussing current business for the month and telling a few stories along the way.

Someone's cell phone rang and as everyone was talking to each other the room went to complete silence when the fella with the cell phone said "there is a Tornado where?". Sure enough the report was there was a monster Tornado ripping through Oklahoma City and it was Marching straight up I-44. They were expecting it to hit the Tulsa area around 10 pm.

As you might have imagined, we adjourned our meeting and headed home. KC5BZS Bryan East was living at my house at the time and we had been out storm spotting quite a few times together in the past and also had completed the storm spotters seminar held for the past 2 years by the TARC. We knew that we needed to get our equipment loaded into the truck so we went right to it. I loaded my laptop and with the APRS running grabbed the flash light with a spare set of batteries, fresh drinking water and a couple of sandwiches. I took my kids to my parents house and kept a ear to the radio listening for updates on the storms progress.

The thing about this storm was we had hours to get ready. When we got the report that Stroud had been hit hard is when Bryan and I headed out. Looking for a good spot to wait for the monster to make it's way to Tulsa.

We decide to head over around HWY 75 and 61st S. There is a church with a big parking lot that looks over the valley to the west. We thought this would give us a good spot that we could watch for the storm as it moved through.. We sat there for what felt like for ever when we heard KC5WJE Mo with the report of a funnel over the Sapulpa's Pretty Water Lake. Then the next report was from the Creek County Civil Defense where it just passed over there building putting them out of business for a while.

With each report we would also call or parents house to keep them informed as to where the thing was. I looked over the APRS location for Creek County, the direction of the funnels travel, and our location and decided that we were in the wrong place to be. Looked like it was going to

track right over us. So we hopped back on HWY 75 and we drove a mile south to 71st S., turned around, got back on the HWY and pulled over and waited.

It didn't take long to see the Green flashes when the tornado tore through the power lines. We knew then where it was located and could move closer.

Once we cleared the rise in the road You could see the tornado when the power lines broke and the transformers flashed. As it moved in closer and crossed I-44 it hit our clubs old meeting place at the West Tulsa Library and the Fire station next door then smashing head on into the Church across the street.

As the tornado made it deeper into town you could see it with the light of town so you could track it very easily. Then for some reason it lifted and was gone. It didn't show its self again until it was east of town.

By the way if we had stayed at the church we would have had front row seats. BUT it is always better to play it safe. Thanks to Mark for his prospective on the storm.



Now we hear from Dave Ratliff, W5ATV, one of the volunteers that went to OKC to provide any help possible.

Charley, K5TTT called me, Dave, W5ATV at home about 48 hrs after the tornado hit OKC & notified me of a call for amateurs in the OKC area from

the OKC EOC & the Salvation Army. I put out a call on our repeater system for any interested amateurs that were able to go to meet me at the Town West shopping center the following morning at 1000 hrs.

Frank/W5TTT picked up the ball & stayed on the linked system all night recruiting volunteers for the mission. Our small group included Bryon / KC5BZS, Dave/KE4OPA, Mark/N7XYO & myself.

We checked in on the Edmond repeater as instructed (it was about the only repeater left standing in the area) and was told to report to the Salvation Army center near downtown. We spent the next three days providing communications and shuffling supplies to the various canteens throughout the affected areas.



We had large Salvation Army signs for our vehicles and that was the ticket to us being able to travel anywhere in the affected area. National Guard, OKC Police, etc. would wave us right on through any and all roadblocks where no one else could get through. Yes, I got lost several times, but someone would talk me through on the radio.



I must relate one story which I will never forget. After dropping off a load of ice to one of the canteens, I was winding through one of the worst hit areas and a man flagged me down in front of his severely damaged house. He said "wait here just a minute" went back in and returned with a huge jar of quarters he had been saving for a "rainy day". He insisted that I take it back and give it to the Salvation Army. I told him he looked like he might need them himself. He said (quote) "Hey, My family is ok and I've got good insurance-give this to the folks who need it" I have no idea how much was in that jar, but it was substantial.



It's times like that, that make me so proud to live in America. The Salvation Army provided us with meals and rooms. They were very grateful for our help and I gained a whole bunch of respect and gratitude for their organization.

It is almost impossible to describe the devastation. Entire neighborhoods were literally swept off the foundations and some had disappeared. An automobile jammed halfway into the ground in the middle of an open field. One wonders how long it was in the air and where it came from. It was quite an experience but I hope to never see anything like it again.

73, Dave W5ATV.

Me, I came through the day with no problems at all other than taking about ten years off my life due to worry. I have family in the Oklahoma City area that lost everything but their lives. Today they are still living in OKC and thanking God every day for the precious gift of life.

Thank God the tornado lifted just as it crossed the river here and did not touch down until it was the other side of Tulsa. Most of us know where we were May 3rd 1999, some of us had our noses in the television, others were listening to the radio, and still others, way to many of us, were fighting for their lives during the worst tornado outbreak to hit the state of Oklahoma in history.

Today in Oklahoma City life goes on. People that were there when "The Big One" ripped through the various towns in Oklahoma will not soon forget that terrible day. When ever we see dark clouds on the horizon or hear the warnings on the television, it's hard not to think of the most terrible tornado day in history.

When an event of this magnitude comes around, it burns a memory in our minds that we will eventually pass along to our grand children by saying, "I remember the tornado of 99".

As we enter another tornado season in Oklahoma's tornado alley, let us remember the past and prepare for the future. Someday, maybe soon or

maybe not so soon it will happen again. After all, we do live in Oklahoma, the state known as the Heart of Tornado Alley!

DE W5TAZ