

A violent tornado “success” story

At 11:00 AM on Tuesday July 13, much of northern and central Illinois was put into a Tornado watch. A single, large supercell developed in far northwest Illinois at the time the watch was issued. This storm was moving southeast into a very unstable environment (and had a lot of similarities to the Plainfield tornado of 8/28/90). About 3 hours later, a shower developed in western Woodford county on a boundary that came from the large supercell. Within 20 minutes, this storm was showing signs of becoming severe. A Severe Thunderstorm Warning was issued by our office at 2:29 PM. At that time, the NWR alarmed in the business office of the Parsons Manufacturing plant. The Emergency Response Team (ERT) leader of the facility was immediately notified. A few moments later he walked outside and noticed a rotating wall cloud with a developing funnel cloud. He radioed back to the office to institute the company's severe weather plan. Someone from the accounting department went on the plant's PA system and announced that everyone should go to their designated storm shelter, and that it was not a drill - this was a real event. Three months prior, the plant conducted one of their semi-annual tornado drills successfully - everyone got to their shelter in less than 4 minutes.

Similar to the drill, everyone calmly went to their designated shelters - all 150 people in the 3 buildings of the plant. While they were doing this, we issued a tornado warning at 2:34 PM. At the same time, a county spotter reported a tornado 1 mile northeast of Metamora - about 4 miles west-northwest of the facility. The ERT leader had enough time to check on all three shelters to make sure that everyone was there. He took one final look and noticed that the tornado was heading right for the facility, and was less than a mile away. He ran to the closest tornado shelter, about 1.5 minutes before the tornado destroyed the plant at 2:41 PM. When the tornado moved out of the area, the employees emerged to see the destruction - the entire business was heavily damaged, beams were twisted, parts and machinery were strewn everywhere, and more than 50 autos were launched into the buildings. The most startling thing was that no one at the plant was killed OR injured. ALL 150 people were accounted for.

The company owner witnessed a tornado damage the business he was working at 30 years earlier. Shortly afterwards, when he built his own business, he was concerned that a tornado could strike again. He did not want to take any chances, so he built the restrooms to also be tornado shelters with reinforced concrete walls and 8" thick concrete ceilings. These "safe rooms" made the difference between life and death for 150 people that were caught in the middle of an F4 tornado with winds estimated to be up to 240 mph. This case was proof that having a plan, practicing the plan, and implementing the plan SAVED lives. It also shows that they saved lives, and gave themselves extra time to go to their shelters by responding to an SVR!

In all, the tornado was 9.6 miles long, 1/4 mile wide, and had a life span of 21 minutes. It also affected a half a dozen farmsteads, with no fatalities and three minor injuries. Let me know if you need any additional information.

Chris Miller, WCM
WFO Central IL