

It's Just What We Do

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Severe weather is a way of life in Oklahoma. In the comm center, we look upon the storm season with a mixture of anticipation and dread. Several tornadoes have impacted our county directly in the last nearly fifteen years so it is not new to us. We discuss, we practice. Still, you never feel quite ready when the real deal is finally here. Nothing can really prepare you for the things we dealt with the last two weeks of May 2013.

May 18, 2013, was the celebration of my fourteenth year with the Cleveland County Sheriff's Office. I reflected on how much I've learned and how far I've come. When I started in 1999, I missed the historic May 3rd tornado by just a couple weeks. Since then we have had tornadoes in 2003, 2010, and 2011 in which I was in Dispatch and actively working.

The 2013 storm season had been blessedly quiet up to that point, unusual for Oklahoma. The good thing about being in Tornado Alley is that we have some of the best meteorologists in the world right here in our own backyard. The tricky thing about severe weather is that you never know just how severe it is going to be but we have grown accustomed to receiving threat analysis at least a day or two ahead of a big storm. The weekend of May 17-19 was no different.

As the Communications Manager, I have learned to keep a close eye on the weather. I utilize various sources, including local meteorologists and social media. I am still learning to discern those who are imparting solid information that should be considered closely and those who are not. All sources unanimously agreed that weekend would be **the** weekend for significant weather.

By now my dispatchers know the drill. They have all been through this at least once, most of them twice. When it looks like tornadic activity will impact our county, I am in Dispatch—no matter what. It becomes an all hands on deck sort of situation. They check in to find out if they need to report or sit tight and wait for the call.

May 19th was one of those afternoons. A tornado had already touched down in a heavily populated city to the north of us. While the local news media was covering that, they seemingly lost track of the storms to our south that were moving our way because they weren't an immediate threat. I kept my eye on the weather radar app on my phone and recognized a hook echo—indication that a tornado was trying to form. I made my way to the SO to play the waiting game.

I have learned that if you wait until a tornado touches down to start calling personnel in, then you have waited too long. Nothing can really prepare you for the inundation of work that comes with a tornado: phone calls, radio traffic, sometimes the loss of communications, systems, phones, etc. We are a small dispatch center with only six dispatchers and me, the supervisor. As the storm approached and the situation became dire, I called in two other dispatchers to join me and the dispatcher on duty.

When the storm finally crossed into Cleveland County, we balanced tracking the deputies as they went in service with their locations and the track of the storm. As the tornado touched down in the center of our county, we began calling out locations and recording information the deputies were giving back to us. An initial command post was identified and became a rallying point until the storm had passed through and we could start moving units up to examine the debris path.

In the meantime, we were starting to get 911 calls saying complete neighborhoods were gone, we were calling out all available personnel that hadn't already reported, and we were trying to scramble ambulances to an accident involving a deputy who had been hit by a driver fleeing the storm. It was chaos.

In a crisis situation, time becomes a vacuum and you lose all sense of it. At some point I got called out to the new command post, the one set up in the damage zone. I left dispatch in the hands of my most senior dispatcher, knowing that they had it under control. Sometime during my commute (and traffic was horrible, it's times like that when I wish I had lights and sirens too!), Dispatch took a power hit. We could only run radios off a secondary channel and they lost pretty much all other capabilities. The same

thing happened during the 2010 tornado and we had to rely heavily on personal cell phones. Of course, when that sort of natural disaster happens, it knocks out cell towers and the system quickly becomes overrun, so even that becomes tricky. Once on scene, we dispatched out of the back of the Chief of Operations' command vehicle.

Dispatching from the scene of a critical incident is a whole different beast from our normal, everyday jobs. It's about managing resources, triaging calls, tracking units. It's dispatching on a grander scale but in a concentrated area with ten times the stress. When you have entire, heavily damaged neighborhoods blocked off by high tension power lines, search and rescue becomes very tricky. You have residents who become hostile because they can't get to their property or family in the zone, even if it is for their own safety. You have media. You have the dreaded lookie-lous. All impact what we are doing as dispatchers.

By around 0130, our command trailer was on scene and set up but we still had no real form of radio communications. It was hard to go home to catch a couple hours sleep, knowing there would be no dispatcher out there. The knowledge that even had I stayed, I'd be useless until they could get communications up and running didn't really ease the anxiety.

Sleep was practically impossible but had I known what was coming, I certainly would have made a better effort. I returned before 0700 to find things running smoothly. It wasn't the command staff's first rodeo either and they knew exactly what needed to be done. The morning was spent dealing with road openings and road closures, media, citizens who wanted in, the general public who needed to stay out, and making sure deputies that were posted were getting adequate breaks for food and water, which was sparse.

By early afternoon, we had much of the damage zone opened up and were preparing for what was being touted by meteorologist to be an even worse weather day. We were all aware and wary but honestly, it seemed impossible that another tornado could hit our county the day after an F4 swept through. By 14:00, we were packing up gear and loading into patrol

vehicles to get out of the command trailer because everyone knows, trailers aren't safe in severe weather.

Our main dispatch center was still without most of their communications ability. I paired up with a patrol captain and we found a hill to occupy while we attempted to stream weather coverage from our phones and then eventually his MDT. This is where social media played a huge role for me. When we had no other way to monitor the weather, my personal Twitter timeline became a Godsend. We watched and commented on the storm brewing to our southwest, talking about how it was following the same path as the May 3rd, 1999, tornado had.

We watched helplessly as the storm became a monster. I was concerned for my child who was still in school, honestly praying that she would be safe and feeling so helpless because I was stuck in a police car with no way to get to her if something happened. It didn't occur to me at the time that if something had happened, that's where we would be headed. For me, it was the first time that I didn't have my family situated before I headed in to do my duty and I caught a glimpse of how the deputies must feel when such things happen.

The tornado crossed over into our county, first hitting far southern Oklahoma City before moving into Moore. It seemed to go on for hours. I know now that it was on the ground for approximately 40 minutes but I remember thinking that tornadoes can have up to 300mph winds yet this is the slowest thing I've ever seen.

As it moved into Moore and damage reports started to come in, we ran code across the county. I had an old map book, a notepad, and a pen. I did my best to keep track of units and locations as we followed the path on the map page. We could not make sense of the sporadic information from the weather report we had streaming and what deputies were telling us. They seemed to be too far apart to be accurate. Later I learned that it was because the tornado was 1.3 miles wide and the information we were receiving was accurate.

The captain looked at me as we were about to make our final turn west and head directly into the damage

zone and asked if I had ever seen the damage from an F5 tornado. Honestly, I hadn't except on TV. He told me to brace myself and while I scoffed a bit at that in my head, when we crested the hill, it was like nothing I had ever seen. Cars going both directions as far as you could see, dark black smoke rising in the distance, this haze in the air, and nothing but destruction along the horizon. That was the first time I got it. Reality would break over me in waves over the next several hours but there was no shield, no distance, no sterile observation from my office desk, no seeing just the aftermath. I was in it.

Cars parted like the Red Sea as we made our way west. It just got worse the further in we got and there was nothing untouched. Everything had damage in varying degrees. There was debris everywhere. Our initial rallying point was the Warren Theater. It was as close as we could get to the worst of the damage and was some place I was very familiar with. We visit the Warren often; I trained at a park track down the street for months.

When we got around to the north side of the parking lot, the second wave of reality broke over me. What used to be a bowling alley was flattened to a pancake as if it had simply imploded on itself. A medical center looked like a bomb had gone off, cars piled in the parking lot like debris might catch and gather on a log in a stream. On the other side of the street where established neighborhoods had been there was nothing. Not a single house left standing. There was nothing but rubble.

The single hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life was stay in that patrol car while I watched people running toward the damage to start rescuing trapped citizens. Because of the storm, our main dispatch had lost everything—no power, no phones, no radios. I was it. It was critical that I stay put and direct and track units to the best of my ability. Because I was there, every single deputy could put their efforts into search and rescue and that is exactly what they did.

As I watched bloodied people walk around dazed while others ran full out in a panic, my deputies went into a living hell and did what they had to do. Some of the things they had to do were unspeakable. Stories I heard in the coming days will never be repeated because they're just too horrible. I witnessed

the men and women of my department acting with such valor not even realizing they were doing anything extraordinary. "It's just what we do," I heard over and over.

Eventually we moved about a mile south and established the command post we would occupy for the next week. It became a situation where we had to move our command trailer from one disaster area to another. Once again we dispatched out of the back of the chief's command vehicle until the trailer got there.

Because this was a large incident, the ICS system was utilized and it was needed. I have never seen so much law enforcement in one place...ever. We had people from all over the state and eventually would get help from out of state as well. There is no way that all of it could have been coordinated without Incident Command. They coordinated everything. Every shift, we would have command staff personnel designated as a liaison and all things would flow through that person and ultimately through incident command.

Within the first day and a half, all structures had been searched three times. When you hear that, you probably think house to house or grid searches. Keep in mind that there was a 17 mile path of destruction, much of which was nothing but piles of heavy debris. To have everything searched three times and all people accounted for seemed nothing short of amazing to me. As the days got longer and volunteers began returning home, looting became a problem. Damaged areas were broken down into zones and were patrolled as such. This was maintained for the duration of the operation.

Without Incident Command, I'm not sure that things could have run as seamlessly. I wish I had taken the opportunity to go see the main command. Looking back, I can see how well it worked. Perhaps it was lessons learned from the 1999 tornado or the overwhelming outpouring of generosity, but I can't imagine something so devastating going any better than it did.

That said, with every incident, we learn how to make things better. We are still waiting to have our department-wide debrief but I have a few

observations that I will bring up. During the first tornado, we had some issues with ambulances and mutual aid that will need to be addressed. We need to establish when it is okay to cross the chain of command to call out personnel. That doesn't sound like a big deal but in the heat of the moment when you grab a book and just running down the list, it can become an issue. It's a minor detail but one to address just the same.

The biggest issue for us to address is the phone calls. We need to have one central person who can keep a running list of Good Samaritan callers that can eventually be turned over to those focusing on disaster relief. In hindsight, I wish I would have catalogued all our resources so we could have managed them better. The information we recorded in the first hours of the second tornado was no longer valid six days into the incident. We were super with the short term resources but we can definitely improve how we deal in a long term situation.

The final thing that I would improve is something that I should have been responsible for in the very beginning. Our CAD system worked intermittently in main dispatch and the MDT I had access to was even more sporadic. We had many, many welfare checks come through immediately after the first tornado. We contacted a lot of people and many of them were stoic and refused to leave their heavily damaged homes. As the hours wore on the next day, we received a whole different round of welfare checks called in from family members further away. Many of the welfare checks we had to do over "just in case" because we had no central documentation that they had been done already without access to a computer. While it didn't tax us in this situation, it could be an issue in another incident down the road.

Overall, I feel incredibly fortunate to have been a part of this. I saw a system run the way it should. Practice, debriefings, discussions—they are tedious and we all whine about them at some point but they work. I saw deputies who lost everything having to be forced from their posts to go take care of their personal lives because they felt the need to continue serving their community. I saw an outpouring of human kindness that I cannot put into word, generosity beyond measure, and hope that is indefatigable. I

saw people coming together, just doing what they do, to help others in a time of such utter devastation that I don't think we'll ever be able to truly grasp it. Above all, I am reminded why I am here. Why I chose to be a dispatcher all those years ago. Why I continue with the tedious daily tasks that bog me down some days. When disaster strikes, in whatever scope or on whatever level, we are ready. We've all taken on the same challenge to do and be our very best when the rest of the world is falling apart because we can. It's just what we do.