

Twister on the Ground

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In the early evening hours one day in January 1999, my family lay huddled in the hallway of their home in a small town 30 miles northeast of Little Rock, Ark. They wondered if they'd survive the quarter-mile-wide tornado bearing down on them with winds up to 206 mph.

About 80 yards before reaching their house, the deadly twister veered to the east as quickly as it had threatened them and struck my brother's high school, which was about 100

yards away. It continued into the heart of town, killing three, among them an infant who was blown from his house. Churches, businesses and homes in the town of 5,000 were ruined, their remains strewn in the trail of the storm's fury. Damage amounted to the tens of millions of dollars.

My father's town was the hardest hit by the storm system, which moved across Arkansas that day. The system spawned 63 tornadoes during a 12-hour period and claimed 10 lives.

Everyone needs to understand that these powerful and largely unpredictable forces of nature can form almost anywhere in the country. You should know what causes these storms, where and when they are likely to strike, and how experts predict them. Most importantly, you should develop and implement a basic disaster plan and understand the precautions you can take to survive a deadly twister.

If your family is well-prepared before the first warning sounds for a tornado, your chances for survival are better. A successful plan includes preparation for other dangers that often accompany twisters, such as flash floods, winds and large hail. You also must realize that collapsing buildings, flying debris, or panicky attempted escapes by automobile usually cause most deaths and injuries during tornadoes.

Quick response is the key to surviving a twister. Hold drills each year and find the area in your home that will provide the best shelter. Practice going there in response to a tornado threat. Learn the difference between a tornado watch and a tornado warning.

Have a survival kit ready, complete with non-perishable foods, at least three gallons of water per person, a manual can opener, a flashlight with extra batteries, and a first-aid kit. You'll also need comfort items, such as pillows, blankets and sleeping bags. Don't forget to include a portable battery-operated

radio, essential medicines, cash and credit cards, and sturdy shoes. Candles aren't recommended because they often cause fires after a disaster. You should maintain a smaller survival kit in your car, in case a tornado strikes while you're away from home.

Another critical item for your survival kit is an NWS weather radio, which you can set



Photo courtesy NOAA Photo Library

to turn on automatically if a tornado watch or warning is issued. Most electronics stores sell them for about the cost of a pair of shoes. For more information on these radios, check the web at www.nws.noaa.gov/nwr.

You also should develop an emergency-communication plan to re-unite family members if they are separated during a tornado. Use a realistic, daytime scenario, with the adults at work and the children at school. Identify an out-of-state relative or friend to act as a family contact. Calling long distance after a disaster often is easier than calling locally. Everyone in the family should know the contact's name, address and phone number.

Before finalizing an emergency plan, check it with the Red Cross or your local government's emergency-services department. The nearest Red Cross center can be found on the web at www.redcross.org.

Finally, consider getting your community more involved and better prepared. You can help by asking your local newspapers to publish emergency tips and information. Enact a “help your neighbor” program at local schools to encourage children to think of those people who need special assistance, such as the elderly, infants or people with disabilities.

What do you do once a detailed emergency plan is in place and a tornado threatens your community? In case the NWS weather radio doesn’t warn you in advance, be familiar with the typical tornado-danger signs, such as a dark or greenish sky, large hail, a wall cloud, or a freight-train-like roar. Some tornadoes are clearly visible, while rain or clouds obscure others. They often occur near the trailing edge of a thunderstorm. A cloud of debris may mark a twister’s location if you can’t see a funnel. Before a tornado hits, the wind may die down, and the air may become very still.

If you’re at home when a tornado threatens, immediately go to the basement, storm cellar or lowest level. If your home has no basement, go to an inner hallway or smaller inner room without windows. A bathroom or closet is a good option. Go to the center of the room, and stay away from windows. Avoid room corners because they tend to attract debris. Try to get under a piece of sturdy furniture, such as a workbench or heavy table, and hold on to it. Protect your head and neck with your arms. Ignore the myth that opening windows will equalize pressure and reduce damage; such actions only allow damaging winds to enter your home.

If a tornado approaches while you’re at work or school, go to the basement or hallway at the lowest level. Avoid rooms with wide-span roofs, such as auditoriums or cafeterias. If you’re in a car at the time, never try to outrun a tornado. Pull over, get out, and seek shelter inside a building. If you can’t do this, lie in a ditch or other low area away from the car.

Once the tornado has passed, help the injured and trapped people around you, and give first aid to those who need it. Don’t try to move seriously injured people unless more dangers threaten them. Remember your neighbors who may need special attention. Turn on a radio or television to get the latest information, and stay clear of damaged buildings. Wait for authorities to declare a damaged structure safe before entering. Use the telephone only for emergency calls. Don’t forget to clean up spilled medicines, bleaches, gasoline, or other flammable liquids.

Check for gas leaks. Open a window and leave immediately if you smell gas or hear a hissing sound in a building. Call the gas company. Inspect the area for electrical damage, and turn off the electricity at the main-fuse box if you see sparks or broken wires. Don’t step in water to reach a fuse box; first call an electrician. Check for damaged sewer and water lines. If water pipes are damaged, contact the water company, and avoid drinking tap water. Try melting ice cubes if you need safe water. Finally, take pictures of any damage to your house or your possessions. You likely will need these photos for your insurance claim.

Those who have lived through a tornado remember the intense horror they felt. Although the best technology available may offer only about a 12-minute warning, you can take steps to be prepared for the destructive forces of tornadoes. A common problem with many people is disbelief; they don’t feel their community will be hit. This notion can be deadly.

Know the severe-weather threats in your region, and protect your families by developing an emergency-action plan. My family was only 80 yards away from disaster when the tornado inexplicably changed course and spared their lives and their home. The community, however, wasn’t as fortunate. ❏

The author was assigned to VAW-117 when he wrote this article.