

Chase Day: May 5, 2007

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I had been watching this system for the last several days. As the weekend approached, it looked like it would be a massive storm with several days of severe weather possible across the Central Plains.

On the night of May 4, 2007, a massive tornado descended upon Greensburg, KS, completely wiping out the town. This tornado was rated an EF-5...the highest rating possible on the new Enhanced-Fujita Scale...with winds above 200 mph. This was the first EF-5 since the EF scale went into effect and the first F5 (old scale) since the tornado that struck the Bridge Creek, OK, and Moore, OK areas on May 3, 1999.

I was nervous watching today's system develop. The highest risk area was also the same area that was devastated the previous night. After getting cleared from work, I wrangled together my former college roommate, Thomas Norman V as a chase partner...6 years to the day of his first and only storm chase with me. I really did not get to storm chase last year, so this was my first storm chase in almost two years. The high risk area, the long drive, area with no road options, severe potential, and chase rust on my part would prove to make Cinco de Mayo 2007 interesting.

Target: Coldwater, KS

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Location:

Southwest Kansas

Miles Travelled:
730 miles

Total Time:

19 hours

Chase Partner:

Thomas Norman V

11:00am CDT (1600 UTC)

I left my house and went to pick up my chase partner, Thomas, at his apartment in Tulsa. We were roommates for five years of college, but he only went chasing with me one time six years ago to the day...May 5, 2001. The only other time I went to Kansas I had a really good tornado day, so I thought that fact, and that I was chasing on Cinco de Mayo with "Cinco de Thomas" would be a lucky combination. After some delays, we finally made it out of Tulsa by about 12:00pm CDT (1700 UTC). Being a left the house, I made a target of Coldwater, KS. I expected several rounds of initiation along the dryline before the real action started, so I wasn't worried about missing the action. We headed east on US-412/Cimarron Turnpike, north on I-35. Once we reached Wellington, KS, we exited I-35/Kansas Turnpike and headed east on US-160.

4:00pm CDT (2100 UTC)

We arrived in Medicine Lodge, KS, somewhere around 4:00pm. We decided to stop and refill the gas tank, since it looked like this would be our last major stop before chase action, and there is a pretty big gap between towns in SW Kansas. We also checked some data while we were there. Some storms had started fire along the dryline and were moving north-northeast into Kansas from the Oklahoma panhandles. Most of these storms were quickly dying as they moved off the dryline.

I talked to my friend Gerard Jebaily. He was with his crew to our north in Pratt, KS. I was also noticing on radar that the dryline had stalled, and had started retreating. I was not encouraged with this outlook. About that time, Matt Patterson, a friend and fellow chaser for KOTV in Tulsa pulled up next to me at the gas station. We discussed how things were panning out and debated killing time in Medicine Lodge and getting something to eat. I received a call from my old chase buddy Kyle Mozley in the Marshall Islands, he was advising me

to head back into Oklahoma where the best shear, instability, and convergence was. So, I decided to make the move back south to Alva, OK..

BREF1 from KDDC at 4:07pm CDT (2107 UTC)

Checking the radar, I could see that the dryline had stalled, and even started retreating. That wasn't a good sign. But, if you look at the screenshot, a bulge in the dryline started to form just north of the KS-OK border. Upon seeing that, I knew things would get going quickly. A storm developed northwest of Medicine Lodge, and was soon TOR warned. We were only 4 miles south of Medicine Lodge at this point, but the storm's speed and direction prevented us from catching it.

A new storm began developing right off the dryline bulge, so we decided to head west to Coldwater on US-160 in an attempt to intercept it. We lost our data connection, and we weren't really hearing much on the ham radio about the storm. We got a call from Matt Patterson. He was only four miles north of Coldwater with a tornado on the ground.

6:33pm CDT (2333 UTC)

As we moved north to rejoin Matt, we briefly saw Tornado-1A (i.e., tornado #1, from Storm-A). I

Two-panel view showing BREF1 and SRV1

from KDDC at 6:33pm CDT (2333 UTC)

during
Tornado-1A.

was unable to get video due to dust and driving. We reached Matt and continued to watch the storm moving north and south as need be to keep a good position on the storm. We did have a nice view on the wall cloud as it moved northeast towards us (2.5MB).

We let the wall cloud and precip core move across US-183 and followed it north. I began to get worried because it was going to pass very close to Greensburg...and had a history of producing tornadoes. Greensburg was devastated the previous night by a massive tornado (later rated the first EF5 since the new EF-scale went into effect) killing 10 people. I was also worried because US-54 going east through Greensburg was closed. Once we reach Greensburg, our only options would be to head back to Coldwater and east on US-160 or north to Kinsley and east on US-50. Both roads were about 20-30 miles away.

7:15pm CDT (0015 UTC)

As we continued north on US-183, we began to cross the damage path from the previous night's EF5. (4.4MB) . After seeing this damage, I was worried about what I find should I have to get closer to Greensburg. While still in the damage path from last night's tornado, a brief tornado (Tornado-2A) touched down about 4-5 miles due east of us...approximately 2-3 miles SE of Greensburg (4.1 MB). This tornado was very brief and only lasted about 15 seconds. I didn't even have time to get the tripod out of the car. After this tornado occluded and dissipated, another tornado (Tornado-3A) touched down in approximately the same area. (4.9 MB). Again, this tornado lasted about 1 minute.

Two-panel view showing BREF1 and SRV1

from KDDC at 7:14pm CDT (0015 UTC)

during Tornado-2A.

We now had a tough decision to make. We had try to figure out a way to get around Greensburg. All the side roads were mud, so our options were slim to none. We stopped at the intersection of US-54 and US-183 just west of Greensburg. We debated going north, but we would be driving right into the cores of more severe (potentially tornadic storms). We could head west to Dodge City and eventually drop back south and west, but that would put us straight into the severe squall

line. We could go back south to Coldwater, but a new tornadic cell had developed between us and Coldwater, and we would not safely avoid the storm.

We decided to try the roadblock. I put on my media ID and approached the roadblock. I talked with the Kansas Highway Patrol and Kansas Dept. of Transportation guys for several minutes. I explained that I was not trying to shoot a story or sightsee, but I was just trying to get out of the way of them and the next storm. One of their squad cars was headed to the other side of town and he agree to escort us over there. I am extremely grateful to them.

I've seen tornado damage before. You see it all the time on TV. However, I've never driven through any damage worse F1-F2. I have also never been through an area immediately following a storm that caused fatalities. I'll simply say that it was a very humbling experience (4.3 MB).

We made it through town just fine and headed to east to Pratt for fuel. However, this is only half of the story. Some of our friends got stuck on a dirt road northeast of Macksville about the time we spotted Tornado-1A north of Coldwater. They spent the next 5 hours having some very close calls with tornadic storms. After departing Greensburg, we went to a hotel in Pratt to wait out the storms. Tornadic cells were between us and them, so we had to wait. The hotel let us use their WiFi to watch the radar. It was a very tense 2 hours watching the storms pass close to them on GRLevel3. I'm not really going to go into details of my story because to be honest, it's not mine to tell. In the end, they made it out of the mud, we met up with them east of Macksville, and we finally started the drive back to Tulsa around 11pm CDT (0400 UTC). We made it home at around 5am (1000 UTC) the next morning...the Sun was coming up when I finally got in bed.

SUMMARY:

This probably had to be one of the strangest chase days ever. It was the first time I had chased in two years. To not chase in that long of a time and still manage to bag three tornadoes on the day...that was really good. That's a much better success rate than why I used to chase every chance I had in college.

Wound up really being a witness to history as I experienced the aftermath of the Greensburg EF5. Had some friends get themselves into some serious trouble, but they made it.

Overall, it's not exactly a chase day I would like to repeat. A 19-hour chase day, and I wound up with severe weather in my neck of the woods the following day. The good things that came from the day was seeing three tornadoes over open country...that I could do again. Here's hoping it's not another two years before I get to go on a real storm chase again.

Oh yeah, my record in Kansas remains perfect, also. I think my old chase partner, Kyle Mozley, said it best, "Kansas has been good to you." Now, if only I could see a tornado in Oklahoma.....

Final tornado count for the day: 3

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