

Chase 99
By Nancy Bose

M.E.S.O.
Who we are:

MESO, (Multi-community Environmental Storm Observatory), was formed by a group of storm chasers that met on the Internet and chased together for 10 days during the peak season in Tornado Alley. The truly amazing thing is that not only did we chase well together, but we also became fast friends. Most of us left Tornado Alley last year (1998) believing that we had just been a party to the coolest venture ever. Those of us who were already storm junkies had renewed dedication. Those of us who weren't already storm junkies were now. Our team leader, John Bender, who has been with skywarn since its inception, is a skywarn instructor in Illinois. He contacted me some years ago as the result of a posting I made on the storm chasers homepage. As a result of the dialogue that ensued, we began to entertain the notion of chasing in the great plains. As the plan grew, we decided to make a go of it...but to do it as a team, hand picking a select group of people with particular skills and abilities. What resulted was the team we chased with last year. There were varying degrees of experience and knowledge, but we made sure ALL the bases were covered.

We returned from a great 10 days with a solid team not willing to let it be a one time experience. To many of us, though, chasing simply for the pure joy of chasing was not enough. Many of us saw a need in our local warnings systems for much of the technology we had used for our recreational chase. ...to use all our combined talent, energy and experience for purely recreational chasing seemed somehow shallow and self serving. We wanted to stand for something, to be able to share what we had learned and what we would learn about the pursuit of severe weather. We had enjoyed such a high success ratio on our first trip - it was apparent that the systems and procedures we used WORKED.

We formed MESO, and continued to recruit people based on interest, ability, knowledge, and experience, but this time with the desire to share our successes and our failures with any interested agencies. We shifted our motivation from that of chasing to that of becoming an research group. We have also launched an in-school program wherein we educate youngster about the wonders and dangers of weather.

Our main focus this year had been to design and build a mobile research lab. A vehicle from which we could forecast, track, and chase. This vehicle became a reality. As it developed, more than a few of us found that such a vehicle could be useful in aiding local spotter groups....with its ability to not only track the storms but track the chasers and keep track of where each person is in relation to the storm, the value such a system could would be immeasurable.

The team:

Well, we have people of varying talents and abilities. Our team leader, John Bender, with more experience in chasing than I can even conceive...over 30 years. We have a meteorologist, an atmospheric physicist, a medic, a few electronics experts, a mechanic, some navigation specialists, a photojournalist, a videographer, and some communications people. Almost everyone is also either an advanced trained spotter, a skywarn instructor, EMS coordinator, and experienced in the pursuit of severe weather. We have a strict chain of command, and each person has certain duties they have been delegated to.

Storm chasing is dangerous, and can be tedious:

We spent years preparing ourselves for this expedition. The 10 days we chase together represent hours of preparation and study, study, study every day. We do not advocate ANYONE pursuing severe weather without similar preparation, and without at least one experienced chaser with them. Anyone wishing to become involved with such an undertaking should be willing to "pay the dues" necessary to do so intelligently, professionally and safely.

As I recall, the cart came somewhat before the ox in the case of the forming of MESO. Sure, we had tossed the idea around to form a research group, involved in applying new and different technologies used for chasing in the work of public warning. We had already discussed how great it would be to design and own an ultimate chase vehicle - instead of renting an RV like we did for our first chase. As the dream grew, we discussed how valuable such a vehicle would be not only in chasing, but in the work of public warning. A totally mobile lab, capable of cell phone and satellite communication on the road. Our chances of acquiring that van would improve 100 fold if we were a legitimate non profit group. We hastily put together the necessary ingredients for becoming non profit - such as bylaws, officers, etc. In the interest of time, these things were more or less put together more by group consent than actual vote...but everyone seemed content.

The paper chase involved in filing for non-profit status is unbelievable. Things did seem to progress, if every so slowly...but the ambulance was going on the auction block within weeks. Nonprofit or not, if we wanted it we'd have to bid on it like anyone else. Unfortunately, we got out bid...considerably. This would have to be classified as an D4 on the MESO disappointment scale.

It wasn't long before another van became available. This one was another retired ambulance, but not the box style which would be ideal. Everyone chipped in what was available, the guy owning the ambulance gave us a big break price wise, and the deed was done. We owned a 1991 Dodge 1 ton van with an ambulance conversion. It took over 500 hours to get the equipment installed, the repairs made, the systems running...all done by John. This was a labor of love - and the final tab was quite a bit in excess of the funds we collected for the

project. Dreams come dearly, and such a vehicle was the fruition of a 30 year dream for John, who emptied his pockets more than a few times to bring the van from concept to reality.

In addition to the ongoing challenges of providing the federal government with what THEY considered to be proper paperwork, the company that sold us the van was dragging their heels about producing a title to the van. Without a title, the van could not be registered, insured, or driven. Ultimately, under threat of civil and criminal prosecution, the title was produced and the van registered...but valuable time had been lost. Three weeks before the chase, and the van had not had a proper shake down cruise. A few problems manifested and were fixed, as I sent out an SOS to the membership, and all available pockets were once again emptied. We got down to the wire...a few days before chase time...and the van was ready to roll.

Throughout the year, we had tried to retain as many of the original chase team as was possible. There were some that were unquestionably in for the long haul...one of two we worried about. Also, we wanted to add qualified members. Finding people with the desire, the time, the interest, the and the money to be active participants in the group as well as join us on the team chase would be enough of a challenge. To add to this equation our desire to add people who could bring "something to the table" in terms of abilities, talent, and knowledge made the search even more of a challenge. Also, we wanted people we felt we could get along with...so personality and character came into play also.

In addition to having certain "qualifiers", we had to establish certain "disqualifiers". Each member of the chase team, for example, would have to be over 23, fully capable of doing each of the tasks involved independently of the others in an emergency, and in sound mental and physical health. This required that some hard decisions be made as to who could chase and who could not. One of our people had been suffering for years with panic/anxiety disorder, and it was far from being under control. By her own admission, she could not travel as much as 5 miles from her home without getting an attack. We offered as much support as we could throughout the year, but as chase time approached, there was no improvement - not enough, anyway. At first, I'm sure she thought we were being horrid by telling her that unless she was "under control" she'd have to stay home...but eventually, she came around to understanding that to go on such a venture with such a condition was beyond ludicrous. She remains a member of MESO and hopefully will be able to chase with us in the future.

Others came and went. The first "newbie" we acquired was John Griswold from Kentucky. Grizz was an active member in skywarn, had computer savvy, and early on, started working tirelessly and with tremendous dedication to the organization. Grizz very quickly went from being "the new guy" to a key member

of MESO. That he had mechanical and electronic expertise (as well as a heavy duty club cab pick-up!) was merely sauce for the goose.

Later, we latched onto Chris Howell, a self taught meteorologist from Ypsilanti, Michigan. Chris very quickly proved that he could hold his own with any forecaster in the country. Yes, he is self taught...but this independent study spanned over a decade, sometimes as much as 7 to 10 hours a day. Chris knows his stuff. When we informed him that he was voted to attend the chase, he let out a whoop that was heard for 1,000 miles.

Ken Meehan was a young meteorologist who works for Accuweather. Though Ken didn't become a member of MESO, he was added to the chase team as a tag-along. He had no real field experience, but had shown definite forecasting abilities.

Carole Frei was a weather enthusiast from Colorado, who seemed keen to go on board both as a MESO member and a chase team member. She had good basic wx knowledge, and actual chase experience. At first she had a few issues with the precision with which we had organized MESO and its chase procedures, but a few thoughtful explanations cleared that up early on.

Steve Chambers had tried to organize a team himself, in Ohio. He met with a lot of frustration, as we did in the early stages. Seems like not everyone who claims they want to chase REALLY wants to chase. This revelation was not new to us. Steve proved to be an energetic addition to MESO, and a delightful and tireless worker.

Last but not least, was Markus Binapfl. I had seen Markus on the Storm Chasers Homepage, but had glossed over him countless times due to his lack of experience with severe weather. I was concerned that someone with so little actual experience might have a misconception of what chasing really was...hours and hours of staring at data, and still only a remote chance of "scoring". I referred Markus to a number of commercial chase organizations, but his name just kept popping up again and again. That sort of endurance and singleness of purpose should not go unheeded. We signed Markus on last winter.

Jill Borden and I have been corresponding since the days the John and I assembled the chase team that was later to become MESO. Her job wouldn't allow her to chase in 98 or 99, but she has been a staunch supporter from the start. When we incorporated, Jill was elected as a trustee and reserve board member. She will be with us for Chase 2000 if I have to drag her by her hair. (I hardly think such measures will be necessary...wild horses couldn't stop her now!) Jill has selflessly helped us throughout the year, in whatever capacity was needed. That she would open her heart (and her checkbook) so often and so

generously KNOWING she didn't have a prayer of going on the chase stunned me. The debt we owe Jill can never be repaid...but we're gonna try.

With the new people, and those we were able to retain of the old team (all but Bill Steigerwald) we went into the spring feeling more or less secure that our plans were firm. HA!

The first wrinkle in our finely woven fabric was that Markus was having going through some business adjustments in Germany that made it look like he wouldn't be able to make it. Grizz had just found out that his family was moving to Florida about the time of the chase. Two horrible clouds on the horizon. We had scarcely gotten over learning that neither Dave Ott or Bill Steigerwald couldn't come, when up pop more problems. After a few tense weeks, both Markus and Grizz echoed what is now probably the unofficial MESO mission statement - "Screw it! I'm going." Crisis averted.

About this time, we had discussed the possibility of sharing our chase, via the Internet, with other chasers. We started to compile a list of people with an interest (either professional or otherwise) in severe weather. Unfortunately, due to a miscommunication, these invitations went out in a mass mailing....a spam. We made a few enemies, but gained a few friends. At any rate, they knew who we were now.

The next wrinkle in the fabric appeared about that time. Grizz had broken his ankle fighting a fire. After nearly a year of planning, he was out. No way could he go. Within days of hearing about Grizz, the van started having ITS problems as well. And within a few days of that, Allan twisted his knee and was on crutches. It gets better. After sending money to Illinois to assist with the van repairs, I was "down to it" financially. If I didn't spend one more cent, I could still go chasing. So what happens? My car was nearly totaled by the worlds largest deer as I returned from the gas station. Damage? \$495...just under my insurance deductible. That night I got online to moan about my misfortune...only to find out that Brian McNoldy had been reported missing in the Rocky Mountains for 14 hours. The above has got to be the single worst week in our existence. Funny thing was, never once did we even consider shit canning the chase. Grizz couldn't go...but the car was repaired, the van fixed, Allan swallowed his pain, and they found Brian. As we approached the final week, I think we all figured we had used up all our bad luck. We even had some GOOD luck. Dave Ott had rallied, and would be chasing with us once again. That last minute development made all the BAD luck seem minimal.

As I packed up and prepared to drive to Bradley Airport in Hartford, CT...I had the very best of feelings that all our trials were over - even though Ken had sent me a last minute E-mail indicating that fair weather and clear skies were on the agenda for the next 10 days in tornado alley. After all, every silver lining has a dark cloud!

Remote chasing:

Many of us had been involved since early spring in what I named "Cyber Chasing." We would make our outlooks and forecasts in advance, then meet in the PM and see how accurate they may have been...tracking severe weather events as they occurred. On just such an evening, we were watching Oklahoma...when the huge cell that became the OKC F-5 tornado was born. It became a grim reminder of what we are doing, what we are about. For more than a few days, we followed the breaking stories with horrified fascination.

We got more than a bird's eye view of what happened there...Allan Detrich was there covering the story. We got Allan's pictures and stories even before the press did, and they were powerful. Allan is a mega award winning photojournalist, and he's seen just about everything. Even he was awed by the terrible devastation and losses of OKC, and was not unhappy to leave there.

After OKC, Allan was in the mood for a little pre-chase chasing. Our Cyber chasing was about to take on a new complexion...we actually had a "piece" on the game board. As luck would have it, just as the day's action was starting to pop, ALL of our weather pros were off-line. It was only me, my cell phone, and poor Allan. Now I'm a pretty good chaser, and a very good spotter...but I make no pretense of having the abilities of people like Brian, Chris and John. It was a case of the cheerleader calling in the plays. I didn't get Allan killed, and I did manage to land him in the same area that the Weather Channel had sent their crew...but nothing but a few t-storms hit. All and all, I felt I did OK. Later in the day, when others were on to stand watch, I realized that I had just spent all of mothers day staring at radar and talking on the phone.

The Chase, Day 1

It's Not a Job, It's an Adventure

We got off in record time on Friday morning...which usually means no longer than 1 hour past the time we had set. I really liked that hotel; the people were friendly, interested in what we were doing, and anxious to help in whatever way they could. This was a scenario that would play out time and time again. People couldn't help but notice McWar, and naturally curiosity would invariably overcome natural reserve. People couldn't resist taking a peek, and were generally fascinated with it, us and what we were doing.

The Grand Am was packed to capacity, as were the other vehicles. We set off for Oklahoma City with two way radios installed in each vehicle-something John was quite insistent on us having. I was to mentally thank him 1,000 times over for these. They proved to be a valuable, no, an essential asset. There was, of course, some confusion remembering what everyone's official handle was. I

believe I was Charlie 3, but for the life of me couldn't then and can't now remember the others. John had them listed on a sheet of paper in all vehicles, but more often than not I cheated and used the vehicle call signs or the people's actual names to summon them on the radio. Short term memory dissipates at an alarming rate after age 40. Heck, for three days into the chase, I was still calling poor Steve CHRIS!

Last year we made a vow NEVER to go back to Oklahoma City. We were lost for hours there, and actually had to employ the use of Global Positioning merely to get out of a PARKING LOT while there. I'm sure that the roads make perfect sense to the locals, but to a stranger, driving in OKC is paramount to serving time in hell. However, there we were, headed there with all due speed.

Just outside of OKC, we started to develop transmission glitches in the van. As the rpms rose, we realized that she was locking up in a lower gear, and in danger of overheating. John called for an immediate slow down, but we were hopeful that the condition was temporary. And, as luck would have it, with only an hour to go till we got to the hotel, the group separated. With the choreography of a finely trained chorus line, half of us went to the left and half to the right. It was beautiful. Of course, going to the next exit and turning around IS NOT an option in OKC. With an unspoken attitude of "each man for himself", we continued.

Ironically (right?) the path the Grand Am and Allan's Blazer took led us to one of the most heavily impacted areas from the May 3 tornado. As McWar and Brian's jeep were trying to get back on route to the hotel, we were drawn to the damage area. Had to look. Had to see.

Pictures to not even begin to capture the horrible devastation that unfolded before us. Massive ruin spread out for miles ahead of our mini-convoy.. Allan had been in OKC covering the aftermath of the horrific May 3 F5 that had leveled so many neighborhoods, so we had SEEN some of the best photos available. However, even Allan's magic was not capable of telling the whole story. Allan commented from OKC when he was shooting that it was a horror. He was there when the people were still there, rooting through the damage, looking for...something. The desperation and trauma rocked him soundly. Now, weeks later, a different feeling seemed to prevail. The people were gone. Their homes, abandoned. As we looked out over what reminded me of the pictures of the aftermath of Hiroshima, I was overcome with a feeling of hopelessness. So many personal things, the accumulations of many lifetimes, we rudely and callously strewn about. What impacted me most was the one home that had raised the American flag, which flew bravely over the ruin that had once been their home. That one simple gesture moved me to near tears, at the same time filling me with immense pride. I felt certain that these people, at least, would be back. In the shadow of that flag, though, was a small flowered memorial, marking one that would not be back. The gamut of emotions, I imagine in all of us, ran wild.

As I wandered through the wreckage, I recall thinking that everyone who aspires to pursue severe weather should be REQUIRED to gaze on such a scene. More than anything I had ever experienced, it taught me that this thing that we chase IS NOT a friendly playmate, and that this thing that we do IS NOT a game. Regardless of whatever cavalier attitude we chose to chase under, we should never forget that at any time, the tables can change and the chasers can become the chased. Regardless of what talent, ability, and technology we chose to employ, the red centered radar images we follow can turn in an instant into a home wrecking, life taking beast that knows no rules and shows no pity.

Those of us that were there that evening, dealt with what we saw in whichever manner we could. It was filed away in some vast mental folder for thought and review at some future time, and we continued to do what we originally intended to do: chase as many of these storms as possible, and learn from them as much as possible. First order of business - find out where the hell the rest of the team was!

Eventually we got back on the road and headed toward the motel. It wasn't long before we reestablished radio contact with the rest of the convoy. Despite the fact that we had made a slight side trip, we hadn't ventured very far out of radio range of each other. It seemed by some stroke of good fortune, that we were all on the right road, all headed for the same destination. Incredible.

The Forecasting:

That night at the hotel, we made a plan to have the van checked out the next day, and began forecasting in earnest. Not having the meteorological expertise of many of the others, I used primarily data that had already been compiled by IWIN, SPC, and NWS. Who am I to question. Others wanted to compile their own data, analyze it, and make outlooks accordingly. When we have discovered that by compiling data and analyzing it separately from each other, by whatever means, and then discussing why we feel we should do this or do that, we are able to come to a good decision of just what we should do and where we should go. We include everyone's input, even the guy who "just has a gut feeling".

It was about this time that we began to notice that there was a decided difference in the attitude of those who had chased before and those that had not. However, in all instances but one, the newer people gave deference to those who had the actual chase experience. There always seems to be one individual who wants to rush headlong into something he knows very little about, emboldened by a few years of book knowledge that he naively holds to be irrefutable. There is no point in rushing in to what is not yet happening or that which has already happened.

The other "newbies" had exceeded our expectations by a tremendous margin. Markus was, as mentioned, a knowledge sponge. He devoured text and tutorials

that would have taken me weeks to digest. Steve was a very stabilizing force, also eager to learn, eager to help out in whatever capacity, setting an example of patience that at times put me to shame. Chris learned AND taught. He exhausted himself trying to make sure we knew everything we needed to know about developing conditions. These guys fit right in with the rest of us, and we immediately and completely enjoyed them. It is the hope of us all that they will become "lifers".

Just as the sun was going down, we spotted some huge towers to the north, and an immense anvil, which was glowing in the setting sun. The sight was so magnificent, that if that were all we had seen on the entire trip, I would be content. The sky is no bigger in the great plains than anywhere else on the planet, but you can just see so much more of it. Its like a living text book, changing each hour, displaying a new lesson. I was quite caught up in it all, as were many of the rest.

I think one of the things that draws me back to the great plains time and time again is that it is one of the only place where one can find true solitude. There are spots there you can stand gazing out into space for hours without the rude glare of distant city lights or the intrusive beams of headlights. It is singularly the best spot on the planet for THINKING. One becomes aware of things like stars, warm evening breezes, sunsets, and silence....options almost everywhere, but standard equipment on the plains. Solitude, by my definition, CAN be shared with friends. It would, I believe, be called "being alone, together." Many times, one or two of the guys would join me for my late night "gazes". As is often the case with good friends who share a certain something in their hard drives, this was more a shared moment in time, and its import and significance became multiplied when it was divided.

The Chase Day 2
Van Problems:

The first thing we did Saturday morning was to revisit the damage site Allan had led some of us to the night before. The area we had been in was restricted, and I felt very strongly that McWar should not tread over that line. Personal vehicles, OK. I feared, though, the bad press that could ensue if our corporate vehicle should be discovered where it didn't belong. It would be a field day for our detractors.

Allan found me a piece of bark that had been literally sucked off a tree, intact in its circumference. I stashed it in my already burgeoning suitcase....wanting to take with me something for the site. I imagine that every time I look at it in years to come, I will think of OKC and what I saw and learned there.

There were no overwhelming indicators of severe weather, but to combat the restlessness of the team, we decided to give it our best shot. We headed

northwest, led by mildly intriguing LI's and adequate CAPE for the possible development of severe weather. We pretty much knew that the chances of seeing anything were slim to none, but staying put made our chances even less than that.

John had sprayed down the linkage of McWar with Slick 50, hoping that our tranny problems were merely mechanical. Just outside of OKC, we started to overheat. Fortunately, we were near an exit, where we pulled over to analyze the problem. A rest stop and a bit of coolant were all McWar needed for the time being. We combined the van cool down with a lunch stop, where I bolted down a cup of coffee and went out to discuss with John what our next move would be. We decided to continue on, in a somewhat more cautious (and slower) mode, trusting to the Storm Chase muse to keep us running. I felt badly for some of the others, as I could sense their growing concern with the problems we were having with the van. I did my best to stay upbeat and manifest an attitude of confidence, but it was becoming an effort.

Throughout the year, when organizing the trip and planning the budget, I always played out the "worst possible case scenario." More than one of these scenarios involved the "what if" concerning the van acting up. Simple mechanical problems go hand in hand with a shake down cruise, and I had anticipated a few. What I hadn't anticipated was that the shake down cruise, due to title problems and our inability to get the van plated till quite late in the game, would be ON THE CHASE. These problems I took in stride...shit happens. What I couldn't take in stride was the disappointment and restlessness of the others. I have this stupid habit of claiming personal responsibility for everything that happens in my sector of the planet, and this chain of events was no exception. I moved from genuine concern, to intense worry, to a more livable attitude of numbed resignation. We would continue to do what we had done for over 2 years...to play the hand we had been dealt the best we could. WE continued.

We stopped en route to have the van checked out by a technician, and he seemed to confirm John's diagnosis. Later, we noticed that every time we went over a significant bump, if the tranny was locked, it became unlocked. If it was unlocked, it would lock up again. This was how we proceeded to Clinton, Oklahoma. Also, to prevent overheating, we lowered the speed and continued to run without air conditioning.

Conditions in Clinton didn't pan out, no surprise to any of us. We stationed ourselves for a few hours in the parking lot of a convenience store, watching the clouds and the radar. We were in the area of highest probability, it's just that the highest probability wasn't that high. I picked up some more tranny lubricant, and made a small (\$20) donation to disaster relief at the Parts Store on behalf of MESO. Then, resigned to another day of "no joy," we found lodging for the night. Later, we were lured out on the road to view some marvelous supercells maxing out somewhere over Colorado. We were cheered to know that at least

somewhere, stuff was happening. Even from a distance, these cells were marvelous...classic.

You Gotta Eat, Maybe:

Whatever depression we had undergone quickly dissipated as we set about to fulfill MESO's secondary priority...finding food. Unfortunately, Geoff became the brunt of the evenings' merriment. We were in junk food heaven...a fast food place at every intersection. However, nothing at any of these places suited the palate of our esteemed videographer. Starting at Long John Silver's, we went place to place, looking for a reasonable compromise. Poor Geoff was fading fast, as each menu offered nothing that wasn't fried, sweetened, or loaded with poison. Chris, in the firm belief that we would stave to death, had abandoned ship at a Burger King a few stops back. Why we finally decided on a Dairy Cream is beyond me...probably desperation. After an in depth interview of the counter person on the ingredients and methods of preparation of the available fare, Geoff decided on chicken fingers. When he was presented with a plate of triple fried barely identifiable morsels of what was once chicken, complete with grease gravy...he turned a deathly shade of green and left quickly. I believe he was headed towards the local supermarket.

As badly as we felt for him, we couldn't resist the opportunity to have some fun. We played out numerous scenarios of Geoff wandering for days in the supermarket, looking for that one container of yogurt ordered in error years ago. By the time we left, we were in stitches. "Yes sir, we have yogurt! Would you like that deep fat fried, pan fried, or butter fried?"

Meanwhile, back at the ranch...once again, McWar had become the center of attention. So many people had dropped by to check her out. It did my heart good to know that other than unforeseen mechanical headaches, she was everything we hoped she would be. So many times, people would say, "Oh, I've seen you guys on TV." We are not now, nor have we ever been the "TV people." However, I realized later that what people really meant was that they had seen people LIKE us on TV, so I conceded that small point, and let folks believe what they wished. It was great fun seeing the van and the team get all that interest and attention. I decided it was a moot point that nothing like McWar had EVER been on TV, or even in tornado alley.

The Chase Day 3:

Looks To Be Headed For Wakita Head On

Free continental breakfast. The nectar of the poor. Nearly every place we stayed had a free continental breakfast. The phrase, "You get what you pay for" was coined by someone who had just eaten a free continental breakfast. This usually consisted of coffee, coffee mate, and a Dunkin' Donuts closing hour special from the night before. Yet each morning, I would haul my still tired

bones to the office, and sustain myself with the free continental breakfast. This particular Sunday morning, we left BEFORE I could get my free continental breakfast, though, as we headed to south central Kansas.

It seems to now be a tradition to stop by Wakita, Oklahoma. Of course, we're much too professional to go out of our way for such a blatantly sentimental venture, but it happened to be on our way, so.... (OK. If Wakita were anywhere within 200 miles, we would find some way to justify it being "on our way". We love that little town.) Wakita had its 15 minutes of fame in the movie TWISTER, a flick that impacted us all. So many chasers put the movie down, hastening to say, "its nothing like the real thing". Bullshit. OK, so maybe a lot of it isn't. Hey, its a movie. Do you think people would have lined up at the box office to watch a bunch of possessed weather nuts study lower level convergence, upper level wind profiles, and radar images for hours, with only a remote hope of even seeing a tornado from a distance? Sure, they took liberties. They had fun. They made money. Is TWISTER like the real deal? Well, it is if you consider it from the point of view of the camaraderie of the road, the sharing of a dream, the utter joy in being able to do what you want to do most in the world. Yeah, its pretty damned accurate. However, if you engage in storm chasing because you think you're going to run into about a dozen twisters a day, survive an F5 by tying yourself to a pipe, and get to hang around with Bill Paxton and Helen Hunt...then no, its not very accurate. Just depends on your point of view. So though it is considered very uncool to even admit to liking the movie, we all did...a lot. Next time you hear a chaser going on about how silly it was, ask him "Yeah, but how many times did you SEE it?" If he answers any less than 25 times, he's probably lying.

When we first went to Wakita, we acting like a bunch of little kids in Disneyland. There was some sort of victory in just FINDING Wakita. Its a tiny microdot of a town in north central Oklahoma...right in the middle of what would be glorious chase country. Its so flat that you can see forever. One gentleman there told us that in the 20 years he had lived there, he had seen over 200 tornadoes. Each and every person was warm and friendly, interested in what we were doing, and thought Helen Hunt was snooty.

This year, going back was still fun...but we didn't spend nearly as much time and only took a few shots of the water tower. I smiled at the "first timers" and their mixed reactions. There were those who had the "I can't believe I'm really here" look, and those that had the "Why in the hell are we here" look. So totally different from the reaction from those who had been there the year before. The veterans had the "I can't believe I'm really here AGAIN" look or the "Why in the hell are we here AGAIN" look.

Wakita didn't have even an open gas station; let alone breakfast. We continued east to find that NO ONE was open for breakfast. We ended up laying siege to a Wal Mart in Alga. I purchased about 500 donuts for \$3.00, some Diet Dr.

Pepper, some Niches with chili, and a few other gourmet delights. The others made prized purchases as well. We combined our treasures for what was probably the most bizarre parking lot buffet ever!

From Alga, we progressed to Medicine Lodge, Kansas. We had stayed in a little place there the year before, and felt that would be a good place to stop and gather some data. Last year, the owner had warned us that we were probably wasting our time hanging in Medicine Lodge; the twisters always hit north of (route) 70 or down in Oklahoma. One day after we left, his motel was hit by a tornado. He lost a concrete wall, a picnic table, and gained a ton of rubbish and debris. We joked that he probably held US responsible. At any rate, we enjoyed our stay there, and were anxious to return.

Medicine Lodge, A Tough Call:

The cell phone connections to the Internet were unusually difficult to maintain, and we were dying to tie into a land line. Not knowing if and where severe weather was to hit, gathering data was critical. Also, we weren't really sure if we'd be staying in Medicine Lodge for longer than a few hours...depended on the data and indicators. I waltzed into the motel office with the intention of renting a room for a few hours, and using their RV hookup for McWar. I was going to make them an offer they couldn't refuse.

Much to my horror, the woman recognized me immediately. "You're with those STORM CHASERS, aren't you" she queried. "Us, why...yes, I am. I'm surprised that you remember us..." I responded. "Of course I do.", she said. "You brought that tornado. Honey, this is our busiest weekend of the year, and we SURE as heck don't need to see YOU again"

I would have been mortified, but when I looked up from staring at my sneakers, I saw that she was smiling warmly, and looked genuinely happy to see us all again. Yes, they would let me have a room for 4 hours...only \$15 bucks. Secretly, I was very glad that the woman was familiar with our mods operand. A lot of places might have raised an eyebrow at a 47 year old woman arriving at a motel with 10 guys and asking to rent a room for 4 hours. I'm not sure my reputation could stand that sort of a boost.

Here Comes The Storm:

Again, indications were that severe, but probably not tornadic, weather was on its way...and we didn't have to move from the very spot we were in. Fortunately, there were almost enough rooms to accommodate us right there...only Allan and Dave had to find a room elsewhere (just down the road) As the storms grew nearer, a few of the guys wanted to ride out and intercept them; get some lightening shots, perhaps. My feelings on night chasing, particularly without radar backup, are all too well known, but I really wanted to go with them. I

stayed, however, with John, Chris, Brian, and McWar...hopeful that by cell phone connections, we could keep the others out of harm's way by monitoring the radar at base, and steering them around anything that looked heavy duty. It turns out we didn't miss a thing...except some hail the others had to drive through. It came right to our doorstep in Medicine Lodge.

We at base were treated to the most marvelous show imaginable. We got to watch the storm move in...with a tremendous and totally visible gust front ahead of it, complete with lightening, wall cloud, updraft, some momentary funnel clouds....and didn't have to venture any further than across the road. It was quite dark, but storms have a marvelous personality after dark. So much of what is missed in the daytime is visible at night. From what we heard from the guys out in the field, they were having fun and games as well. We had a few tense moments when we couldn't contact them by cell phone as the storm was intensifying...and once we did, a near hysterical newbie hung up on us...but Allan had the situation as under control as he could, and followed all the proper safety precautions he had learned the year before; keeping the vehicles turned away from the storm, running, and well lit. He kept in contact as well as he could, but I knew that one and all were out and away from the cars...and totally wrapped up in the magic unfolding before them.

One humorous aside. At base, our viewing area was right in the middle of a cemetery. We trod over the hallowed ground of the revered veterans about 100 times...careful not to disturb anything left during the day by visitors. (Memorial Day weekend, remember?) Anyway, someone had placed a large black flag on one of the graves...it was down and I couldn't see it. A tremendous gust lifted the flag right in front of my eyes! It looked exactly like something rising from the dead, and I shrieked and went weak in the knees for half a second. I laughed at myself for my foolishness, but took great care to avoid that particular area of the cemetery for the rest of the night.

The guys got back to base just as the storm was hitting us full force. We all quickly took shelter in a few of the rooms, but were far from calling it a night. We tracked the storm as it passed over us, and well into the night as it intercepted a line of storms just to our northeast. The two squall lines met and merged like a giant zipper closing. It was fascinating to behold, but difficult to divide our time between the magic in the skies and the magic on the radar screen.

Though we hadn't scored a tornado, we had scored. Spirits were high, and they soared even higher when we discovered that the outlook for the next day was even better than it had been. I don't recall falling asleep that night, but I'm quite sure it was in front of a computer with a scanner in my hand. Some days are just too good to surrender up easily.

The Chase Day 4:
In The Land Of OX

After a really energy charged night the night before, you would think that we would have all slept late...but almost everyone was up at the crack of dawn. I think that in most of us, we just "knew" that today was going to be special.

As mentioned, Allan and Dave had gotten lodging in a different hotel in town. It seemed that their accommodations offered much more than ours did. Even though the place we were at was my sentimental favorite, I could not ignore the fact that the little inn was far from ideal for our purposes. First of all, there were a lot of problems with the phone lines. Every connection we made, I felt we were in danger of screwing up one of the computers. The rooms certainly did show their age. Every time a door was opened, unidentified flying objects simply poured into the rooms. There was no pool, no stores or restaurants within walking distance, and the complementary breakfast left much to be desired. It took very little persuading for us to consider a move to more luxurious digs...particularly when the rooms were \$5 a night cheaper. I felt horribly to defect, as the people were so nice, but you have to do what you have to do.

Happily, the people at the new hotel were just as nice and helpful as the folks at the other place. Allan had also hooked up with a few local gentlemen who showed an inordinate amount of interest in our troupe, and wanted to tag along for a few days. PRY is always in the forefront of what we do; good and friendly relations with the locals - we said, "Sure." They were really nice guys...a father and son, and it never hurts to have someone with local "juice" along. They knew the roads, the people, and were associated with not only the local press, but the local PD.

We got the van happily situated in the new hotel...parked it close to one of the rooms and borrowed electrical current and the phone line. We set up the room I was in as the forecast room, and within seconds, Chris had set up his computer and started gathering data with Ken and Brian. John and I gathered the data we needed from the van...I actually looked for excuses to find work to do in it. Its capabilities hadn't even been tapped, due to the mechanical problems we had been battling. I found it to be a more than capable work station, and the more I stayed in it, the more "at home" I was with it. SPC had highlighted the entire western portion of Kansas and Oklahoma as having high potential for severe weather later in the day. The wx team in the room concurred. There was a pretty significant indication of thunderstorms, possibly severe, possibly tornadic.

We had a firm plan for the day...to monitor into the afternoon, and deploy as indications dictated. We had established much earlier in the year the operations guidelines for deployment. The forecast team would get us to the general area, and then the angle of approach would be determined by Command (John) the head of forecasting, (Brian) the head of safety (me) and the Road Master (Dave). Since there was nothing to really chase yet...we would monitor throughout the day, and move when necessary.

This allowed us a little time to play. Some of us continued to forecast, some of us did some spot vehicle maintenance, I worked on our daily newsletter, and a few caught up on some sleep. First, though, was the call of breakfast.

We were situated next to a homey little greasy spoon that seemed to be doing a brisk business, so a few of us went over to check it out. Sure enough, it was the place where the locals gathered...the food was decent, the prices moderate...and the company; well, lets call it interesting. I ordered a plate of biscuits and gravy...enough to feed about 6 people. It was one of those rare meals that tasted good for about the first four bites, then went downhill rapidly. By the time I was half way through with it, I never wanted to see biscuits and gravy again.

The real show, though, was the other diners. We got such a large slice of local color within the first 10 minutes that we nearly choked on it. Every town has its share of "interesting people", eccentrics, and folks that you suspect are in a witness protection program. We seemed to have found their point of origin. The folks walking through the door of the restaurant scared the living hell out of us. Each person that entered was more "interesting" than the next. In my mind, a nursery rhyme from my childhood kept replaying itself. "Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer, Indian chief" To that, I was able to add munch kin, Hells angles drop out, ax murderer, smuggler, dope dealer, sheep bugger, wife beater, moonshiner, gun trafficker, and a few others I couldn't quite define. A few of the people looked like they had been on the losing end of a battle with some major piece of farm equipment. Our growing fascination with the tremendous cross section of society that continued to march through sadly manifested itself in an attack of the giggles. We knew that we were in terrible danger of meeting with the business end of a shotgun or pig sticker if we weren't able to contain our laughter, and that only made it worse. This wasn't an unkind or ill tempered response on our behalf to these people...simply an involuntary reaction to a totally bizarre situation. This reaction was growing way beyond our ability to control it. I spent more time under the table trying to regain control of myself than I did eating the damn biscuits and gravy. I had lots of company. Thing is, I'm sure that they all thought WE were the odd ones. I can imagine the conversations they shared after we spilled out in the parking lot: "Weren't that a strange group. Kept looking for stuff under the table, kept spitting out their coffee,...and look! Didn't even finish up them biscuits and gravy. Pass that plate over her, would ya?"

I must hasten to add that subsequent visits to the diner revealed these folks to be friendly, gentle spirited, hard working souls, and we came to know them and like them. We had just had a bit of culture shock. By the time we pulled up stakes, we were "part of the crowd", totally assimilated into the local culture, and completely at home with our surroundings. Nothing years of therapy won't fix.

Off To See The Wizard:

When we all got back to the hotel, our radar was starting to show early storm cell development outside of Dodge City. As the cells grew, and continued in their eastward trek, it looked as though we wouldn't have to go very far to intercept them...in fact, they were headed our way. However, being in a storm's path IS NOT part of our operations guidelines. We look to one cell, and approach it from the south as it passed before us on its eastern journey. Rushing into a developing cell from the east is not sane. More often than not, you will pass through the downdraft, the hail shaft, and emerge right under the updraft base, possibly right in the path of a tornado. Though a few couldn't understand this concept, at this point we were adamant. Besides, there was so much activity popping up that ANY PLACE we stood would have a good chance of seeing action.

We charted a course of where we wanted to wait, and went mobile in record speed. Our tag-alongs were in tow, and we ended up in that Kmart parking lot we had breakfasted in a few mornings before. For some strange reason, we were still having radar problems. It seemed that our Internet connections were nearly impossible to maintain, and a log off confused the modem and the laptop to the point where they needed a total reboot...with a few other steps thrown in...before they would attempt another connect. As I seemed to have the highest success ratio in making these connections, I found myself quickly elevated to the position of radar technician. The fact that I could communicate with the computer when others could not was rather funny...as my knowledge of electronics is less than anyone's on the planet. I think it was that I was the only person ignorant enough to try things that made no sense at all....and they worked.

Every so often, I was able to grab an image or two. The cell in Dodge City was now a meso, and had developed a nice hook. That was the one we decided to shoot for. We were south of its projected track, and a deployment to our west would allow us to approach the storm from the south, stopping on our northern trek towards it according to the dictates of common sense and visual observations. Again, a few couldn't understand why we didn't move due west...and charge right through the center of the storm to get behind it and follow it east. After numerous attempts to explain, I had to put into play the standard "mom" answer....."Because!"

When we went into active mode, Steve was driving the van, and Dave was sitting as navigator in the probe vehicle. I was very, very happy with this situation. Dave and Brian both have hands on experience, and Dave is a great navigator. This "team" had proven in the past that they weren't going to "lose it" if the stuff got heavy. They wouldn't take unnecessary chances, nor would they endanger anyone or anything in the chase. Steve was a good person to have at the helm in the van. Chris was also a good driver, but I knew he was keen to film

whatever we saw. Markus was driving the Grand Am, and Allan was driving the Blazer. It was a good convoy, a good system.

Before much longer, we got to where we decided was the prime spot for viewing the multitude of events that were rapidly developing. We pulled the van over to the side of the road, and a few of the vehicles went a little further. Though radar was totally down, we really didn't need it. It was all happening right before our eyes. We had landed in storm central, and we were there first and we were there alone. Yet experience had taught us that whatever is happening in FRONT of you can also be happening BEHIND you, so we made several valiant efforts to keep the radar program up and running.

On our team, we are all high spirited, staunch individualists....who have danced to the beat of that different drummer almost from birth. As mentioned, we tend to be crude in our humor, loud in our discussions, firm in our convictions. None of us could ever be described as "low profile". Yet when we approach an area of imminent activity, we do so with the awe and reverence of someone entering a cathedral, in a oneness of spirit. Each of us knew, without a word being spoken, that we were "in the zone".

The show that was playing out before us was almost surrealistic; not only a life sized replication of what we had dreamed of countless times, but almost overstated in its magnitude. The show was magnificent. We saw it all...mammatus, wall clouds, lightening, funnel clouds, short lived tornadoes, and lower level turbulence the like of which none of us, even John, had ever seen before. The updraft was sucking up low lying clouds like a giant vacuum cleaner. Just ahead, spindly funnels were stretching downward to just the point of contact, then slipping silently back into the storm. Once or twice, we saw an actual touchdown into small, short lived tornadoes. We were in heaven. Our "living textbook", which I had come to describe the skies of OK and KS had opened to the very best chapter. Brian McNoldy described the events as follows "The low level turbulence was incredible. Clouds were pulled apart, forced upward, then downward. There was visible rotation in several places at the cloud base. We spotted several wall clouds, funnel clouds, and a couple of small tornadoes. The sky overhead became greener and greener as the weak-echo region (the bear's cage, the core, the mesocyclone) enclosed us. We rapidly fell below our own safety standards and quickly retreated south away from the core."

Well, some of us did. Our intrepid media team lingered in the cage a little longer than we thought they should have, but the excitement and wonder of the moment was hypnotic. I wasn't really too concerned about Geoff and Allan. They are all about taking chances and pushing the outside of the envelope. Both of them had been in severe weather before. I was concerned that there were many of the new people with them, and they were definitely NOT familiar with how quickly a storm can turn lethal. Also of concern to me was the fact that I knew that Allan and Geoff would be occupied with their shooting, and no one with severe wx

experience was with them to "watch their tails". All's well that ends well, (and I only checked to make sure we had everyone's waivers on file) and soon we were shifting south again and again to stay out of the core, as the storm had chosen to change tracks and chase us for a bit. We got really good at packing up and moving back to avoid the core of the storm. So good that I didn't even take offense that in one such redeployment, I was nearly left behind. As we moved back again and again, we encountered some "late comers" to the action. Positioned on a hill after about our third leg south, there were about 100 chasers...as well as an NSSL truck and one of the Weather Channel vehicles. We didn't feel AT ALL smug or prideful that we had beaten them ALL to the punch. No, not much.

Surrounded:

As darkness was rapidly approaching, it became apparent that our storm was spent, and we headed home. There was some rain, some wind, some lightening, but nothing compared to what we had just witnessed. The van had been acting perfectly, and I joked that all it had needed was a good chase and a few tornadoes to keep it happy. We continued home along the same route that we had chased along a few hours earlier. We knew there were other storms around us, but weren't too concerned with our downed radar program, because we assumed they were dying as well. I continued to try to reestablish contact with the Internet from within the van and thus our radar images, but with very little success. About 15 minutes outside of Alga, I was able to grab one sole image. It indicated that there was a huge supercell blocking our way home to our north, and a tornadic one chasing us down the road...and gaining, and one ahead of us. We were surrounded...no safe route out.

I was speechless. But there it was before me...a road map from hell. As my friends and team mates were merrily cruising down the road, reliving the details of the wonderful storm we had just viewed, I had sole knowledge that something WAY beyond safe was headed our way at an alarming rate. This storm contained very large hail, high winds, high precipitation, and its rain shaft was hiding a tornado. I shared my revelation with John, and in turn, John shared concern with me. There was just no place to go.

I contacted Dave via two way, asking him how far it was to Alga. Doing some quick calculations, I determined that we had enough of a lead to at least make it back to Kmart safely. I couldn't remember if there were overhangs to protect the fleet if the hail got bad, but I do remember a few drainage ditches...just in case. I saw no reason to announce our predicament to the rest....there was not a thing that anyone could do. Also, I was fearful that a few misguided souls, still high off the earlier chase, would take it to mind to turn around and try to catch the tornado. No one, not even the most fool hardy yahoo, chases a tornadic supercell in a rain shaft at night with no tracking. No one. Its beyond dumb. Far

too concerned with the welfare of all than in engaging in a debate, I merely called for a pull over in the Kmart parking lot, and shared with Dave the reason why.

Tornadoes and Glass Houses Don't Mix:

At some point, and the details are unclear, it became necessary to let the others in on our little predicament. One of our tag-alongs knew of a place just up the road where there was at least some form of hail shelter for the vehicles. If we hurried, we just might make it. Its very hard to convey a sense of urgency without conveying a sense of panic, but we managed to make it to the "shelter" just as the storm hit. The so called shelter consisted of a gas station with covered pumps...possibly enough of an overhang to protect us from hail damage. The store itself, though, was a nightmare. It was nearly 75% glass.

John continued to monitor the storm from the van, and the rest of us went inside. They had a radar screen that updated rapidly about every half hour, and a bunch of very concerned customers. The first thing I did when we got in there was to try to find some portion of the store that would act as shelter. The two bathrooms were about all I could find, but they would be good shelter. They were interior rooms, no glass, and had short span roofs. Sharing this knowledge with the rest of the team, and the rest of the people in the store, I settled back with a nice warm cup of coffee to enjoy the show. We had taken every precaution available, and had our bases covered as much as we possibly could.

OK, so its late at night, a tornado is coming, we're in a glass building, and you would think it was Christmas morning. Adrenaline highs are slow to dissipate, and everyone was still as high as a kite from not only what we did earlier, but from what was happening then. This was what we had come for...to be in the center of the action, watching it happened REAL time, not on a computer screen. OK, maybe we didn't really want to be in the CENTER of the center, but we had become real good at playing the hand we were dealt, playing it well, and enjoying the game.

Two skywarn spotters came speeding into the station, and dashed into the store. They were young, and scared out of their wits. "I just saw the biggest wall cloud in the world," one shrieked. I chuckled at their panic, and noted with pride that none of MESO's people were out of control, and were keeping everyone up to date on the progress of the storm, the location of the shelters, and the fact that now was NOT a good time to leave. We all acted like responsible professionals, taking great care to convey an atmosphere of calm and control. Of course, in fairness to the young chasers, its a lot easier to mask feeling of ecstatic delight than it is to mask feelings of panic. We were able, however, to confine our remarks of "All RIGHT!" and "This is incredible", and "I'm loving this" to our few sojourns out of the store and out of earshot of the general public.

John refers to this sort of response as a "torgasm". Others may think of it as an adrenaline rush. Many (most) think that delight in being in a life threatening situation is childishly immature and downright stupid. This thing, this wonder of nature, is what we study, what we chase, what we dream of. Viewing it is a chance to stare down Mother Nature's very throat. Do we hold life so lightly? No. We, each of us, cherish life to the point where we want to experience everything it has to offer. This sometimes means taking chances. "Getting caught" is sometimes a result of taking chances in storm chasing. Once caught, there are two options; you either survive, or you don't. After taking every precaution available, you have very little say in which option will play out. So why go nuts? I first came face to face with my own mortality in the chase of '98. John and I had gotten separated from the rest of the group, and were a little more in the soup than we had planned. When faced with what I truly felt to be my eminent demise at the hands of this evil villain from my childhood nightmares, a voice within me said, "This is where you wanted to be. You're doing what you wanted to do. You knew this was a possibility. Now, toughen up and DRIVE". We don't want to die, or even come close. A larger tragedy would be, however, to perish blue haired and wrinkled at age 80 in front of a TV watching adventures that you were too cautious to pursue. Of "regret" or "danger", I chose "danger".

And perhaps there was a greater purpose to our being there at that particular time. No one else was willing to take charge and tell people what to do and what to expect. Just about 10 seconds before the sirens went off, a young mother and father came in to the store with their darling little baby. When the sirens sounded, the mother turned a deathly shade of pale. I think our light hearted ambiance relieved some of her fears. In a caring manner but not standing on ceremony, I asked her to follow me and I situated her with her husband and the baby in the women's room. I told her not to be scared, it was just a precaution. Remarkably, her husband at first refused to accompany her. "That's the *LADIES* room" he whined. "Don't worry, no one's going to pee in there at the moment." His idea of seeking safety involved jumping back into the pickup and trying to outrun the twister. Had we not been there at that time, in that place... ya never know.

After about 5 minutes, wherein we experienced incredible rain, thunder, lightening and wind...also a bit of hail, the sirens stopped. I asked the proprietor of the store if her community sounded an "all clear" when the danger passed. She said that no, they just stopped sounding the sirens. "So we're to assume that since the sirens have stopped, the tornado has passed?" "Well, maybe. Either that or the siren blew down." Here is a classic lesson on why public warning systems have a long way to go.

I collected the young family from the bathroom, and cautioned them to sit tight for another half hour before they left...just in case. The young storm spotters had obviously done all the listening he intended to from me, and they took off headed

north. I later heard on the scanner that the north route was closed, because of the storm passing up that way. He didn't get very far, and I'll bet that he wished more than once that he was back in the LADIES ROOM.

When John determined that the way home was safe, we went mobile again, treated to a wonderful show of lightening all the way home. A few decent gusts rocked the fleet en route, causing hearts to quicken a bit, but we all made it home in one piece. Cigars and Chaser Champagne (can of beer) appeared magically, and we celebrated our victory well into the evening.

In the aftermath, we had taken our two tag alongs and altered their lifestyle forever. We had once again taken nearly normal people, and converted them into hard core, stone cold storm junkies. Well done, one and all.

As for me, I just wanted to play the whole night through my mind, over and over again. It was "the perfect storm." Thrills, chills, scares, oooohs, aaaaaahs, basically everything you could ask from a whole week of chasing, all rolled up into one night. The fodder for tales to be told and retold countless times over the coming years...I was in total and complete heaven.

The Chase Day 5:
Tuesday - The Day After

Waking fully clothed on top of my bed, I was willing to concede that I had fallen asleep the night before. I can't remember it. I was so behind on sleep at that point, that I knew there would be a terrible day of reckoning in the future. It was my hope that with careful planning, that day would be the LAST day of the chase; preferably just as I boarded the plane home. Home. I really do love my home and my family and the little town we lived in, but I was acutely aware that Tuesday marked the beginning of the last half of the chase. Chasing, particularly chasing in Tornado Alley with my friends, is the thing I love to do most in the world. I was beginning to suffer separation anxiety before the chase was even over...just knowing that someday soon, it WOULD be over. Its kind like the feeling I used to get at the beginning of August when I was a youngster on summer break. One definitely begins to hear the clock ticking. Couple that with the guilt complex I was laying on myself because I really didn't WANT TO GO HOME. I wanted it all to go on forever.

There's very little that happens to me that can't be fixed with a good cup of coffee and a leisurely smoke. I could think of no better way to re-endear myself to home and hearth than a trip to the Indian grill. I knew that after a few moments there, normalcy wouldn't seem so bad.

By this time we had become familiar faces to the "Grill Crowd". I was able to tell who was who...and often sat back and made mental notes of who "belonged" and who didn't. MY GOD! I was being assimilated. Worse, it was happening to

the others as well. Brian arrived, our brilliant grad student and Science Officer, and announced "Hey, Maw...them boys back at the Motel been bad. They's gonna have to spend some time in the WHUPPIN' SHED 'fore this day is over!" I knew then that the battle was over. We had toppled without even so much as a whimper. We were now Lodgesters. I had images of Brian arriving back at CIRA, "Hey, them there satellite pictures shur is purdy!!!" I wondered if the waivers covered brain damage. I began to mentally compose a letter to his mom - "Dear Genie...it could be worse...you still have ONE normal kid". Worse, I had a strange craving for biscuit and gravy.

A Slow Day:

The day presented itself as a definite DOWN DAY, as is often the case following a good storm day. Nothing was happening, and nothing was going to happen. Always, when out there, I watch the skies. Even in the face of irrefutable evidence to the contrary, I'm always looking for that surprise tower to pop up on the horizon. Every day holds the potential for adventure, and every cloud holds the potential for something stupendous to happen to it. One of the greatest benefits of learning about the weather is the knowledge that there is NEVER nothing happening in the skies. Even the tiniest wisp of a cloud has its own story, its reason for being. It's my hope that someday, I'll be able to read all of those stories. This was not going to be that day, though. Marvelous things were happening in the skies, but none of them were what we were there for.

We decided to use the day to our best advantage...laundry, vehicle maintenance, sleep, forecasting, and other basic chores. Also, we had figured out a way to view Allan's video footage.

By hooking Allan's camera up to an idle video monitor, we were able to view his film. It was magnificent. Though Allan's usual medium is still photography, his artist's eye had rendered a terrific video. In addition to some breathtaking storm footage, he had captured a few clips of the team that were nothing less than classic. My favorite was a clip of a very exuberant Markus, his arms opened to the skies in unadulterated delight in what was unfolding before him...as if he wanted to embrace it all forever. I commented on this, and how really super it was, and Allan started laughing. As exuberant as Markus was, another of the newbies (who shall forever remain nameless) had manifested his excitement in an attack of hyperanxiety that bordered on hysterics, and had assumed a decidedly DIFFERENT posture. We all respond differently to our first super storm. Allan suggested that in the future, perhaps we should consider the inclusion of ritalin to the MESO pharmacy.

We are not known for letting an amusing situation stand as just that. Allan expounded on the juxtaposition of our two beloved team members by doing a little bit of artwork on the rear window of his Blazer. He finger etched a tell-all mural into the dust on the rear window of Markus with arms spread, and the other

fellow with his butt in the air. It was really funny, and all of us got a good laugh out of it. Chase humor. You have to either stand up under it, or die by it. The phrase, "we're not laughing at you, we're laughing with you"? No. In most instances, we're laughing at you. But we're also laughing at ourselves, our situation, and everyone else that comes within our circle. When you become the target of "MESO humor", as we all have been...its best to grin and bear it. I had cautioned everyone months before to leave their ego at home, but bring their sense of humor with them. Most listened. Hopefully, the target of this particular laugh will later come to see the harmless humor in it. In an off beat way, it was our way extending the olive branch...making him part of the gang. I somehow don't think it was interpreted as such.

Another less humorous (but only slightly) event had come to light. While out in a field the day before, we learned that Geoff and Allan had come very close to becoming Roman Candles. It seems that he touched a pipe in the negatively charged ground just as lightening was due to strike. Geoff received a tremendous jolt than nearly shot his arm into the next county. There were varying theories of why this happened, but we all agreed that it was a very close call. Allan could feel the jolt from the ground also. I wondered at the time if this comparatively minor jolt didn't act towards dissipating the charge, and ultimately save their lives. I get chills just thinking of it, and it was a good reminder to one and all that what we do IS dangerous.

After whiling away the morning in the local Laundromat, and taking an hour or two to mess around with the computer...it was time for my mid-afternoon coffee break, which had become an afternoon tradition with me and Steve. Steve had proven himself to be one of our greatest successes, as far as recruitment goes. He was eager and anxious to do whatever was needed, and had proven to be a most capable driver of McWar. I never once heard him complain or whine, despite the glitches that seemed to haunt us from the beginning. Steve just seemed to be grooving on being there. He was a rock stable bastion of support, and I never once felt that I had to make excuses to him for unfavorable weather or other disappointments. I found our coffee runs to be a welcomed relief from the responsibilities of MESO, and every so often, I needed those. Steve is good people, and the fact that his association with us has probably screwed up any happiness he would ever derive from a nice sunny day...is something I am immensely proud of.

Around about mid-afternoon, Allan suggested that we take in dinner and a movie in the BIG CITY...which was about 40 minutes up the road in Pratt, Kansas. Ken had decided to bow out of this venture, but the rest of us we raring to go. Down time makes us all a little rowdy, and with this attitude, we laid siege to the bustling metropolis of Pratt.

Dinner was pretty good, filled with lively chatter and laughter. By now, new friendships, true friendships, were forming, as we had seen "battle" together and

shared many other great moments. There were no more newbies and veterans...just the team. I think one of the reasons the friendships formed on the chase are so easy and so maintenance free is that we all share a common bond...the utter delight and fascination in meteorological events that send most people running for cover. Back in the REAL world, it is very tough to find people, even in our own families, that can relate to this. In us all, our hearts are wind driven pumps augmented by adrenaline powered turbines. The crash of thunder is our siren's song, and I for one, will never be able to resist it. There is great comfort in finding people that understand this without it even being verbalized.

The movie theater was a blast from the past. While we waited for "the Phantom Menace" to begin, we were entertained by a constant barrage of oldies...most of which I was uncomfortably familiar with. We were rowdy, and Chris was damned near out of control... but he kept us in stitches. The movie itself was kind of an anticlimax, in fact.

By the time we all got home, the hunger pangs were ringing again, and John, Brian and I took off to try to find some ice cream. Being people of excesses, our ice cream run turned out to be a quest for ingredients for root beer floats. Medicine Lodge after dark is a total trip. The ice cream store had no ice cream, the A & W store had no root beer...but we scored our ingredients at a gas station, and headed home to share our treasures with the team.

As the root beer flowed, we were soon to be joined by a few Hispanics from the adjacent building. Their interest in our midnight picnic dissipated quickly when they discovered that we really WERE drinking root beer - not tequila. I offered to put a worm in the bottle...but they had lost their heart for the whole experience. We were no more than another bunch of crazy gringos, and they wandered back to their own digs.

Ken had been forecasting the entire time we were out, and it looked as though the next day was to be an active one, weather wise. As near to a sure thing as we had seen so far. That was enough to send most of us packing off to bed, and a few of us running off to the available computers. We were back in business.

The Case, Day 6:
Somewhere Over The Rainbow

Wednesday turned out to be full of promise. There were very positive indications that there would be a severe weather outbreak, and the heating had started almost at dawn. We determined that we were situated perhaps a little to far to the east. After a quick summit conference, the call was made. We would go to the southwest - positioning ourselves dead center of the highest probability area.

At this point, we were all feeling very comfortable with each other. The fellow that had started out on a bad foot had mellowed considerably, and we were

hopeful that this would continue. Its critical that everyone on a team...any team...be on the same page. There is no one more resistant to organization than me, and more rebellious to authority, or more willing to rush headlong into anything that smacks of adventure with very little regard to things like "good sense". Yet a chain of command had been established long ago, operational guidelines had been established long ago, and sanity and good sense had been deemed as viable assets...also long ago. Many of us were determined not to let the plans we had made in cool, objective passivity be sacrificed in the heat of "chase fever".

The time for voicing objections to the above had come and gone. By presenting a united front, and by being willing to take responsibility for the decisions made by that united front, it removed a lot of the pressure from those in the group not in a decision making position. That can be good and bad. If someone doesn't have to accept the responsibility of his actions or forecasts or decisions, it's quite easy to become critical of those who do. It was always our aim to rule by committee, so no one person would have to take the heat for a bad call. But it was also our aim to put control of those committees in the hands of the people who had committed to the organization more than just a one time cash deposit....people who had the most experience, the most knowledge, and their heart and soul wrapped up in the whole concept of MESO. Though I'm sure there were some grumbling and complaints made out of earshot by more than one individual, the Board stood strong on certain issues. Our attitude - "this is the way we do it. And unless you have a better way that YOU ARE WILLING TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR, this is the way we will continue to do it." Once this was established, things more or less fell into place, people either relaxed or resigned themselves to it, and we started to pull together as a team of very talented people. Past sins and transgressions were forgiven, and we hoped that from this group, a more or less permanent chase team would develop.

We had joined up with a chaser from Texas, and by mutual agreement, decided to let him tag along with us for the day. He was a nice enough fellow, and more than willing to share his resources...most of which we already had in triplicate. He did turn us on to a neat data site, though, and was great company. Bill had since become a good friend to our organization, and we chat at least weekly....more often in active season.

With high hopes and good spirits, we headed to Meade, Kansas. Finding a world class Pizza Hut, we stopped and grabbed a meal there. And waited. And waited.

We were still having a LOT of trouble with Internet communications. John and I were completely baffled by this. Last year, we had suffered numerous disconnects and signal losses...but at least we were making the connections. This year, the entire system seemed to be in revolt. It was driving me slowly insane. We were later to discover that atmospheric conditions (sun spot storms)

had been playing havoc with everyone's communications - from cell phone operations to radio transmissions.

One thing about McWar, she made numerous friends for us. She's not exactly what you would call a "low profile" vehicle. Everywhere we went, we had people coming up and asking us about the van, who we were, what we were doing. Every where we went that we found other chasers and spotters, we found instant friends, more than happy and willing to help out in any way possible. It made me wonder where all those pricks in the chase sites on the Net were. They certainly weren't apparent in any of the areas we were in.

A guy from the radio station next to the Pizza Hut offered help as well. He offered us the use of a phone line...manna from heaven, no less. Sadly, this line was not data compatible, but the thought was there. We saw a lot of stuff pop us visually...but die out before anything magnificent could happen. Minutes turned to hours, still nothing.

Leisure time always predicates mischief in our group. This time, I was the instigator. During our mid afternoon coffee run, I picked up a package of fake spiders. I had really been looking for a rubber snake. The guy at the radio station had told us that in the area we were in, for every square mile of ground, there was an average of four people and 50 rattlesnakes. I found this to be a huge bummer, as I was in the habit of strolling out into these awesome fields and becoming "one" with nature. This particular aspect of nature, though, I had no desire to bond with. I realized with sadness that my field strolls were definitely a thing of the past. Everyone's awareness was somewhat heightened with this revelation...what better a time to perpetrate a series of practical jokes.

Anytime you want to set someone up for a joke, Allan is the perfect accomplice. Geoff was the first target. Allan very surreptitiously placed one of the spiders under his shoulder as he lay back on the cement catching some rays, then stood back to film the action. We were not disappointed. Geoff, though quickly to regain composure, shot sky high. Our next target was Ken, who did a dance away from the beast that was inspirational. I can't remember ever laughing harder.

As a last ditch attempt to catch a storm, we headed to Guymon, OK. By the time we got there, we were pretty sure that the day was a bust. The warnings and skywarn activations were canceling all over, and we conceded defeat. Our intrepid tag along parted company from us to intercept a storm we could see a piece of some 4 hours away...we knew he wouldn't make it (he didn't) but wished him God speed and good luck as he drove off.

As we headed back home, we were to learn a very important lesson. As I've mentioned, there is never NOTHING happening in the skies. There are a million miracles occurring at every second. If you're looking for one thing, you tend to

ignore those other miracles. One, however, presented itself to us all that could not EVER be ignored. At a roadside stop meant only to film the distant anvils and cu-nims back lit by an incredible sunset, we scored what had to be the most incredible double rainbow ever beheld by man.

It started as a small band of color that grew to an incredible 180-degree arc, and then doubled itself. For reasons unknown to me, the sky outside the arc was dark and ominous, but inside the arc it was much lighter. Lightening from the storms that birthed this aura flashed underneath the arc, and around it. It was by far, the most beautiful display I had ever seen. Had this one sight been the only thing I had ever seen on the chase, or on all the chases combined, I would have to label the event "infinitely worth it". It defied words, time, space, and lucid thought. We were all drawn up into a silent, awed struck communion with this incredible event. Should I live to be 100, I shall be able to recall every detail exactly...and never, ever be able to put it into words.

The trip home was great, too. We saw great lightening displays, some forms of which we had never before witnessed. Always happy to be in foul weather, McWar behaved admirably for the entire trip. We arrived back in Medicine Lodge, tired but unable to let the day pass away. We talked, we laughed, we had a beer or two, a few of us wandered off to b.s. with the Mexicans...all well and good. I, however, had more important things to do. Allan had dropped one of the spiders in my coffee earlier in the day. I had a score to settle. Just before I went to turn in, I sneaked into Allan's room, and gently placed the offending creature under his sheets.

The Case, Day 7: Is This The Big One?

The forecast team was charged. Every possible indicator showed that today would be a severe weather day. Everything seemed perfect. We were all in 100% agreement, and planned to be an early deployment to the Dodge City area. The cell connections had steadily improved, and the van had been behaving admirably. Though we were happy with what we had seen so far on the chase, we were hungry for more.

I was particularly happy with the move to the west. I had heard that the land to the west was tremendous...wide flat plains, but still very rural. We didn't have to go very far west before the landscape merged into a broad expanse of prairie magic the likes of which I had never seen. It was like an ocean of grass and wheat, complete with whirls, waves, and eddies.

The area I live in, the Hudson Valley in upstate New York, is generally regarded as one of the most beautiful places in the world. It's rolling, wooded hills join mountains a few short miles to our west. There are countless lakes, rivers, and

streams, abundant wildlife, and homes and estates to die for. It's also quite possibly the WORST place on the planet for watching the sky. I get the sky in slices - any panorama is blocked by those trees, hills, and mountains. So many times, when driving around with my family, my husband has said, "Honey, just look at THAT" referring to some expanse of forested beauty. I smile sweetly and nod, but I'm mentally fantasizing of riding some mammoth bulldozer, capable of razing those forests and flattening those hills. I used to love the woods; they are now a source of constant irritation. I haven't looked at a forest in years that I haven't mentally leveled it to the ground with the epitaph, "THAT'S gotta go!"

Here, though, in western Kansas, someone had beaten me to it. You could see...forever. Nothing but land, fields, cattle and sky. It was hard to imagine that somewhere, people were jumping into cabs, pressing themselves shoulder to shoulder in subway cars, waiting in bumper to bumper traffic - all to the background music of screaming sirens, honking horns, and jet engines. Here, in a place I had never been before, I sighed with the relief and closure of someone returning home after a very, very long time away. Here, you could see the sky. Here, you could hear the wind.

I'm sure my instant love affair with the land was wearing thin on my comrades. Every two minutes, I would say, "Just LOOK at that LAND!" We weren't there to look at the land - we were there to look at the sky. The sky was a horrible mixture of clear blue and puffy white. Our worst nightmare was unfolding before us. We were caught in the throws of full blown "Nice Day."

We pulled into Dodge City, Kansas, and found an absolutely super place to eat lunch. It was right outside the stockyards, which were permeating the parking lot with an odor alien to some. I don't believe that Markus or Geoff had ever experienced this particular aspect of rural America. I got the feeling that this experience was one they would never go out of their way to relive, either. So much beautiful U.S.D.A. prime red beef on the hoof gave me a warm and fuzzy feeling inside. Some of the others, though, manifested somewhat of a GREEN and fuzzy feeling.

Inside, though, there was a spacious dining area COMPLETE WITH WALL PHONES. In no time at all, Chris and Allan had wrested one from its perch, and had plugged in his laptop to gather data. If anyone objected, they stayed mute. Not only did we represent probably the biggest tab the restaurant would collect all week, but I had often compared our team to the starting lineup of the Dallas Cowboys. We have some pretty intimidating looking people, physically. Those of us that lack physical stature simply look dangerously insane. No one messes with a group of people that come in and start ripping phones off the wall.

I enjoyed a Filet Mignon that was only \$10.95. It was exquisite. Such a meal would have run around \$35 at home. I guess you can get beef cheaper when all you have to do is walk outside your door and club some errant steer over the

head with a baseball bat. While we gathered data, we worked on coffee and desert. Every so often, I would run out to the van and check the radar...nothing was showing, but the data Chris and Ken were gathering in the restaurant still indicated that conditions were prime for development of severe weather. Where the hell was it? I was sure that those of our team less meteorologically inclined thought that we were totally clueless. Fact of the matter is, even on the bust days, according to every possible indicator, we were where it should be happening. The talent and ability backing our forecasts and outlooks was far beyond that of any chase team going, the equipment and technology was beyond compare, and the instincts and experience were honed way back in the very early days of storm chasing. We just weren't getting a hell of a lot of breaks.

Leisure time. Again. Waiting. Again. Something had to break. It did. With a burst of sheer genius from Allan, he found a final resting place for the fake spider that had brought us so much delight earlier. Removing the top of the sugar container, he was gently interred, lying in wait for some future diner. Our finest practical joke ever, and we would not be witness to it. I don't think there is one stunt that would be the cause of more chuckles in the months to come, though.

A Bust, The Weather and McWar:

We determined that if anything was going to happen, we would be in the best location if we moved slightly north. As Brian noted, "we waited a few hours, and came to the conclusion that the cap was too strong (updrafts couldn't compete with the inversion aloft). When this occurs, vertical motion is greatly inhibited, and so, thunderstorms are too." As we stood in the deserted parking lot of some trucking business, it slowly began to dawn on us that the window of opportunity has passed. We had a bust; nothing, nada, zilch, zippo...proving once again that Mother Nature has the final say on what each day will bring.

The day was not to be without its adventure, though. As disappointed as we had been with our "bust", McWar was downright upset. A loose belt that she had allowed us to ignore as long as she was having fun, suddenly cried, "Enough!". It loosened to the point where it could no longer function in its assigned task, which was to power the alternator. Realizing that we had about 75 miles to go to get home, and that we would be running the van directly off the battery...we shut down all non-essential functions of the van. This meant that in addition to running without air conditioning, we would have to run without the two ways, the fans, the computers, and the headlights. We formed a tightly packed convoy, with Brian's jeep acting as McWar's headlights and the other vehicles covering the back door. Not knowing how far we could get, we set off with a brave thought and a ton of hope. On the up side, this was team work at its very finest. On the down side, we had a vehicle that was definitely in a diminished capacity. Foremost in my thoughts was the scenario that I had struggled to keep away in the dark recesses of my mind...what would happen if something really major should

go wrong with the van? How would John and Chris get home? How would we pay for it? How would we get it back to Illinois?

As we limped ever closer to Medicine Lodge, my thoughts turned to last year's chase. The year before, John and I had been detained from fleeing a storm by an inordinately anal retentive local cop...going 43 mph in a 35 mph zone was not a forgivable offense even when trying to escape a tornado. By the time the cop let us continue, (and sped off at about 50 to seek shelter for himself) we were perilously close to the storm. The nonstop lightening, high winds, and blowing debris was very strong evidence that we were very close to the funnel. Somewhere in the night, the rest of the team was waiting for us. Somewhere in the night, there was a tornado...somewhere close...and we had no idea where we were in relation to it. For a period of about 10 minutes, both John and myself were convinced that the "end" was near. As mentioned, the parting line in my dialogue with God (wherein I wrestled in turn with guilt, fear, and finally, resolve), was "Shut up and DRIVE."

Here I was, a year later. I was exactly where I wanted to be doing exactly what I wanted to do. Such a privilege can never be without some toll. We'd get through this latest upset somehow. But for now, as a team, we were all going to shut up and drive.

The Chase, Day 8:
There Is No Place Like Home

We made it back to Medicine Lodge somehow. The next morning, we were up early trying to analyze just what all McWar would need to make her road worthy again. A quick stop at the local mechanic remedied the belt problem, but the alternator was Capote. This was, strangely enough, fairly good news for a couple of reasons. The alternator was new, hence still under warranty.

The alternator would be covered by warranty, but the only alternator available for the van was over an hour away in Great Bend. Somehow, we'd have to make it...traveling again under battery power alone. By golly, we almost made it, too. McWar died some 15 miles shy of its final destination; its battery totally spent. Dave and Allan went up the road to look for help. I was somewhat less optimistic, and started dialing for a tow truck. I had one on stand by, but by that time Dave and Allan had returned with a brand new battery...fully charged...and we were able to continue to Great Bend.

Once in Great Bend, we got the alternator, and after a heart stopping delay in the parts store, found someone who would install it for us. While the work was being done, we grabbed lunch. My cell phone number had been left with the 17 year old mechanic, so he could call us when the work was done. When I got the call from the kid, the news was not good. "Lady, I can't fix it. I put it (the alternator) in, but its not working at all. She's not charging right, and no one here can figure

out why. You'd better come and get it." Totally poker faced, all team ever heard of that conversation was MY end. With a smile on my face and a Mary Poppins tone to my voice, I said, "Yes? Really? No kidding! OK, FINE! Great, we appreciate it. OK, Bye." And then "hey guys, the van's done!"

As it turns out, my bluff was never called. Because of the computerized power monitor, the alternator didn't charge like most vans. Though it appeared to NOT be doing the job, the new alternator was doing everything it was supposed to. A trained tech in a dealership would maybe know this; but a 17 year old mechanic in Great Bend Kansas wouldn't have a clue. I am somewhat ashamed of my little deception to the team. All year long, it had fallen to me to disperse the bad news if and when it developed to the others. If we needed money, if someone got hurt or sick, if the van needed more work, as secretary it was my job to convey the message. At that time I just couldn't hand out any more disappointment and I felt the team couldn't take any more of it. An avoidance, even a temporary one, looked infinitely attractive to me at the time. Let's call it a strategic pause, to buy myself time to search for a solution. Imagine my surprise when the van came cruising down the road obviously running wonderfully. Not missing a beat or even batting an eye, I announced, "OK, let's go!"

We had intended to move northeast, following the instability that hadn't yet popped any storms in the area. There was no avoiding it, though, northeast was also the way home. This trajectory would bring us to the point were we would eventually part company...maybe today, maybe tomorrow. The trip was drawing to a close, and people were already talking about the trip home. As I write this, I can almost imagine the dialogue McWar was running in her mechanical mind:

"Hey, guys, thanks. I'm feeling much better now. OK, where are we headed? Lets chase some storms!!!"

We pulled onto the north route, gaining confidence, and easing the van up to 55 mph.

"I can't help but notice that we seem to be heading home. You guys have to be joking. C'mon, let's do some CHASIN! It's only FRIDAY, for gosh sakes."

As we pulled onto route 70 east, our confidence soared...as did the speedometer. We were hitting about 60.

"OK, Cut the crap. I'm not ready to go home. I'm just getting the hang of all this. I think you should all reconsider this whole deal. We got humidity and heat...I can feel it in my air filter! Anyone do a data check?" 60 mph became 65, even with the veering in very strong cross winds, we felt confident that our newly fixed van could handle it no problem.

"Listen up. I can't TELL you how serious I am about NOT wanted to go home. You mean to tell me we're blasting down the road at close to 80 and we're not EVEN chasing a storm? I don't THINK so! I have ways of making you very, very sorry!"

McWar was running like a greyhound. 75 mph, and running great. Rpm's in line, temp in line..."Dammit, I'M NOT READY TO GO HOME. Stop right this minute! Stop! Stop! Stop!

We Have Liftoff:

"Stop, stop, stop the vehicles...Please!" Markus's voice came crackling over the two way. At first I thought that perhaps Geoff had found some intriguing specimen of road kill that presented a photo opportunity, but Markus sounded quite serious. We all pulled over to see what the problem was. It was big. Real big.

Falling subject to the zeal of having, at last, a well running van that we could really make some time with, we had forgotten a few of the basic rules of aerodynamics and torsional rigidity. A one ton van can go just about as fast as you want it to, but a one ton van with a pop top and a metal plate affixed to its top with thousands of dollars of radar and radio and satellite equipment...not good. Not ever, but especially not good in strong cross winds. Any vehicle experiences torsion roll at speeds over 50 mph...a van even more so, as its body is little more than lightly reinforced sheet metal. The metal is designed to give under this torsional roll, but the metal plate on top was not. High speeds and strong cross winds had magnified the torsional roll of the van, and severely violated the integrity of the metal plate. A few seals gave way, a few bolts popped...and all hell broke loose. Nearly everything on top of the van had given way and lay in a debris field down Route 70. By some miracle, the plate itself had held. Had the plate let go, I shutter to think of the consequences...but someone could have been seriously killed.

About 50% of one whole years worth of work and money lay in bits and pieces all around us. I was in total shock...for once, speechless. I wandered around the van in somewhat of a trance. A zombie. Mentally, I had nothing left. By the time I regained my senses, I found nearly EVERYONE addressing the problem at hand. GO TEAM GO. The mourning period lasted about 2 minutes, then everyone simply galvanized themselves and pulled together to salvage what could be salvaged. Within an hour, we had everything collected, the metal sheet was secured inside the van, the pieces of equipment stashed, and were close to being on the road again.

There was nothing else to do. Chase 99 had ended in a completely unique way. We had actually created our own debris field in a total wind condition of what had to be (combining the forward speed of the van with the cross winds) comparable

to an F1. McWar got her way. We were in, ultimately, one last storm. In an offhanded way, we had inadvertently fulfilled what the Discovery Channel had hoped we were involved with months before: We had simulated a tornado! Damn, we're good.

In the heat of all the excitement, the computer was grinding out data a mile a minute. As soon as we got a chance to check it, we did. Chris announced that the entire area was going to be volatile within 24 hours. My initial reaction was, yeah what else is new, but I asked, "What's the outlook?" Chris answered, "They are forecasting LI's as low as -26 and CAPE of close to 6000". Good old Chris. Always good for a laugh. I had been tracking these things for 3 years now, and had never even HEARD of LI's of lower than -10, or a CAPE higher than may 4500. I started to giggle uncontrollably. Wow. Imagine if there ever was such a day with such conditions.

Here's the kicker. Chris wasn't joking around. What was to be the highest probability of severe weather I had ever even heard of was due to occur RIGHT WHERE WE WERE....but 24 hours from now. The end of the world had been forecast for north central Kansas, and we were headed toward northwest Missouri. There was NO WAY I could call it quits now. Not today. Not even if I had to WALK to the airport in KC on Sunday. I began to mentally access who I could talk into staying. It required no convincing; Brian, Geoff and Markus could stay through Sunday. Chase 99 x was born.

As though as it would be to say good-byes and watch the others return home, it must have been tougher for them knowing that we were staying. At any rate, it seemed only logical to start separating the luggage and positioning folks in what their ride home would be. Markus had left his camcorder back in Great Bend, and he and Geoff took off back after it. There would be one final roadside stop up ahead, and then all parties would depart to their home base. My last minute reprieve did little to quell my eyes from starting to well up.

At the roadside stop, we said our good-byes. Though everyone seemed keen to do it again next year, a year is a long time to keep the fire burning. Things change, people change, and situations change. I knew that there might be some faces I would never see again, but was grateful that at least for a short time, our lives had merged and we had done something fantastic. This year, we had faced perhaps a few more challenges - but nothing more than what we could handle. The single most important aspect for me is that we made a few dreams come true for a few folks. That's an awesome feeling.

As Brian and I pulled out of the road stop...now two of us, where there had been eleven. For a very long time I didn't say much. After a bit, though, the old sing-song started playing in my head "I'm goin' chasin', I'm goin' chasin'! I'M GOIN' CHASIN'!!!" Much later that night, I awakened momentarily with a smile on my

face. I couldn't help but hope that our sugar bowl spider in Dodge City, had, by this time, scored.