

Iowa City Tornado
14 April, 2006
By Jay Honeck

So I was at our airport commission meeting tonight when the tornado sirens went off. We had noticed the skies becoming black, but were all too wrapped up in talk of paving taxiways to pay much heed.

The meeting abruptly adjourned with the sirens, and everyone tried to find the long-rumored basement in the terminal building. The second floor conference room, with its two-story windows overlooking the ramp (and facing West), just didn't seem like a good place to be, and we all ended up down in the boiler room.

After a while we felt silly, and went up to the weather room, where we watched the storm developing on radar. When it looked like the worst was past, I called Mary and made a mad dash for the convertible (thank goodness I had put the top up!) through moderate rain. Strangely, she said that if I didn't leave right away, to wait 15 minutes, because the worst was yet to come – which didn't fit my radar picture at all.

Well, apparently the TV station's "Live Doppler Radar" is a better information source than the airport version. Heading toward home, the hail began. Within seconds it sounded like machine-gun fire, and I quickly drove underneath a gas station's canopy with a few other hapless motorists. For the next ten minutes, we watched as ping-pong-ball-sized hail bombarded Iowa City. The flags were straight out, the wind was howling, and the temperature was almost hot. It was very weird, and I flipped on a local AM radio station that was interviewing a guy maybe a mile away from me, talking to them on his cell phone.

Suddenly, the flag in front of me dropped straight down. The hail continued for a minute, but the wind absolutely died. Then it was just rain – and then it stopped, too. I was wondering what the hell was going on, when the guy on the radio suddenly said "Oh my God, there's a funnel cloud!" The announcer asked him where he was, and he said "On Benton Street!"

I was on Muscatine Dr., maybe 3/4 of a mile away, facing away from it. My concern for hail damage instantly gone, I called Mary, who was down the basement of our home with our kids. I told her I was inbound, and to raise the garage door. I didn't want the power to go out and to be stuck outside with a tornado approaching. Racing toward home, flying down a tree-lined street that offered a limited view to the south, I glanced in the direction of the reported tornado when, in a flash of lightning I saw it.

There was no way to judge scale or direction of travel, in that millisecond flash, but it was big. A giant, V-shaped funnel was looming over the city, and it couldn't have been six blocks away! In fact, for me to have been able to see it at all, over those trees, it was either 50 stories tall, or it was right on top of me!

Suddenly endowed with the driving prowess of Mario Andretti, I punched the pedal to the floor. I glanced down and saw 70 mph in second gear, and told Mary to get back downstairs.

Not wanting to look back, I slid to the last stop sign before my house. Incredibly, with the tornado sirens wailing, hail flying, constant lightning and high winds, and a funnel cloud bringing up the rear, an older woman was dutifully driving 25 mph up our road. I suspect all she saw of me was a candy-apple-red streak...

At last down the basement, with a beer and the kids, we watched the Cedar Rapids newscasters going absolutely ballistic over the "severe weather" in nearby Iowa City. Only difference was, this time it was for real. Reports were soon coming in of damage on Riverside Drive – the road our hotel is on – and of injuries inside the Menards nearby. (This the Menards I've visited nearly every day since we opened.)

When they announced that all off-duty police and firemen were to report for duty, and that the Army National Guard were being called out, I knew we were seeing the real deal. I called my night manager, and got no answer. I then tried his cell phone, but he was busy holding the door to the airport building, which was at that moment trying to be sucked off its hinges. I told him to call me back after he got to safety.

A few minutes later, he called. The storm was past, and he was out assessing damage, but the power was out, and everything was inky black. Best he could tell, the only damage was to the fence around our pool, which was down, a roof vent was gone, and a bunch of shingles were off.

I told him I'd be right down.

That was two hours ago. I took the highway south of town, and was able to get to the hotel fairly quickly, despite the stoplights being out. The hotel grounds are a shambles, with branches, shingles, leaves, and debris of all kinds literally everywhere, but it appears that we got off easy. Although we received wind damage to the roof, and the fence is toast, all of our trees survived, and no windows were blown out.

This is almost unbelievable, as just a few blocks away are scenes of utter devastation. Menards is a shambles, and much of their building materials are scattered around town. Our airport commission president's Dodge dealership is gone. His cars are smashed flat, and

his showroom is splinters, with the roof laying across part of Riverside Drive. We were at the meeting, huddled in the boiler room together, and now his business is gone.

Down the road from us, our favorite Dairy Queen is simply gone. One of the signs is still there, but the store itself is just no longer there. And, being an 85 degree evening, there had to have been a bunch of employees in there when the storm hit.

It's possible to draw a line from Menard's to the Dodge dealership, right through the Dairy Queen, and into downtown proper. It missed our hotel by a few hundred yards, at most.

Downtown is a weird scene of utter pandemonium, combined with the ambience of an all-night kegger. All the college kids – 35,000 of them – are out partying, surveying the changed streetscape. The roof of a gas station was lifted up, moved about six feet toward the street, and then dropped back down, destroying everything inside. Cars are upside down, and one was evidently sucked off the top of a six-story parking ramp, and dropped into the street.

It took my son and I an hour to drive the mile from the hotel to the eastern edge of downtown. Dozens of alarms are wailing, set off when hundreds (thousands?) of windows blew out. Rubble and debris are everywhere, with stop lights twisted around light poles, and dumpsters tossed into the road like tumbleweeds. Fire trucks, ambulances, police cars, front end loaders, and National Guard vehicles struggled to get through the devastation and traffic – and all the while boom boxes were playing and the college kids were out taking pictures and video. Some idiots launched a few bottle rockets, and got the police riled up. Destroyed gas stations are cordoned off, in case of leaks, and they sure didn't need any fireworks setting off a conflagration.

Eventually we made it out of the area, and were able to get home. Our garbage – with six bags of leaves – is sitting out front, absolutely unmoved. Not a blade of grass is out of place.

Nature is amazing, and we were so very lucky. Our hangar and plane are unscathed, the hotel was just nicked a glancing blow, and our home is fine. There's no word on casualties yet, but from the looks of things, there almost had to be some.

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Jay Honeck
Iowa City, IA

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