



DON'T RAIN ON MY PARADE

BY RICK MUNDY

The green flag drops and the cars roar off the starting line at Daytona. The huge crowd cheers and everything is off to a great start for the day. Or is it? In an office at the speedway, one person is not watching the race but a computer monitor carefully evaluating an electrical storm that is traveling just south of Daytona. To continue the race in the middle of lightning would be totally reckless. To clear the track and the stands would ruin everyone's day. Minutes later the technician has collected enough tracking information and a decision is made. The storm is headed out to sea and the race proceeds as scheduled.

In fact one of the most important common weather occurrences is lightning. A person is more likely to get seriously injured or killed from lightning than most other types of weather. The knowledge of where a storm is and where the lightning is hitting is extremely valuable as described above.

One man in Vienna has been obsessed with keeping people from harm's way his entire life. For as far back as Dan Gropper can remember he wanted to be a "fire guy." Although

being a fireman is a passing fancy for many youngsters, Dan never stopped wanting to save people. So he learned first aid, then lifeguarding and eventually joined the volunteer fire department. He had grown up in Oceanside, NY, where he also developed a fascination with the weather, so critical to the boaters and fishermen in the area. It turns out he also had a fond interest in electronics and amateur radio. Combine all of those different loves, and that's where Dan is today.

His interest in the weather led to working closely with the National Weather Service (NWS). As he spent time in the forecast office in the late 80's it became obvious to him that warnings and alerts needed to get out faster and more efficiently.

Dan's company, Thunder Eagle, has created interfaces with two-way radios, public address systems, signboards, email and other means of communication to report local weather warnings and alerts. They also provide local, onsite weather stations for industry, state and local governments, schools, and others whose operations can be heavily affected by weather conditions.

The Thunder Eagle mission closely parallels that of the NWS, which in part is to save lives and property through the dissemination of weather alerts. Dan's mission is to get weather information to people so they can make good decisions in the face of severe weather conditions. Is it working? The evidence says "yes."



This spring 250 lives were saved when, using Thunder Eagle's alerting system, a factory building was evacuated less than five minutes before a tornado ripped the roof off the building. Their equipment was also in operation in 1997 in Indianapolis when, interfacing with the city's two-way radio system, 5000 people were evacuated right

before a tornado ripped up IU stadium. In fact, Dan likes to brag, the Thunder Eagle system is so good that the NWS uses it to monitor and troubleshoot THEIR alerting systems.

What is Dan's favorite weather? He wouldn't be pinned down but claims that he loves the "awe of weather" in all forms. His comments on the company? "I didn't plan it - I had a bunch of things that I liked and ended up putting them all together. It's a public service (all of their weather data is accessible by anyone) project that got out of hand."

Predictably, when asked about the future, he simply states that he will take advantage of the products that have not been invented yet in the technology of communications, providing data to create the best warning system that can save people's lives.

Looks like he's keeping up so far. As our meeting ended he pulled out his iPhone, accessed his website and in real-time, 1500 miles away in Florida, we watched 22 lightning strikes per minute just 20 miles from sunny Daytona. If they had been racing, the technicians would have been nervous but able to make the right decision in the end. ■

Another of Dan Gropper's tasks while working with the National Weather Service several years ago was to recruit volunteers to help the service confirm what they were seeing on the new Doppler radar. Dan himself was a volunteer and continues his daily weather observations and reporting to the NWS to this day. If he goes away on vacation he finds a substitute to record the data. Typically it is not hazardous duty but he did have a bad day one winter: sliding down the driveway on a 1/2 inch of ice (he measured it), legs in the air.

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