

the Blizzard of '88

TSgt Grant Callant, Fairchild AFB, Wash.

It was while we were packing up that everything with our weather went from good to bad quick!



Working in the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) business has its ups and downs — literally. The work can be long. However, the satisfaction of knowing the importance of what you're doing and the lasting effect our work has on the security of this country makes it worthwhile. Spending long hours at remote sites, we know weather plays a major role in how an ICBM team conducts its mission. When a team at a northern tier base heads out to perform maintenance, especially in the wintertime, this training needs to be second nature. Weather on any given day can change in just a few short minutes. In fact, a statement that gets said around Cheyenne a lot is, "If you don't like the weather, wait a minute, it will change."

I experienced this first hand as a new technical training instructor, working with the electromechanical maintenance teams on 5-level upgrade. My second class had four students, who were all ready and willing to learn. My lead instructor and I were already well into our 4th week of training, and on this particular day, we would be training them on motor generator checkout. It was March 10, 1988, and spring was knocking at the door. In the missile field, there are great distances to travel to get to your site — sometimes up to 3 hours depending on the weather. Today the weather was a great spring day, sunny and warm. Who knew that things would change so drastically and quickly?

After reaching our location and well into our training, we received a phone call from Maintenance Operations Control Center (MOCC). It was short and simple, "The weather is changing, button up the site, and go to the Maintenance Alert Facility (MAF) and remain there until the weather gets better." We didn't understand, because it was a beautiful sunny day with not a cloud in the sky.

It was while we were packing up downstairs that everything with our weather went to bad quick (*with ICBMs you work 30 feet below ground, so you don't see what the weather is doing*). By the time we got things packed into the vehicles, we had several inches of snow on the ground. Worst of all, like any day around the Wyoming-Nebraska area, we had lots of wind. We locked up, drove off site to the access road, and started to wait for security alarm resets. Sometimes it can take up to half an hour to get the alarms reset, so the MAF sent an Alert Force in a four-wheel drive to wait out the resets so we could get to a safe location. We had two

trucks and eight people including our two security escorts.

We started out on the road to the MAF, but conditions got worse. More snow and more wind brought incredible winter blizzard conditions. We didn't know it, but eventually this storm would only bring a total of 7 inches of snow, and the wind was gusting to more than 50 miles per hour.

After just a few short minutes of driving there was zero visibility. I could barely see the taillights of our second truck ahead of us. We knew that it was only 25 miles to the MAF,

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but with our speed we only made it a couple hundred feet a minute. Our vehicle started sliding, so it was time to put snow chains on.

With the snow, cold, and wind, putting the chains on proved to be a very difficult task. The weather was not cooperating. With tire chains on or not — if you can't see ahead of you — it doesn't matter if you have the chains, you're not going anywhere.

Finally, we weren't able to move at all and radioed the other vehicle that we were stuck. We called MOCC and notified them that we would have to hold out in the storm.

MOCC had the MAF send out a four-wheel drive to pull us out. It never made it to us. It had to turn around because the roads were so bad. Finally, they attempted to send out a CAT tractor from the MAF and called it back because visibility was too bad. As we talked back and forth on the radios, we got our winter weather gear out of the back of the truck and realized that we might be in this for the long haul overnight. Never in our wildest dreams did we realize there would be a TWO NIGHT stay waiting for us.

Francis E. Warren AFB was our support base. They sent out snowplows and bulldozers to try and rescue us. Several hours into it, we

heard a loud sound humming around us. As we looked out, we saw this helicopter overhead checking out the scene. On the radio they told us that they had orders to pull us out if they could, but due to the low visibility they couldn't put down anywhere and didn't want to chance it. They let down two big A-3 bags full of extra Sterno, MREs and wool blankets.

We had already broken open the winter survival boxes to check them out and see what we had. My lead instructor decided that he would take some of the supplies up to the other vehicle. I had no idea what was going to happen next. He got out of the vehicle and proceeded to the other vehicle with one of the other A-3 bags of supplies. Our vehicles were only a couple hundred feet apart, but you couldn't see each other. In fact, when you got out of the vehicle to relieve yourself, you couldn't see your hand in front of you. He didn't take this into consideration when he left to help out the other vehicle; he was just trying to help them out.

Several minutes went by as I wondered how things were going in the other vehicle, and how he was progressing with them. For whatever reason, to this day, I don't know why, I started testing my head lights by turning them on and off. A few short moments later there was a loud clunk on my driver's side door. I opened it and there stood my lead instructor gasping: *That he'd never made it to the other vehicle and "thanks man, for turning on the lights. You saved my life."*

I didn't know what he meant, but he finally told us that while he tried to get back to the other truck, he got disoriented and turned around in the blizzard. He said he started following a fence line, until snowdrifts buried it. Finally, he turned around and tried to head back to our truck. When he didn't know which way it was, he just laid down on the ground, put his head in his hands and started to pray.

Just a few minutes later, he saw this glowing flash in the snow ahead of him and he thought, *"I am*

saved." That is when he got back in the truck. We stuck it out for the rest of the 3 days and 2 nights on the side of the road. The other truck got by with what they had in their winter survival kit.

On the 3rd day, after we awoke, we heard the helicopter hovering around again. This time it was able to find a place to land and it took us back to our support base. Except for minor frostbite, everyone returned back to base healthy.

The one major thing we learned was that **"weather can change in an instant."** We didn't know which way the weather came from, but when it did come, it came in a gale. We survived because

we didn't loose our cool. We just settled down and waited it out. Nobody got stupid and thought they could walk to the MAF or anything. Another lesson learned was we should have tied a rope around my lead instructor when he attempted to go to the other vehicle. This way he could have tied it to the other vehicle and we could use it to guide us back and forth. The old Cheyenne statement, *"If you don't like the weather — wait a minute, it will change,"* was never more true than on that day. We are lucky to have made it through. Never underestimate the weather because in a battle with Mother Nature, you'll lose. ▶

How to survive ... Cold Weather

- ❄️ **Stay dry.**
- ❄️ **Keep out of the wind.** Use anything available to make a shelter; your car, blankets, tarp, tent, branches, or even packed snow.
- ❄️ **Avoid exhaustion and perspiring.** Open layers of clothing if you increase your workload and work slowly.
- ❄️ **Stay put.** Do not travel unless necessary for safety. If you do travel, leave a recognizable signal showing your direction of travel.
- ❄️ **Recognize onset of cold weather injuries and prevent if able.**

Frostbite: cover your extremities and keep them dry.

Hypothermia: Recognize it is most prevalent in 30-50 degree weather and when you are wet.

News

Blizzard '88

Storm 'buries' many Warren people

Major, Chem E. Measner
The storm began to fall. The wind kicked up and snow to howl. Suddenly there was zero visibility. Survival was soon the foremost thing in the minds of many people. While attempting to reach safety at Alpha 1 launch control facility, the eight became stranded in their vehicles for two days and nights. They had to fill sleeping bags in our survival kits and our lives," said Sgt. Lawrence Muldon Jr., an electronic mechanical maintenance team instructor.

The second blizzard of the winter struck March 10, 1988, dropping seven inches of snow and producing winds in excess of 50 mph. For those caught in the snow, it was a time to seek shelter — in whatever fashion possible.

Because of Muldon's mission to keep a combination of 200 Parachute and Mountain III missiles alert, maintaining the missile systems and keep them operational is a job that does not stop when it gets weather. That team are sent to the field weather permitting, after safety and weather briefings. However, on that Thursday morning, no one knew a blizzard would strike with such ferocity.

After completing a maintenance training mission, Alpha 1 team Burns, Wynn, six maintenance team, and two security positions began their day. Leaving the missile site, they were directed to Alpha 1, 21 miles away. It was logical the time to move to the LCP as the winter storm was getting worse and visibility decreasing.

The eight were inside two vehicles, a maintenance van and a six passenger pickup truck. Four people were in each vehicle as they began their trip and north toward Alpha 1.

"Without warning, we hit a white out," said AIC Sgt. Paulsen, an EMT trainer with the 80th Operational Missile Maintenance Squadron.

The storm got so bad that no one could see for the drivers by sticking their heads out the windows to see the roads and grass alongside the road," said AIC Timothy Smith, also an EMT, who was with 80th OMSM.

Eventually the vehicles became stuck in our drifts about 50 yards apart as they tried to pull out. The team struggled to free the vehicles, but to abandon their attempts as weather gear ran out and the howling, wind-driven snow drifted around the vehicles. The team members broke up survival gear preparing to stay in their vehicles and wait.

Little did the team know how critical the sleeping bags were going to be for their survival. "The sleep was right in the middle of a drift," said AIC Sgt. Battaglia, a security escort with the 80th OMSM Security Squadron. "He had a hard time using the doors because the snow was packed



The 80th Civil Engineering Squadron snow team was sent to force after the March 10 blizzard that hit Warren and left many people stranded in the missile field.

Against them. Also, snow was blowing into the cab through the tiny cracks around the closed air vents and whether what they could do.

During the ordeal, many of the team members had to leave in their haste and fear. AIC Stephen Myers, an EMT trainer, and AIC Marcus High, a security escort with the 80th, said that without the sleeping bags in the survival kits, the stranded team would have developed frostbite or frozen to death.

After getting stuck, the team radioed to the Alpha 1 flight security controller that they were stranded east of the LCP on a country track. This led to a rescue operation headed by members of the 80th Strategic Missile Wing's battle staff assembled in the wing command post.

Early Friday, a rescue party, including a snow plow, snow blower, ambulance and maintenance van were sent from Warren to try and reach the eight people. However, the severe blowing and drifting snow thwarted the attempt as the party could not see through drifts deeper than the snow plow and blower to within six miles of the stranded team. Then, the snow glow became stuck in the 30-foot drifts, and the rescue party had to take refuge at a nearby ranch because of the blizzard conditions.

Inside the stranded vehicle, the eight began to wonder when their rescue would come as they monitored the would-be rescue party's attempts over a radio.

Later Friday afternoon, a Detachment 10 helicopter with a medical technician aboard attempted a rescue. But because of the severe winds, blowing snow, near zero visibility and marginal radio, they were not able to pick up the stranded team. However, the helicopter crew did drop off

more food, water and survival equipment to the occupants of the van.

Seeking the extra supplies for the second half of the team, Sergeant Muldon left the truck for the van. "After dividing the supplies, I left the van to the pickup, but I couldn't see because of the blowing snow," the sergeant explained. "I walked out about 25 yards before losing my sense of direction. The wind knocked me down and the snow had completely covered the fence along the roadside. I began to search for my backpack, but even then I was confused. I was going to die."

Suddenly, he saw headlights flash on and off on behind for them. He reached the van, AIC Gary Callahan, an EMT instructor, had turned the lights on and the van's battery was dead.

"It was very fortunate. If AIC Gary Callahan had not turned the lights on that time, if I hadn't been looking directly at the vehicle, there I would have probably died there," Sergeant Muldon said.

Enduring the blizzard by using survival kits gave help the team members stay alive, according to wing safety officials.

Some of the team members used batteries on discarded food bags as toilets. By staying inside the vehicles, they protected themselves from the severe weather. Safety officials stressed that this was important as it kept the bodies of the people from the severe wind and snow.

The team also used survival kit stress to try and heat up the vehicles after the gas ran out and they had to use the emergency lights.

Contrasting the severity of the outside weather to their safety inside the van, AIC Marcus High said the ice crystals about one inch thick formed on all the windows. The team also used the vehicle's rear view mirror.

Rescue of the team was made Saturday morning when a helicopter landed near the vehicles. Stunned for more than 48 hours, all 10 members survived their ordeal.

"It's appropriate that the help from everyone try to rescue us," AIC Marcus High said.

After the rescue, AIC John Sullivan, an EMT trainer with 80th OMSM, also was stranded. AIC Stephen Myers and Muldon were on their last training mission.

Those involved in the rescue attempt March 10-11 were the helicopter crew that dropped the extra supplies to the team were:

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