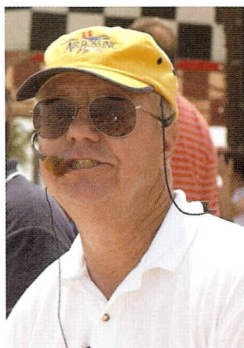




# Command Decision



I start lurking about the *Weather Channel* the week before an airshow. This time, the forecast models for Eglin AFB had an ominous prediction of a major low pressure area moving through Northwest Florida over the mid-April Open House weekend.

For the Friday “practice” show, we enjoyed typical Florida weather – warm temperatures, and tropical breezes – as the kinks were worked out in the show schedule and performances. The rest of

the weekend would be another story!

Saturday, at dawn, the weather was again beautiful, almost as pretty as the Eglin weather officer who delivered the bad news: a low pressure over eastern Texas and its associated cold front would trigger a squall line of heavy thunderstorms. Convective activity in front of the squall line could cause pop-up thunderstorms to form in the Gulf and move through the area by early Saturday afternoon.

I don’t know if it was the information or the weather officer that held everyone’s attention, but the news was not good. According to the forecast, we would be slammed with heavy rain and winds in excess of 45 knots at about the time the Thunderbirds were scheduled to take the field. The Open House Project Officers had developed excellent contingency plans for pop-up thunderstorms, but with what radar was painting moving through Mississippi, the storms were not contingent – they were guaranteed.

As an airshow announcer, I have weathered two incidences where a major thunderstorm hit an airshow in progress. The first was at a military base where the airboss suffered from “mission completion bias” and ignored the warnings of the approaching storm until it was too late to clear the spectators and secure the field. That was where I learned a lighting bolt was about a foot in diameter, and all that is left of a port-a-john taking a lightning strike is the seat! At that show, we were fortunate that no serious injuries occurred, although several aircraft suffered major damage and the field was in shambles.

The second incident was at a civilian show where the producer wanted to fly as many acts as possible before the on-coming storm hit the field. This time, I issued repeated warnings to the crowd that a nasty thunderstorm was approaching, but the crowd assumed that as long as it was safe to fly acts, they were safe on the ground. The next act was taxiing out when a light rain started falling. The act headed for the hangar. What quickly followed were high winds, heavy rain, and small hail. We retreated to the performers’ hangar and watched as the spectators scrambled for

protection under whatever they could find. We also watched as two ambulances picked-up spectators for transport to the hospital due to broken bones and other injuries caused by their efforts to run for the parking lot.

In this business, we sometimes give lip service to “safety is a priority,” but in the above examples, “safety” was limited to the performers. Eglin’s leadership took a different approach. They viewed the weather situation from the perspective of (quoting the base commander) “Safety, Security, Mission” in that order.

After the 0730 briefing, the base leadership held a conclave to discuss the impending weather situation. Several officers thought the event could be run to noon and then the gates closed, the spectators sent home, and the rest of the day’s flying canceled. Others thought the gates should not be opened at all and the entire day’s flying canceled. None felt that they should take the chance of having 60,000+ people on the field in a thunderstorm.

The command decision was to never open the gates, cancel all flying, and secure the airfield. Within 2-1/2 hours, all planes had been moved to safety, and the base was as ready as possible for the incoming weather.

Any time a weather decision of this type is made, the decision maker is put into an unenviable position of “Goat or Hero” – a “Goat” if the weather does not materialize and a “Hero” if it does. That’s the reason decision makers are paid the big bucks – everyone will judge their work with the advantage of hindsight.

This time, the squall line was two hours late and, although the dew point continued to climb towards 73 degrees (a critical temperature for strong thunderstorms), the Gulf remained quiet until early evening. When the storm did hit, it hit hard, measuring sustained winds of over 45 knots and heavy rain – the same storm that ravaged the east coast with death and destruction all the way to Nova Scotia.

The Eglin command decision was made on the best available information. It was one of those “80% decisions,” a judgment call necessarily made without all the information – one of those hard, possibly unpopular decisions that saves lives and protects property.

I strongly concurred with the decision made early that Saturday morning, and I still support that decision with the value of hindsight. *If* the squall line had been two hours early, *If* the warm Gulf had spawned pop-up thunderstorms, and *If* the crowd had been on the field in these situations, we would have all been “Goats,” operating what the lawyers would have called an “attractive nuisance.”

It was the strong leadership of the Eglin AFB commanders that made them “Heroes” in my book. The leaders were willing to lead and to take the available information and make the hard decision.

Although it is tempting to perpetually “what if” any situation, the truth is, Team Eglin stayed true to “Safety, Security, Mission.”

