

MESO's Convoy Chasing Guidelines

A while back in our guest book, an irritated young man suggested that all this "weather bunk" was garbage, that all one needed to chase storms was a car and a scanner. This is like saying that all one needs to skydive is a plane with an open door. Both statements are technically correct; both are suicidal. Anyone who would storm chase without supplying himself with every possible edge ~knowledge being a real biggie here~ is a disaster waiting to happen.

We at *MESO* are advocates of safe chasing. To this end, we spend our idle time learning as much about the weather as we can possibly pack in to our craniums. We use every technical advantage we can... even though a few detractors think one can often be burdened by too much technology. **YOU CANNOT BE BURDENED WITH TOO MUCH TECHNOLOGY UNLESS YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO USE THE TECHNOLOGY YOU HAVE.** It's almost like saying one can be burdened by too much knowledge.

So how do we manage it all? We do "convoy chasing." There is a certain joy in being at one and alone with nature... save it for a sunset. Storm chasing is not, or should not be a solo activity.

The advantages of convoy chasing are numerous, but the pitfalls are many. The first step is setting up the rules for the team. You set the rules before you construct the team, and then only select team mates that agree to the rules. Our rules are pretty simple: No night chasing, no core punching, no substance abuse, agreement to our chain of command, obedience to the local laws, consideration for the local people, respect for the opinions and input of others on the team, continuance of knowledge and learning, and leave your ego at home.

Another thing to bear in mind is to try to strive for a diverse talent base. All should have a passion for and knowledge of severe weather, but to have 12 meteorologists would be a little redundant. We have meteorologists on staff, but we also have computer people, navigation people, electronics people, communications people, photographers, videographers, people with mechanical ability, and people with emergency first aid experience. Despite our diversity, all our people have had Skywarn training as well.

In addition to having diverse talent, it is **CRITICALLY** important that your team members get along on a personal level. Before we take anyone on a long chase with us, we open a dialogue and get to know that person for at least a few weeks before we sign them. If you have doubts about a person before you chase with them, 8 hours in wet clothes after 12 hours without sleep or a hot meal, and five hours of intense forecasting and tracking, only to find yourself on a bust... well, your opinion of that person **WON'T** improve.

We have also found that assigning certain responsibilities to each person is critical to the success and safety of the chase. When we're in active pursuit, the drivers drive... only drive. Managing a car and watching the skies do not mix well. Each vehicle has a navigator. It is his or her responsibility to stay on course and keep in touch with the Command Vehicle...which is the vehicle where the navigation and tracking is done from. Our Command Vehicle (McWAR) has a driver, a communicator, a data archivist, a navigator, and a forecaster/tracker. Maps are printed from one of the computers in McWar and dispersed to

each vehicle BEFORE we leave, and any changes are communicated to the other vehicles by means of radio. From our command vehicle, the storm is tracked and the angle of approach is determined.

Our convoy line-up is unchanging. We have a Probe vehicle, manned by two or three people. Your best driver, best spotter or someone who knows what to look for, and a good navigator should man your probe vehicle. The Probe Vehicle, which we refer to as "Probe 1" is first in line. Anyone who thinks manning the probe vehicle is fun should NOT be in the probe vehicle... they don't have enough severe weather experience. People in the probe vehicle get hit with everything that they warn their others of. It's a position of extreme responsibility. Second to the probe vehicle is Probe 2, who keeps an eye on Probe 1 and also has a driver and communications/navigator. Then we have the Media Vehicle, which houses our people who film and shoot. Then comes the Command Vehicle, or McWAR. The people in McWAR do the constant tracking, navigating, and make the final decision where to stop, and when to bail out. Following McWAR is our Tail Vehicle, which watches everyone's back. The Tail position is also one of extreme responsibility. It watches the fleet and the back door. Other vehicles are assigned as need be, but we always have a probe, a command, and a tail.

When we decide on where to stop, the first thing we do is computer maps showing exits from the area in ALL directions. These maps are printed and given to each vehicle. While the maps are being done, the Safety Manager makes sure that we're in a safe spot, all vehicles are well lit and facing towards the preferred way OUT of the storm zone, and that the best available emergency shelter is ear marked and known to one and all, and that no one is doing anything overtly stupid, like standing under power lines. Someone ALWAYS keeps track of where we are in relation to the storm track, both visually and on radar.

Now here is where chain of command comes in. We are all mesmerized by a severe weather. It has a near hypnotic effect on me, and I can easily zone out common sense. In our group, the guy in charge is the one with the most field experience (in our case, John Bender... a chaser and spotter for over 30 years). When the guy in charge says its time to move, YOU MOVE. Staying for that one last clip or shot could cause your death or someone else's.

Most important~always stay in radio contact with all vehicles at all times... and in visual contact with all vehicles when you're in active pursuit... or retreat. If you lose someone, stop... unless you are in imminent danger. But stop as soon as you can, and re-establish radio and visual contact. This can be dicier than you might think, especially if someone has gone beyond radio range. Because radios have limited range, we also have cell phones in each car. Each car in the convoy also has emergency lighting, usually amber lights on top of the vehicle.

Last but not least, by mutual agreement, if we come across a community where our resources, either manpower or technological, are in need for disaster preparedness or disaster recovery, **the chase stops**. This is possibly not really a rule that should be incorporated in chase convoy guidelines, but it is a pretty darned good rule for life in general; that there is no good reason for turning your backs on people in need. We try never to lose sight of the fact of that which we seek causes loss of life, health, and property, and leaves in its wake heartbreak and ruin. There will be other storms, but the chance to truly make a difference in

someone else's life is a rare and fine opportunity. We believe so strongly in this that we have incorporated it into our mission statement.

We are constantly improving our convoy methodology, and have found that done right, it results in a very high degree of success and safety.