

Working at the edge of a tornado

NWEC linemen experience a wet and wild second shift

BY JOHN EGAN



ON A LATE AUGUST AFTERNOON, after North Western Electric Cooperative linemen Lee Keppeler and Tom Clark finished their shift, they went their separate ways. Lee headed to his brother's farm to look at a 4-H project that his great-niece and great-nephew would enter in the Williams County Fair.

Tom and his wife, Andrea, visited with neighbors. "I remember thinking, 'Man, it's really humid,'" Tom recalled.

Two hours after their shift ended, they were

called back in to restore a power outage. But that outage was just the beginning of a wild second shift that lasted about 10 hours. While working to restore power to NWEC mem-

bers, Lee and Tom found themselves at the edge of an EF2 tornado, with wind speeds up to 125 mph.

"We had heard that there were some nasty storms around," Lee said. "When we got to our first site, we saw that several poles were on the ground. I was up in the bucket for about five minutes when the rain started coming down real hard. I got back in the truck, just as the sky turned a greenish-gray."

"Our phones were going crazy with tornado warnings," added Tom, who has been with NWEC for almost seven years. "The rain was coming down so hard that we could barely see two truck-lengths ahead of us. There was flash after flash of lightning, some of it lasting five seconds or more. Then it was as if someone flipped a switch, and it all stopped. There was a huge, low-hanging cloud right over us, and then another cloud swooped in and they started rotating."

Lee, the crew chief, has been a lineman for 36 years.



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“The last time northwest Ohio had a tornado was 1994,” he said. “There’s no tornado-specific training that you go through as a lineworker.”

But good common sense sure comes in handy.

When Lee and Tom saw a tornado forming, they got in their truck and drove away from it.

The EF2 tornado touched down at 6:04 p.m. Aug. 24. The National Weather Service confirmed that six tornadoes hit the Defiance six-county region that day, according to local news reports.

The destruction was widespread. “We saw several houses and barns that were ripped apart,” Lee said. “There was steel wrapped around our poles and roof rafters in our lines.”



The Aug. 24 tornado crew, from left, were Chad Livensparger, Ryan Belton, Doug Dulle, Joe Belcher, Tom Clark, and Lee Keppeler.

Despite the damage, the tornado caused no deaths. “It could have been a lot worse,” Tom said.

Fortunately, none of the six linemen restoring power that night were injured. Lee and Tom independently commented that communication was the most important factor in preventing injuries during power restoration.

“The biggest thing was that we were all talking to each other,” Lee said. “Nobody did anything without telling their buddy first.”

Although Lee and Tom were the only linemen to find themselves near the Aug. 24 tornado, they went out of their way to recognize the other four linemen who helped get power back on: Joe Belcher, Doug Dulle, Ryan Belton, and Chad Livensparger.

“It wasn’t just Tom and me,” Lee said. “We have a good group of guys, and we work well as a team. Two of these linemen have only one year on the job. They were introduced to some pretty severe weather that night.”

Tom and Lee’s second shift ended about 3:45 a.m. Aug. 25. They got about two hours of sleep before they were called out again to fix another outage.

Reflecting on his severe weather experience, Tom said matter-of-factly, “This is our job, and we’re going to work.”

Lee agreed: “That night was nothing special. We were trying to get people’s lights back on safely and quickly. We were just doing what we had been trained to do.”

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