



**Year: 1979**

**Location: Offutt AFB, NE**

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*Always look outside before briefing or you might get hit by a snowball!*

Offutt Base Weather Station, Winter 1979.

I was a newly-minted 2d LT manning the counter during a weekend day shift. I had driven through very light freezing drizzle on the way to work. The overnight forecaster briefed me to expect the freezing drizzle to end very soon; certainly before the next Looking Glass crew arrived for their briefing or the airborne bird needed to land. As I began working on that morning's 175-1 briefings and the Looking Glass packages, the 55th SRW Command Post called for an update on the freezing precipitation warning about to expire. I passed on what I was briefed; the freezing drizzle would end any moment and the warning would be allowed to expire. I then got back to the stack of 175-1s but also thinking hard about why this freezing drizzle was happening in the first place. At the shift change briefing, the very experienced TSgt told me there was no warm layer on the 00Z skew-T or on the incoming Omaha RAOB data being plotted by the observer nor any freezing drizzle being reported at downstream stations we routinely watched. Freezing precipitation was extremely impactful to the Looking Glass mission because it was the only condition that prevented, without waiver for any reason, the landing of the airborne EC-135 and/or the take-off of its replacement. When freezing precipitation happened, a decision to scramble a tanker had to be made in a timely fashion to ensure that the Airborne Command Post did not falter in its continuous, command and control mission. The Offutt BWS forecasters knew this well and, in winter, watched continuously for any signs of low-level warmth and moisture migrating northward from the Gulf to overrun cold air at the surface. We also knew from experience that any 55thSRW Command Post call during these events would soon be followed by an urgent visit from the 55th SRW/DO likely followed by an even more urgent visit from the 55th SRW/CC if the critical decision to scramble a tanker had to be made. Sure enough. not long after the Command Post call, the 55 SRW/DO appeared at the counter asking the expected question, "When is this freezing crap going to end?" I kept to my story, "Any moment, sir." I then began even more urgently looking for data to support this forecast; the 12Z skew-T, another scan of the map wall, conditional climatology but all proved to be no help. "This crap shouldn't be happening, so it's got to stop soon", I continued to believe. The 55 SRW/CC then made his expected appearance once, twice, a third time and

each time I gave him that same “confident” answer. After his fourth visit, he was understandably perturbed but remained professional and, to my surprise, likely because of the fear he saw in my eyes, thanked me for my input. Finally, on his fifth visit, I threw up my hands in frustration and said, “I can’t figure out why this crap is happening now so forecasting when it will stop is obviously beyond me!” He actually laughed and then got on his brick with instructions to scramble a tanker. The freezing drizzle finally stopped around 3PM as my replacement arrived. I was, honestly, humbled beyond words but also incredibly impressed by that One-Star’s patience with my inexperience as well as the appreciation he later expressed for the concern and effort I put into trying to get that mission accomplished. The lesson learned for this new forecaster was that data must never override the reality of what’s actually happening. In this case, my later bust review indicated that a very narrow warm layer had migrated northward between all the reporting stations and RAOB sites. In those days of hand-plotted charts, primitive model data, no regular satellite imagery and single-station radar, forecasting was far more art than science with experience on-station and being deeply embedded within the customer’s mission the key to success. I went on to earn the confidence of the 55 SRW leaders, operational decision-makers and crews as I gained weather and flying ops experience though I did have one additional lesson to learn at Offutt. One night, a 2AM classified mission got delayed after I had already arrived at the SCI vault to brief. Rather than return to the BWS, I stayed to further “bond” with the crew. Two hours later, the briefing commenced as usual with my weather. As I told them to expect a dry runway for take-off, a snowball flew from the back of the room and hit me in the chest. It had snowed during that “bonding time” which, in typical crew dog fashion, provided an opportunity to teach me another important lesson; always look outside before briefing. I went on to tell young forecasters working under my supervision at follow-on assignments that they have one opportunity to be 100% accurate ... at zero hour ... so always look outside or at the latest observation to be sure to get at least the first line of their TAF right!