

BEST OF LUCK IN YOUR  
FUTURE ENDEAVORS  
(LESSONS LEARNED BY A  
PRIVATE-SECTOR METEOROLOGIST)

by

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The stack is half-an-inch high now. The last paragraph of each letter-- there are 102 of them-- in that stack is virtually identical: "Once again, thank you for your interest in (name of corporation) and the best of luck in your future endeavors." It's a personnel department phrase which means "please don't bother us again."

The rejections have been flowing in for 18 months. But I'm used to rejections, because besides being a meteorologist, I'm a free-lance writer. In that business rejections are a daily affair. But after 102 contacts in the writing game I would have gotten a sale or two. Not so as an experienced, private-sector operational meteorologist; I haven't even gotten an interview. Even employment agencies won't bother with an unemployed meteorologist.

The only interest expressed in me came from two outfits who knew that, as a meteorologist with 17 years' experience, I was backed into a financial corner. They said they'd be glad to put me to work as long as I took a 30 to 40 percent cut in salary (back to what I was earning in 1974).

Needless to say, I didn't take either job. I feel I'm worth considerably more than the 1974 model. Pride, however, doesn't pay the mortgage. At this point I'm not sure what will. My wife has suggested I become an insurance salesman. We both laughed about that. But we both knew she wasn't kidding.

How did I get into this mess? Destiny just finally caught up with me, I guess. Ever since the 5th grade I wanted to be a meteorologist. I didn't know the words for it then, but what I really wanted to be was a "synoptic" or "operational" meteorologist. A forecaster. But nobody was around in the 1950s to tell me not to follow the private industry route.

Actually, things started out very well. I got a BS degree in atmospheric science from the University of Washington, then spent 5 years on active duty with the Air Force. I had every intention of getting a Master's Degree through the Air Force, but a war fouled up those plans. I entered private-sector meteorology after my military tour. I thoroughly enjoyed the work, first with The Travelers Weather Service in Hartford, Connecticut, then with ERT (Environmental Research and Technology, Inc.) in Concord, Massachusetts.

By 1978 I was the operations manager of the forecast center at ERT. But the business there suddenly collapsed and a bunch of us were walking the streets. Fortunately my writing ability, and a desire to learn on my own, led to the production of my second trade book. And the rapport I'd established teaching Saudi Arabians at ERT helped me obtain some contract work. So I didn't starve (just lost weight.) In fact, there may be more

Saudi contract work in the offing. But it's a hell of a way to live... not knowing where my next pay check will be coming from... or indeed, if one will be coming.

I wasn't the only one who got zapped in the 1978 crash. At last count there were 4 of us still unemployed. A fifth person had taken a job as a bank teller, another was driving a cab, and yet another was back in meteorology, but at an initial pay cut of 40 percent.

As you can see, there's a great future in the private-sector forecasting business. Yes, of course, I'm bitter. The problem is, it's an amorphous, non-directed bitterness. I'm not angry at any thing or any body. I'm frustrated by circumstances. I perceive that "that's how things are", and that the efforts of any individual or any group won't change them.

My experience may not be "typical". But neither is it atypical. I know there are dozens (unfortunately) who will validate the lessons I've learned over the past 17 years. It's a little late for me to profit from these lessons, but maybe it's not for my younger colleagues. Pay attention, students.

**LESSON 1-- DON'T BECOME AN OPERATIONAL METEOROLOGIST!** There is at best a limited future in that field from the standpoint of career advancement, particularly in non-government and non-military jobs. It is a career fraught with frustration and little financial reward. Don't be suckered in by the lure of TV jobs, either. True, there is good money to be had, but only in the top 20 or so markets. And job security in the field is virtually nil.

**LESSON 2-- IF YOU WISH TO PURSUE A CAREER IN METEOROLOGY, MAKE SURE YOU OBTAIN AT LEAST A MASTER'S DEGREE AND BECOME FAMILIAR WITH COMPUTER PROGRAMMING AND DISPERSION MODELING.** Programming and modeling weren't part of the elective curriculum when I was in college in the early-1960s. The prime reason I can't get a job in meteorology now is because I don't have a background in either computers or modeling. (I might add that there is a sub-lesson here: **LESSON 2A-- DON'T WAIT TO GET AN ADVANCED DEGREE.** Once you're earning money and supporting a family, going back to school is not particularly easy and you probably won't do it. My father, a college professor, warned me repeatedly of that danger. He was right. I learned the hard way.)

**LESSON 3-- IF YOU INSIST ON BECOMING A PRIVATE-SECTOR OPERATIONAL METEOROLOGIST, MAKE SURE YOU HAVE A BACK-UP PROFESSION OR AVOCATION.** You'll need it sooner or later. Preferably you should study to become a doctor or lawyer. (You'd probably never be accepted as a psychiatrist.) Getting back to a practical level though, the "senior"

## EPILOGUE

meteorologists I know who have best been able to weather the rather un-rewarding career of operational meteorology have been those with additional talents or interests. My writing and speaking abilities— which landed me, among other things, a transatlantic voyage on the QE2— have kept me off the welfare rolls (so far.) One of my contemporaries has turned an avocation into a fulltime, profitable business. He's a numismatist, buying and selling coins. Still another old friend is dabbling in real estate, although that's a difficult field in which to only "dabble".

The point is that no matter how talented you are as a weather forecaster, your potential is severely limited, both in terms of money and employability. You're being blind to reality if you enter the world of private meteorology without a backup avocation or profession.

I'm not seeking sympathy for myself. And I don't wish to denigrate the profession in general. But there is a definite "black hole" in meteorology: private-sector forecasting. I've met others, not just people with whom I've worked, who have been swept up by the black hole. They will echo my warnings.

Stay away.

But, if you are determined to become a modern-day Don Quixote, tilting at black holes, I can say only, "... thank you for your interest in (my article) and best of luck in your future endeavors."

After 22 months and approximately 150 contacts (I stopped counting at 115) there was a happy ending to my search for salaried employment. I am now the staff meteorologist for a corporation dealing in systems engineering, which includes efforts designed to develop automated weather information communications. Thus, my job is not directly related to operational meteorology, but there is an obvious indirect relationship.

Three other people were unemployed and two under-employed at the time I wrote the article. Happily, four are fully employed again, and one has returned to school in pursuit of an MBA. Of the four re-employed individuals, only one returned to private sector meteorology. One got a job with the NWS; and the other two took jobs only indirectly related (as mine is) to operational meteorology.

Still, the lessons learned remain valid and the after-taste of frustration lingers. We'd all rather be involved directly in operations. But decent salaries and the opportunities for career advancement are about as plentiful as clockwise-revolving tornadoes.

## FOOTNOTE

1. Mr. Bernard is the staff meteorologist for Systems Architects, Inc. in Lexington, MA. He is also a major in the Air Force Reserve (AWS), and the author of two books on meteorology and climatology.

## ANNUAL MEETING-CALL FOR PAPERS

The Annual Meeting of the National Weather Association will be held at Penn State University, University Park, PA on November 4 and 5, 1982. Participation of all members is encouraged. Time will be allocated for (a) presentation of papers, (b) informal discussion of forecasting topics, (c) informal presentation of ideas on solving common forecasting/communication problems and (d) a panel discussion of forecaster training, retraining and development. There will be opportunities to observe and use the Penn State minicomputer-based weather station facilities, and a business meeting. Sessions will be held in the Walker Building, site of the Penn State Weather Station, and in the Nittany Lion Inn, on the Penn State campus. A luncheon meeting will take place at the Inn on Thursday, November 4 at noon.

Those wishing to make a presentation should send a short abstract or very brief summary to Dr. John J. Cahir, 620 Walker Building, University Park, PA 16802 prior to September 1982 so that sessions can be planned.

More detailed information on the annual meeting appeared in the March 1982 Newsletter and will continue to appear in subsequent issues.