The Christmas Eve edition of the NT News in 1974 had a typical holiday-angled front page that sought to set a happy mood for the coming fun. Even the paper’s official weather forecast gave no indication of what was to come.

Even the Bureau of Meteorology-supplied weather forecast on the back page contained not a single clue to the fury that would be unleashed on Darwin. Issued at midnight on December 23, the weather brief read: ‘Darwin, occasional showers, 30°C’.

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The city’s early risers were thumbing through their copies of the NT News on December 24, 1974. Cyclone Tracy had just skirted Cape Fourcroy on the southern tip of Bathurst Island.

Tracy was about to make the fateful southeasterly jink that would set it on its course for Darwin. It would be hours before people knew her true course and the NT News of December 24 made no mention of the looming weather event and its potential for disaster.

The paper led with a breezy front page article headlined “We Scoff At the Scrooges”.

“Australia may be plunged into economic gloom but in Darwin we’re still spending big,” said the opening paragraph of the lead story.

The article featured a photograph of Mrs Eileen Clough, of Millner, along with her children Kim, 12, and David, 10, with two trolley loads of “Christmas goodies”, including ham and other foodstuffs that may never have reached the Christmas table.

The front page also contained a cheery Christmas salutation with the headline “All the very best!”

“Happy Christmas.

Top End pioneer Mrs Nellie Flynn has also sent a Christmas message.

“She wants everyone to have a Merry Christmas and prosperous New Year – and to stick to soft drink.”

As history was to prove, soft drink was the last thing on the mind on a sizeable percentage of Darwin residents on December 24, 1974.

The only mention of a threatening weather event in the last NT News published before Tracy related to two massive bushfires west of the NSW town of Cobar.

Elsewhere, near the front of the paper, there was a report about British Prime Minister Edward Heath escaping an IRA bomb attack.

And in local news, there was a picture story about eight new Department of Transport buses which had been driven from Adelaide and Sydney to begin service in Darwin.

But the News could hardly be blamed for its scant regard about Tracy. Even the Bureau of Meteorology-supplied weather forecast on the back page contained not a single clue to the fury that would be unleashed on Darwin.

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First voice from the ruins

History suggests that ABC reporter Mike Hayes was the first voice to be heard by the rest of Australia from Darwin following Tracy.

On Christmas afternoon, soon after the first reports of Darwin’s devastation, filtered through to the outside world reporter Bruce Gundy in Melbourne decided on pure speculation to ring the ABC newsroom in Darwin.

He was surprised to even get a ringtone and even more surprised when reporter Mike Hayes answered the phone from the shattered surrounds of the ABC newsroom in Darwin. Hayes told Gundy about the human side of the story as well as the cyclone’s psychological impact on the people of Darwin.