OPERATION
NAVY HELP

By Commodore Eric Johnston AM,
OBE, CSU, RANEM, RAN
Administrator of the
Northern Territory
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Disaster operations by the Royal Australian Navy post-Cyclone Tracy

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Cataloguing in publication data provided by the Northern Territory Library Service.

JOHNSTON, Eric (Eric Eugene), 1933 —


Occasional papers; no. 5
ISBN 0 7245 0469 9
ISSN 0817—2927

1. Australia. Royal Australian Navy
I. Northern Territory Library Service. II. Title.
III. Series (Occasional papers (Northern Territory Library Serviced); no. 5)

363.3492

Prepared by the Distance Education Branch of the Northern Territory Department of Education.
April 1987
P&P87/102-300
INTRODUCTION

For some time we at the State Reference Library have felt that there existed a serious gap in Darwin's cultural calendar. The city had no lecture series dealing in depth with the history of the Territory in all its diverse ramifications. Australia's southern cities all have their individual lectures, such as the Boyer and the Curtin lectures and, closer to home, Alice Springs has the Doreen Braitling Memorial Lectures. All Darwin had to offer in this area were the 'Warehouse Workshops' run by the Darwin Institute of Technology.

When no other organisation showed signs of coming up with anything suitable, the State Reference Library instituted the Eric Johnston Lectures. I am very grateful to His Honour Commodore Johnston for agreeing to have the lecture series named after him, and for delivering the inaugural lecture himself. Who better to name the series after than our present Administrator, who experienced with other Darwinites the terrors and traumas of Cyclone Tracy.

The Eric Johnston Lectures will be delivered annually, probably during the Dry Season, alternating between a prominent Territorian and a reputable interstate/overseas personality.

The topics of the lectures can cover any subject, provided the central theme relates to the Northern Territory. The lectures will be published by the NT Library Service in its Occasional Papers series, and we are optimistic that the ABC will continue the practice, adopted with the inaugural lecture, of recording and subsequently broad-casting the lectures.

It is my hope that, through these lectures, the people of Darwin will be able to hear famous people speak on subjects close to the hearts of Territorians, and perhaps discuss points of interest with the speaker afterwards.

The Eric Johnston Lectures will, I am sure, establish themselves as a prestigious, and scholarly annual event in Darwin's social and cultural calendar, and make a real contribution to the spread of knowledge on Territory history, not just in the Northern Territory, but throughout Australia.

RON DAVIS
Director
Northern Territory Library Service


Plate I

Commodore Eric Johnston AM, OBE, CStJ, RANEM, RAN
Administrator of the Northern Territory
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When I was first approached to give permission to the State Reference Library of the Northern Territory for a series of lectures to be named as the Eric Johnston Lectures I was very flattered and very touched. My pleasure in accepting was somewhat diminished by a subsequent request to deliver the first lecture myself.

Inevitably, the first lecture in a series creates the yardstick against which subsequent deliveries are measured, and I fear that future comparison might find Eric Johnston himself to be somewhat lacking in his opening performance.

However, I stand before you to speak to you on the topic of _The Role of the Royal Australian Navy in Darwin, Post Cyclone Tracy_. The initial request was for me to deal with the role of all three Services; however, I believe that such was the scope of the topic I could not have done it justice.

It is very sad, but none the less true that as years of peace increase, the public view of the necessity for the armed services proportionally diminishes, while it is particularly true in times such as those which now surround us, times of financial constraint where ever shrinking government funding is prey to ever increasing demands upon it, it has always been the case.

Let me quote to you some lines from a Rudyard Kipling poem called _Tommy_, wherein a member of the British Army bemoans the fact that in peace time he is a constant target for civil abuse:

> Oh, it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' Tommy. Go away;  
> But it's Thank you, Mister Atkins, when the band begins to play  
> It's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' Chuck him out, the brute!  
> But it's Saviour of 'is country when the guns begin to shoot.  
> Then it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' Tommy, 'ow's yer soul?  
> But it's Thin red line of 'eroes when the drums begin to roll.  
> We aren't no thin red 'eroes, nor we aren't no blackguards too.  
> But single men in barricks, most remarkable like you;

However, I believe that by the middle of 1975 not one Darwinian had any doubts whatsoever as to the efficacy of Naval support to a civilian community after it had been victim of a natural disaster.

In December 1974 the headquarters of the Royal Australian Navy North Australia Area was located in Darwin. Two shore establishments were situated in the area, _HMAS Melville_, under the command of Captain E E Johnston and _Coonawarra_, under the command of Commander S A Hall; in addition Captain Johnston was the Naval officer commanding. The Third Australian Patrol Boat Squadron comprising _HMAS Arrow, Attack, Assail_ and _Advance_ were also based in Darwin. _HMAS Melville_ which had quarters at the Army's Larrakeyah Barracks, was required to support the patrol boat base and provide limited logistic support for visiting ships. _HMAS Coonawarra_, the Naval Communication Station Darwin, operated from two sites on the Stuart Highway, Coonawarra West and Coonawarra East. In addition new communication facilities were under construction at Shoal Bay.
When in harbour, as they were on the 24 December 1974, the patrol boats normally berthed at either Stokes Hill or Fort Hill wharves. The shore establishments were manned by 305 naval personnel, a figure which included 90 WRANS and 29 civilians. In addition, 75 personnel were serving aboard the patrol boats. Thus, together with the 287 dependents resident in Darwin, the Royal Australian Navy had a presence of 696 in a city whose population was approximately 47,000.

The Darwin of 1974 was still something of a frontier town, many of its buildings were old and poorly constructed and a high proportion of its population were transient and highly mobile. Although recognisably within the cyclone belt which encompasses the northern section of Australia, many years had passed since the city had felt the full force of a cyclone. Between 1964 and 1974 twenty-five cyclones had been named in Northern Territory waters, with only eleven approaching within 200 kilometres of the city, and these merely dumped occasional heavy rains upon the city accompanied by gale force winds. It would not be unfair to say that despite many warnings the population of Darwin had a laissez-faire attitude regarding the likelihood of them suffering as individuals from such a natural disaster.

On the 3 December Cyclone Selma, which had formed in the Timor Sea, was only 54 kilometres west of the city, which was experiencing gale force winds and heavy rain. However, at noon Selma stopped, reversed to the north-west and then moved south-west away from Darwin. The reminder, (or could it be called a warning), to Darwinians was either ignored or served to set in concrete the view that modern Darwin was now invincible.

On the 20 December 1974 a weak tropical low formed 700 kilometres north of Darwin. By the following morning satellite photographs showed a large cloud mass now some 640 kilometres north of Darwin and it was on these photographs that the first tropical cyclone warning was issued at 4 pm that day. By that evening the disturbance had developed into the usual clockwise cloud system of a tropical cyclone and at 10 pm that evening the cyclone was officially classified and named Tracy. Continued monitoring by satellite and radar showed Tracy making slow and steady progress about 230 kilometres north of Darwin. Overnight and throughout the 23 December Tracy continued on a south-west course and at 9 am on the morning of the 24th had finally rounded the south-west tip of Bathurst Island. It now became obvious from radar and satellite pictures and from surface observation that Tracy had changed direction first southerly and then east-south-east towards Darwin.

At 3.30 am on the 24 December the first direct evidence of the wind strength was obtained from the automatic weather station at Cape Fourcroy, which recorded a mean wind of 100 kilometres per hour. By 9.30, with the eye 15 kilometres from the weather station, the mean had increased to 120. From this point on there is no doubt that the cyclone markedly intensified.

And what of the Navy at this time? In Darwin HMAS Coonawarra and Melville reacted to the cyclone warnings by assuming higher degrees of readiness, in accordance with NOCNA’s cyclone standing orders, and precautions were taken regarding such things as storage of food and water, the taping of windows, the fuelling of vehicles, the removal of loose objects etc. At 2 pm NOCNA ordered the four patrol
boats to recall their crews and to sail to the cyclone moorings by 4 pm. This order was greeted with a degree of scepticism but none the less, in true service tradition, was obeyed.

At 4 pm, the normal time of ceasing work on Fridays, watch-keeping personnel in the communications stations remained on duty while offwatch personnel secured their quarters and married quarters. Instructions were given for the passive defence organisations of both Melville and Coonawarra to be fully closed up by 9.30 pm. While these preparations were made top priority, flash cyclone warnings were being issued by the Bureau of Meteorology advising of Tracy's expected land-fall early on Christmas morning.

In Sydney, as is customary, the majority of the fleet was in harbour on leave and undergoing self maintenance. With the exception of the duty destroyer, ships had minimum crews aboard, merely sufficient to maintain an efficient fire and damage control organisation. Machinery was stripped down for maintenance.

From 9 pm on the 24 December Darwin began to feel significant effects of the cyclone. By 9.30 a full gale was blowing and by midnight the winds were recorded at 100 kilometres per hour. These winds increased with gusts over 200 kilometres with the anemometer at the airport collapsing at 5.30 on Christmas morning after a gust of 217 kilometres per hour.

At twenty-five minutes past midnight I made my final telephone call to Navy Office, Canberra, advising the duty staff officer of Tracy's imminent presence in the city and giving my prediction that severe damage would occur right throughout the city. At this time heavy rain was falling, the trees opposite Naval Headquarters, which are now my Administrator's offices, had all been uprooted, a car passed down the Esplanade some twenty feet in the air and the end of the building in which I was located began to disintegrate.

I well recall the final words from the Naval duty staff officer in Canberra which seemed somewhat fatuous although well meaning, wishing happy Christmas to myself and my staff. Five minutes later all phone and radio contact was lost and by 4.30 the building had been destroyed and my three staff and I were buried.

Three of us managed to dig ourselves out and take refuge in the centre cell which also acted as the Naval Headquarters bar. To my intense delight, not only did I have a packet of cigarettes which were not touched by water, but the cell bar fridge, although without power, contained some still cold beer. I say without equivocation that the cigarettes and two beers I consumed are the best I have tasted in my life.

Down the track at Coonawarra the transmitting station ceased to operate at 3 am due to heavy damage inflicted on communication buildings, antenna systems and feeder lines and other equipment. In addition extensive damage was caused to other buildings, stores, residential accommodation, motor vehicles and the patrol boat station itself.

1 — 6 metres
NAVAL HEADQUARTERS

Plate II

Before Tracy

Plate III

And after
On the harbour the scene had to be experienced to be believed — at the height of the cyclone just before and just after the eye passed over Darwin the best description can be to liken the harbour to a maelstrom. Boats in the harbour had either broken their moorings or slipped them in an endeavour to run to sea. Of the four patrol boats, *Assail* and *Advance* cleared the harbour, *Attack* was driven aground in Doctor's Gully and *Arrow*, after losing engine power, was driven under Stoke's Hill Wharf losing two of her crew in the process. To add to the Navy's losses, four dependents, two wives and two children were also killed in their married quarters while their husbands were at their place of duty, and thus the Navy in Darwin with some 1.5 per cent of the population suffered 12 per cent of the total fatal casualties and indeed was the only service to so suffer.

The scene at first light was beyond belief — the harbour empty, every building within eyesight destroyed with the exception of Government House and shortly afterwards the survivors of the *Arrow* arrived outside the wrecked headquarters to report their loss.

The day was spent in clearing Naval roads, estimating Naval damage, searching the harbour foreshore for survivors and endeavouring to establish communications with Canberra. The Navy Headquarters was temporarily shifted to Larrakeyah Barracks where many Naval families were sheltering and later in the day *HMAS Melville* was closed down by NOCNA and personnel and dependents moved to *Coonawarra* and the headquarters moved yet again to the RAAF Base.

*Plate IV*

*HMAS Arrow* in Francis Bay after Tracy
By 8 pm NOCNA had good communications with Canberra and in a series of situation reports gave an indication of the damage to the city and specifically to Naval assets. In his capacity as Acting Chairman of the Joint Service Local Planning Committee he recommended that all service dependents be evacuated as quickly as possible to relieve the burden on such accommodation which was still usable. NOCNA also took a place on the Darwin Disaster Committee.

The small Naval community, in addition to their own inhouse clearing-up, rendered limited aid to the civil community at this time. The two surviving patrol boats were employed to survey the approaches to Darwin Harbour and the wharf area in order to delineate safe navigable waters through the numerous wrecks caused by Cyclone Tracy. In conjunction with the waterside workers, sailors cleared the wharves of storm debris and then began search and rescue operations along Darwin shores. A few available members of the WRAN assisted civil relief organisations and staffed the communications for the police, the fire brigade and the Department of the Northern Territory. In addition, they provided a twenty-four hour courier service on an hourly basis between RAAF Darwin, Coonawarra, Shoal Bay and the civil authorities.

May I say in passing, and I hope this will not be taken as a chauvinistic comment, that one of the most delightful sights on Christmas Day and Boxing Day was my WRAN couriers, who had lost the majority of their clothing, riding motor bikes through the city in the skimpiest of bikinis but none the less with their service caps planted firmly on their heads. This unusual garb was to earn me a severe censure from the Fleet Admiral on his subsequent arrival in Darwin, a censure which I took but lightly.

Back in Sydney, Fleet Headquarters received the first signals from NOCNA mid-afternoon on Christmas Day. Staff officers were called to a conference and ships in harbour were ordered to reduce their notice to sea and warned of a probable departure for Darwin. Recall procedures were instituted for the personnel to sail in the nine ships selected and embarkation orders were given for additional helicopters.

Planning was concluded by NOCNA for a Naval aircraft to travel to Darwin carrying medical, demolition and diving teams to augment my staff. In fact the medical teams did not travel, being replaced by Red Cross workers and blood transfusion equipment.

The Navy’s civilian supply organisation also swung into full operation. On being informed of the stores requirements and which ships were available for loading, arrangements were made with the Department of Housing and Construction for the supply of building materials together with other relief stores from the NSW State Emergency Services and the municipal council depots.

I should point out that all ships had approximately fifty per cent of their personnel on annual leave throughout Australia and another thirty to thirty-five per cent were on short leave. Christmas night and early on Boxing Day volunteers from other ships and shore establishments were allocated to vacant billets in those ships nominated to sail.
In an incredible response to recall procedures 2 020 of the 2 700 sailors on annual leave returned to their ships prior to sailing, many of them having made it from country areas as far away as Northern Queensland and Western Australia.

At 5 pm on Boxing Day HMAS Melbourne and Brisbane sailed from Sydney with Brisbane being detached to proceed to Darwin at high speed. Stuart sailed at midnight to overtake Melbourne.

On the 29 December Melbourne hove to off Townsville embarking 230 recalled personnel together with disaster relief and victualling stores.

HMAS Flinders and Brisbane arrived off Darwin at 9.00 on the 31 December and after Flinders had check surveyed the approaches Brisbane anchored in the harbour.

It was decided to repair the roof at Admiralty House with tarpaulins and then turn the house into a dwelling place for my wife and myself as well as being my shore headquarters, the fleet shore headquarters and the stores dump. The tennis court at Admiralty House was covered with a large Army tent for the safe and dry storage of medical supplies and the old Darwin Oval was prepared as a helicopter landing zone. Melbourne and Stuart arrived at 12.30 on the 31 December and Stalwart at midday on the 2nd, Supply, Hobart and Vendetta at 9.30 on the 3rd. In addition, the landing craft Betano and Balikpapan arrived in Darwin on the 4 January augmented on the 13th by Brunei, Tarakan and Wewak.

While on passage to Darwin, utilising information supplied by NOCNA on his views of the damage and the requirements on arrival of the fleet, detailed planning was commenced. The greatest advantage in utilising the fleet for the initial disaster relief lay in the fact that the personnel who would be employed in the relief operation would be self-contained in their ships, not drawing upon the town's meagre supplies for their food, clothing and other necessities.

Each member of the ships' companies listed his particular skills other than those directly connected with his Naval employment. An incredible diversity of talent was revealed with many having civilian qualifications unknown to their superiors.

I will quote from the comments of the Fleet Commander on anchoring off Darwin and viewing from a helicopter the state of devastation:

The first impression of Darwin was one of virtual hopelessness. It is extremely doubtful if any personnel had expected the widespread and almost total destruction of such large areas particularly in the northern suburbs of Nightcliff, Rapid Creek and Casuarina which made up the Naval assistance area. Realisation instilled an even greater sense of urgency in the efforts to get relief work started quickly.

On the first day, with control being exercised from the now so-called Fort Johnston forty-four tonnes of stores were landed by helicopter and 250 personnel were landed to carry out a half-day's disaster relief work.

The three northern suburbs had been designated as being the sole responsibility of the Naval relief teams for search, rescue, clearance, and safe storage and recording
of valuables found. Transport, both water-borne and vehicular, were requisitioned by NOCNA as necessary and the total absence of financial controllers made this side of the operation relatively simple.

Each day from then on up to 1 200 personnel were landed from the ships, some being airlifted ashore by helicopters and the others by ships' boats and landing craft. Initially stocks of equipment for demolition and debris removal were meagre and thus the physical load on the work teams was high and progress frustratingly slow. However, working through General Stretton and his staff, further stores were rapidly transferred from South. Another helicopter pad was established at Nightcliff and a sub-headquarters collocated to control the 600 personnel working daily in this area.

One particular task undertaken by the Navy I think deserves special mention. Because of the need to protect their hands from damage the fleet band master and his musicians were not permitted to carry out the normal clearance work. Instead they were detailed from the first day as hygiene parties, tasked with the disgusting evolution of emptying domestic fridges and freezers which contained putrid food which had been decomposing since Christmas Day. Although equipped with breathing apparatus, the task required frequent and prolonged breaks as grown and hardened men were overcome by nausea and subjected to severe bouts of vomiting. The situation deteriorated for them when they were tasked to clear the supermarket's cold and cool rooms.

The conditions for both the hygiene and clearing parties were most unpleasant in the excessive heat and humidity. The heavy physical toil and the initial lack of water and paucity of transport and equipment were a constant strain upon morale already somewhat shattered by working through the sad remains of people's lifetimes.

Despite this, the cheerfulness and the work of the sailors and officers was a subject of much favourable comment. I mention officers for, apart from those controlling personnel, the officers were best employed in manual labour and a photo of the captain of Melbourne, Commodore Guy Griffiths, stripped to the waist and carrying a large baulk of timber, made the front pages in southern newspapers.

Concurrent with the clearance tasks specialised teams were employed on skilled duties which took up about 500 personnel each day. Particularly, work such as the repair of PMG facilities and general electrical wiring formed a large part of these duties. In addition shipwrights were employed repairing vessels and clearing slipways.

The basic working day was established as being from 7 am to 3 pm and with transportation to and from the ships this generally meant an eleven hour day.

I should note that in accordance with Naval custom Sunday 5 January, the first Sunday in harbour, was declared a non-working day although provision was made for volunteers to work if they so wished. One thousand and fifty personnel so volunteered.

On the 8 January the helicopters were given an additional task of lifting material
and equipment to the top of high buildings such as the Territorian Hotel and the Travelodge. This rapidly increased the ability of the town to provide accommodation.

**HMAS Flinders**, the survey vessel, until its departure on the 9 January was employed in fixing the position of navigational aids and locating harbour obstructions. The clearance diving team which had arrived in Darwin on the 26 January carried out extensive diving operations around the wharves with their primary task being the removal of the wrecked **HMAS Arrow** in order that wharf repairs might be undertaken. NOCNA determined the priorities in this work as, on his arrival in Darwin, General Stretton had appointed him Chairman of the Port Committee giving him operational control of the port and its approaches.

One of the concerns which had been voiced on passage to Darwin was the lack of facilities for recreation and the relief of tedium for the clearing teams. However, throughout the early part of the operation at least, sailors employed showed little interest on return to their ships, other than to clean up, enjoy their beer issue and a meal and then collapse in their beds.

On the 8 January good progress had been made although to the untutored eye the surface of the problem had only been scratched. Four hundred and ninety-six 'houses had been cleared as well as 110 Naval married quarters. Fourteen houses had been re-roofed and ten others had temporary roof repairs completed. Operation Navy Help Darwin was well underway.

The work teams were now into a set routine. On landing either by helicopter, ship's boat, or barge, the team proceeded to the shore headquarters at Admiralty House where the team leader was briefed on the day's task, tools were issued and transport allocated. On the completion of the day's work the team returned to the shore headquarters to be de-briefed as to their accomplishments for the day. Thus an up-to-date detailed pattern was available as to the progress of work on every day.

Considerable discussion was held on the evening of the 8 January and while satisfaction was taken from the achievements to date concensus was reached that a change of emphasis was required. People who remained in Darwin and worked at tasks other than in their own interest were not having an opportunity to get their dwellings into a reasonable shape. It was thus decided to provide primary assistance to those residents who remained. That evening it was announced over the radio that residents from any area who required assistance were invited to contact the shore headquarters in order that a team might be allocated to them and a time be established for the team's arrival. The only stipulation made was that one resident must be present to work with the team. In the next few days 580 requests were received and the list was temporarily closed to prevent a back-log.

Each day the NT News listed the homes which were due for team assistance on the following day and the scheme was an outstanding success. A close liaison developed with the locals and many lasting friendships were commenced. Concurrent with these private requests general clearance in the Nightcliff area continued until the 17 January.
Sunday 12 January was declared a rest day but even after eleven continuous and arduous days of work 414 volunteers were landed to work on home owners' blocks or to assist friends and relatives or people with whom they had been working during the week. The measure of their efforts was the clearance of 126 blocks which was double the daily average.

By the 14 January practically all house clearance tasks were in response to requests by residents, while the level of skilled tasks remained unchanged.

On the 18 January the withdrawal of the Fleet commenced and the weekend was kept clear for those who remained to participate in organised sports, bus tours and safaris into the Darwin hinterland.

From the 20 January an attempt was made to concentrate Naval assistance on skilled tasks but the call for such support had diminished and fifty to sixty per cent of the total workforce remained on house clearing duty in answer to requests from residents. On the 29 January the majority of the ships had left harbour and on the following day, after handing over the rescue records and tasks to the Commander 7th Military District, the shore headquarters closed down and Operation Navy Help Darwin was completed.

The ships' companies of the vessels employed in Navy Help could look back with a considerable degree of satisfaction upon their achievements. Seventeen thousand, nine hundred and seventy-nine working days had been worked ashore and a total of 1,593 blocks had been cleared, principally in the northern suburbs. In addition to residential blocks, schools, hotels, commercial and government buildings had had their surrounds cleared and, where possible, repairs effected. Of particular interest to the residents of Darwin was the clearing and setting to work of the Parap and Nightcliff swimming pools, thus giving access to some recreational facilities within the wrecked city.

In the electrical task skill area considerable assistance had been given to both the PMG and the Electricity Authority in the fields of house rewiring, general repair to exchange and terminal equipment, power line repairs and generator installation in large complexes. Places outside Darwin such as the leprosarium, quarantine station and Gunn Point Prison Farm also were the subject of work by the electrical task skill groups. In addition, airconditioning in such places as the Darwin Hospital and a number of hotels and motels was also repaired and set to work.

Re-roofing and weather-proofing had been carried out on houses in the Rapid Creek area and on priority buildings within the city of Darwin. This latter task included such places as the YWCA, a number of hotels and motels and the brewery, which I understand rewarded the work teams in kind.

The diving team had worked tirelessly. They had undertaken general harbour search and surveys, they had cleared the wharves and immediate approach areas and they had salvaged and raised the wreck of HMAS Arrow. I believe that the only time I lost my temper during the whole clear-up operation was when a well-known television commentator, encountering the clearance divers during one of their rest periods, asked them why they were bludging. This man does not know how close he came to joining the other debris in the harbour.
Miscellaneous tasks were many and varied, ranging from the saving of rare trees in the Botanic Gardens, the unloading of merchant ships, to watch keeping and fire fighting duties at the Darwin Fire Station. One party went so far as to design and construct a water tower at the Mindil Beach Caravan Park to enable the park's use for temporary accommodation. In addition, of course, inhouse repairs were being carried out at HMAS Coonawarra, the patrol boat facility and slipway, and the wharf area where it was utilised by the Naval patrol boats.

One area which I should mention specifically was the care and custody of personal property found on blocks which were being cleared. While housing materials and general debris was cut up and removed for possible future use in reconstruction, such things as white goods were placed in the centre of the block, or under the floor boards if these still existed, and covered as best as possible. Smaller valuables were brought back by the team leaders to the shore headquarters where they were logged into a register of valuables and then placed in a locked wagon which eventually transferred the items to cell no. 8 at the Darwin Police Headquarters. On 18 January the Territory Police agreed to assume responsibility for the valuables and items were then handed by the team leaders direct to Police Headquarters.

From listening to people who came seeking their valuables it would appear that such things as expensive jewellery and the like were of little consequence to them. What they sought were things of intrinsic value such as photographs, their father's medals, and books. Their joy on being reunited with such items made the tediousness of the task thoroughly worthwhile.

I should also mention the utilisation of helicopter operations in disaster relief post—Cyclone Tracy.

In addition to their transportation of work teams, helicopters were utilised, using both internal and underslung loads, to land the extensive stores and materials required in the repair and reconstruction of Darwin. They also carried out aerial photography and body searches and were heavily involved in surveys being undertaken by personnel from the Department of Housing and Construction. In all the fleet's helicopters flew 313.3 hours, lifting 7 832 personnel and 244 518 lbs 'weight of stores and equipment.

Looking back now after almost twelve years I believe that I can sincerely say, without too much personal bias, that the recovery of Darwin after Cyclone Tracy would have been greatly protracted or indeed possibly not even achieved without the assistance of the Royal Australian Navy Task Group. Such a large source of man power, fresh, physically fit, and highly organised, achieved, I believe, somewhere between five and ten times what might have been done by a similar number of residents who had gone through the cyclone.

I mentioned earlier the fact that such a relief force carrying, as the hermit crab does, its home upon its back and not draining any existing resources in the disaster area, is an incredible bonus to the relief operation.

2 — 110 906 kg
As NOCNA and a member of the Darwin Disaster Committee I saw very closely what the Navy achieved and the manner in which it was done. The almost total absence of the dead hand of bureaucracy, particularly in the early months, allowed tasks to be undertaken without worrying about the correct channels or the eventual cost. However, be assured that these matters finally came home to roost.

Some years later, while serving in Navy Headquarters, I received a number of very interesting pieces of correspondence from the Secretary, Department of Defence. One was a minute from him expressing total horror at the number of vehicles and boats I had requisitioned, many of them new and many of them returned in a very poor and damaged condition.

Another letter was from the Navy's legal advisor informing me that I had been cited by an iron ore mining company as being the principal cause of their liquidation. This grew from a decision by me to employ engineers on wharf repair rather than on the repair of the conveyor belt which might have fed from the large deposit of iron ore which was in the port area when Tracy struck. A rider to this particular correspondence was a bill for $16,900, being the market value of iron ore which I appropriated to build a ramp upon which the landing craft discharged their loads. May I say that iron ore when packed with water and sand makes a most admirable slipway.

I believe that the period from 1 January to 30 January 1975 cemented a bond between the citizens of Darwin and the members of the Royal Australian Navy which will never ever be weakened. The sympathy and support given by the Fleet's sailors, and the shore based sailors and WRANS, was matched only by the cheerfulness and togetherness of the citizens of Darwin. Six months later, when normality returned to our city, and the Patris sailed from Darwin Harbour after I had personally slipped her last lines, I looked back with a feeling of great pride in being not only a member of the Royal Australian Navy but also a Darwinian.