MY MEMORIES OF CYCLONE TRACY

The radio had broadcast that a cyclone was heading our way, but as the one predicted 3 weeks previously (Cyclone Selma) had blown out to sea, no-one was very worried. The 1st radio warning of the imminent arrival was broadcast at 9-30pm.

Chris, my husband worked as a Telecom Technician and I was a Telephonist at the NT Government Switchboard.

During the afternoon of the 24th of December 1974, Eddie Dias, an Architect with the Dept. of Housing and Construction, who was working at the Hospital, rang his wife Mary, who was also a Telephonist and told her that the Hospital windows were all being taped up, as the winds were expected to be very strong and nonessential people were being sent home from work.

After work, Chris and I went home and tied down or stowed away all that we could, then settled down to wait for whatever was about to come.

The winds got very strong about 10pm, but our house seemed ok. During the first half, our neighbours, Brian and Molly Williams, lost the end bedroom and we could see them making their way along to the stairs, so, with much yelling and screaming, trying to be heard above the sound of the wind, lightning and thunder, we asked them to come to us. They answered that they were ok and were going down to their laundry to shelter; they had only lived in the 3 month old house, since Sept 30th 1974. They were English but had lived in NZ for some years, before Brian decided he would like to work for the Uniting Church in the NT. We made friends with them, helping out with garden bits and pieces and Kerry loved to come and see our Christmas tree, as their main furniture and household goods uplift hadn’t arrived from NZ.

Our place still seemed ok, though the floor was covered in water that had blown in through the locked louvers. We had picked up all the Christmas gifts from under the tree and put them in an esky to keep them dry and the children were lying on their beds, trying to rest. About 2am, our eldest daughter Sheryl had a phone call from her boyfriend Clive in Sydney. He rang to say that his Father had just died in Hospital down there. Sheryl was very scared and told Clive that we were in the middle of a Cyclone and hung up. He of course was worried stiff, especially as they couldn’t get us back on line again. Once something hit our end wall about 3am, (we think it was someone’s roof beam) the house began disintegrating around us, including the phone disappearing.

The only wall staying upstairs was the one dividing the living area from the bedrooms and it fell onto a brand new Freezer, forming a lean-to, under which 3 adults, 3 children, 2 dogs and a budgie in a cage sheltered for the rest of the night.

Our eldest son, Shane, held onto a door knob, to hold the door down, over us. We crouched or lay there together, arms linked so that no one would be blown away. Gary let go, to free his foot and began to slide away, so was quickly grabbed and hauled back. He
had nightmares about that, for quite some time after. At one stage Sheryl huddled a bit closer in and a few minutes later a beam of timber landed where she had been.

Chris thought he had something seriously wrong with his back, as the weight of the cupboard / wall was pressing him down and causing pain, fortunately he was able to move away a bit and it shifted the weight. The noise of roofing iron being wrenched from nails was horrendous and frightening, as we didn’t know where it was going to land.

At daylight, Brian our neighbour, asked us to come and look at his wife Molly, in the laundry. The wall had fallen onto her and Kerry, their 2 year old toddler. Molly had just died and Kerry died during the day at the hospital.

The old saying, don’t judge others too quickly, was certainly true at this time. A group of young people from the far end of our street were always in trouble with their neighbours because of their noise and behaviour, but they were the first group out at daylight, calling at every house to see if everyone was ok. We asked them to try and get Brian and Kerry to hospital, which they did. Several of them clearing debris from the roads, while another drove the car. They also shared warm clothes and blankets with those who needed them.

Later on, a Minister from Brian’s church came to see how they had fared and it was our unhappy task to tell him about Molly and where Brian was. Several hours later he drove Brian back to see us and tell us that Kerry had died too.

Christmas day we spent there in the wreckage, trying to salvage anything. The things still standing on the floorboards were, the freezer, the bath, the dining table and the lower kitchen cupboards. The big 2 tiered aquarium that Chris had made, was leaning out onto the stair railing, top half completely smashed and a small triangular pond in 1 corner of the bottom tank with a couple of fish still alive in it, so we put them in a glass jar. Both sets of stairs were mangled and we couldn’t use them properly, so it was hard to get down. The front wall had fallen onto Clive’s Ford that Sheryl was minding, so that upset her a great deal. The old Vanguard was still standing solidly and the Toyota was under the house, but though locked up tight, it had leaves and mud inside. The Datsun was parked behind it, blocked in by rubbish.

Though tied down with a hawser type rope, the Campervan had done a double flip and landed upside down in the Frangipani tree. The thick rope had been cut cleanly by flying iron. It was completely smashed, though by some miracle the fridge was still workable, so we rescued that and the gas bottle and the camping stove. No one felt like eating that day, and the canned drinks soon warmed up. I won’t touch Fanta again, it is disgusting and extra gassy when drunk hot. We spent Christmas night in Shane’s Transit van, though I wouldn’t say that we slept. The van had a huge beam jammed under the chassis, so it didn’t work and couldn’t be moved until many days later when they towed it to Naylor’s house. Many months later when Christine and Rob Hayes arrived from NZ to work, they used it to sleep in until they got a flat.

Chris and Shane had dug a pit and put the inside liner, (from our above ground swimming
pool, which had collapsed,) around it to use as a toilet, but because of the heavy rain and saturated ground, the water table was too high for it to be of any use. We had also used some of the pool liner to cover Molly’s body with, until the Police came and got her. I was sitting on the floorboards when my cousin Claire and Bert came to see how we had fared. They had only lost part of a bedroom wall and some roofing, which was excellent for them. Their dining table was still set for Christmas lunch and their pool had a crack in it, but they were ok. Later they patched the pool and it was great for relaxing in after stressful days. Claire and Fiona were evacuated to Adelaide a few days later.

We all went to the Hospital for Typhoid and Small pox injections; because the Drs. were afraid those diseases could spread if they didn’t get the sewerage pipes fixed quickly. Some days later there were squads of men going from house to house, clearing out fridges and freezers and taking it to the dump to be covered quickly.

A lot of Telecom families had taken shelter in the Exchange and they then stayed there for some days. Once a line was connected to the Southern states, the men took it in turn to ring a relation, so they could pass the word around about how we had all fared.

Chris began work again in the exchange on Boxing Day. Sheryl had been minding and airing the Naylor’s house and we found that it had not been badly damaged, a few broken louvers, a beam that had come through the back door and jammed the laundry door shut, so we moved in there with some of their neighbours. Chris rang Isobel Naylor in Sydney to see if that was ok. Later on we had up to 13 people staying for varying lengths of time, sleeping on camp stretchers and the floor.

About the 28th or 29th December, several Telecom Techs. Who maintained the Govt. PABX came out and asked me to go back to work and begin testing lines with them. 898911 were so well known Australia wide, that if they got the board working again, it would take pressure from the Telecom board. Because it was also the board for all the main government departments, it had to be ready for when they would get underway again. Luckily only the first 1000 extensions were damaged, so we got back on air quickly. The first extensions were for the Committee that was set up, to rebuild and clear up Darwin, before the Reconstruction group was formed. I worked alone there for 3 weeks, then Marie Stapleton came back too. The first 2 days were in very dim light from the windows, but once the power was connected again, it was ok and a chap from T&W gave me a standard fan to use, as the Switchroom was tucked away inside the building and none of the windows could be opened. The other operators returned to work when they were able, or returned after being evacuated after the Cyclone.

Shane had been working for a quarry and could drive almost anything on wheels, so when the local firms gave their machines and staff to help with the clean up, he was needed too. With all firms helping, most roads were soon passable, though there were a lot of punctures caused by nails torn from the roofing iron.

Several Navy ships arrived later in the week and began clearing the rubble from house blocks, it was done suburb by suburb and we were told when they would be in our area. If
possible they wanted someone from the house to be there at the time, there wasn’t a great deal to be done at our place, most of it had flown and blown across the street into the playground. When Pat’s place was done, I went there to supervise and it was lucky I did, as her Jewellery boxes holding her pearls and rings, were about to be swept into the truck from the floorboards. We also packed a lot of things into her Camphor wood chest and sent them down to her in Alice later on, though I kept the chest for a couple of years before giving it back for Julia. Their house walls had fallen inwards, like a pack of cards so there were a few things still under them that we saved for her.

We had a hard time deciding what we were going to do as far as the family was concerned. It was a cycle of 3 changing decisions. The 1st decision was that we would all leave Darwin; 2nd one, we would send the 3 youngest children south to boarding schools and we 3 adults would stay; 3rd decision; I would take the 3 youngest south to school and rent a house and Chris and Shane would stay here. As it turned out, we sent the 3 young ones alone to Adelaide on the 28th and we 3 adults stayed as we all had essential jobs. The children were very upset and didn’t want to go without us. Carmel in particular was terrified the dogs would be shot, there were a few strays being killed, because they were becoming nuisances after being abandoned. We promised it wouldn’t happen to Snow or Tuffy as we kept them on the chains while we weren’t home, and Snow didn’t eat unless we force fed him, so no one could bait or poison them. One thing we did tell them though, was that if the dogs had to be put down, we would get ‘Uncle’ Tom Gorle, who was a stock inspector, to give them a needle and they would die peacefully in their sleep. Fortunately that didn’t happen and Snowy lived until he was 14. To help Carmel calm down and take her mind from the dogs, I gave her a very special job. She had to mind a Johnny Walker decanter that my Grandfather had passed onto my Mum and she then passed it to me. Poor Johnny was cracked a bit, but is so old, I thought it could be saved and eventually become an heirloom.

* (A sad footnote is that Tuffy was a greedy dog and ate everything in sight and a year later when we had moved to the new house at Casuarina, he didn’t come back from his morning walk, and when we found him, he had died from a bait.)

On Dec 27th Shane took me, on the back of his motorbike to Nightcliff High school, where I put their names down for evacuation. We had to take them there the following day and they stayed there until a flight was organized. Then they went by bus to the Airport and flew out on a RAAF Hercules, not the most comfortable of planes and they were very cold. Their luggage, for the 3 of them, consisted of ½ a black gar-bag of tatty, grotty clothes. Eileen with Kath and Trevor Wing met the children at the airport where Red Cross gave them some more clothes. Gary had set his heart on a Leather? Vinyl? black jacket that he saw and even though it was about 5 sizes too big, they let him have it. I think he wore it everywhere (and probably to bed) for many years afterwards.

Two very dear friends of Eileen’s, Jack and Ena Blackwell, helped by washing the clothes. Jack could see that the mud wasn’t coming out of them, so put them all into boiling water and scrubbed them on an old fashioned scrub board, he unfortunately used the same principle on a woolen hand knitted poncho of Sheryl’s, which came out small
enough for a baby or doll. He was a dear soul and we were thankful for all the help they gave. The children stayed with my sister Eileen for a short time, but as she was working all day they then went to our friends, Jean and Brian Buttery at Felixstow. My brother Les and his wife Peggy in Millicent, wanted them too, but Sheryl didn’t want to go, so only Carmel and Gary went there for a week. Lorraine and Lindsay would have liked them to stay at Pt Noarlunga with them also, but time was running out.

Shane, Chris and I went to Adelaide on Feb.1st for 2 weeks R&R and bought clothes and things we needed to replace, and then brought the family back, because Darwin High was going to reopen and we thought it safe enough to bring them home. Before returning home, Chris and I gave a dinner party at The Old Coach Inn for all the adults, that had been so kind and helpful to us and the children. We are really grateful, especially to those who looked after them and had them to stay. We have some wonderful friends.

On our way home from work, we used to collect food from the Darwin High school where a distribution point was set up. I cooked on our gas camp stove. Later on we borrowed a small generator from the Govt. and were able to use one appliance at a time, plus a light. It didn’t have enough oomph to power the washing machine and ironing was definitely out.

Clothes were very hard to dry, as most clothes hoists had been turned inside out, like an umbrella in the wind, so we strung a rope line across the back yard, unfortunately it broke quite often, or sagged to the ground. Once electricity was reconnected, and Chris had to go to Adelaide for a course, he bought a clothes dryer, which was a great help.

In March, there were a lot of letters to the paper from women and families wanting to return and I guess people will say ‘it is ok for her, her family are together.’ But I decided to write to the paper in Adelaide and tell them to think carefully about doing so. The food distribution point had been closed and there wasn’t a very good supply of fruit or vegetables getting through and we were having constant rain, so it was hard to get clothes washed and dried, besides accommodation was still scarce. The Adelaide News printed the letter and the NT News copied it, so it was printed here too.

It was a time that brought out the best and worst of people. People did go and help themselves to things from shops, things that would not have helped in the daily living at that time and subsequently several from our street were charged with looting, from Tom the Cheap’s shop, in the Rapid Creek shopping area. It also occurred in Chan Building, where the Switchboard was located while the Victorian Police were billeted there. When Clive and I went to the 2nd floor, to retrieve furniture they had taken to use, from the switchboard rest-room, we saw a lot of things stacked there from the City shops. Why would Policemen need baby clothes, material lengths and women’s toiletries, things they would not have brought with them to Darwin? The cynical saying that went around at the time was, ‘the Police arrived with a duffel bag each and left with 2 suitcases.’

One glass wall had a sign in shaving cream, “Vic police were here” and someone else had tried to etch the same message in another glass wall.
There were some strange sights to be seen over the next few weeks. A mob of Calves, Emus and Buffalo calves wandered along McMillan’s Rd area for quite a few days, looking quite lost, but happy to be together. I think they came from a farm / riding stables place down on Rapid Creek Road, Millner.

At the end of each working day, there would be a line of people sitting astride the water pipeline, all washing the person in front of them’s back! Or we would go down to Rapid Creek and have a communal bath in the big pool, dressed in swimsuits, undies or clothes. Quite often someone would be there taking photos. I wonder where they ended up.

Isobel decided not to return to Darwin to live, but came back with Paul and Debbie to clear a lot of their things and stayed 2 weeks. William their eldest son, brought his wife and baby back at the same time, so the house was full to the ceiling, the main bedroom had 7 adults and a baby sleeping there. Clive also returned and lived with us there and also when we moved to our own place. We made arrangements with the Housing Commission to rent that house on McMillan’s Rd, until our Telecom place was available and we moved to Rockland’s Drive, Casuarina in February 1976.

One thing that sticks in my mind, and people should be aware of, is how cold it was during the Cyclone. The wind and rain is freezing and shock also makes you feel very cold. Shane wore Chris’ woolen dressing gown, (that was hanging in a tree) around the yard for a day or so, as we only had what we stood up in or rescued from the yard.

Another thing that upset me a bit, was the fact we weren’t able to attend Molly and Kerry’s funeral. It was quite understandable, because there weren’t many phones working and with so many funerals being held quickly, that only immediate families were notified, an hour or so beforehand. In Brian’s case it was only him and the Minister where he was staying, so we couldn’t go. Brian returned to England soon after, to see both sets of parents, then was going on to NZ and would eventually come back here. A couple of years later, I did find the grave (in which they are buried together,) through the Darwin City Council’s records and have been to visit them a couple of times.

As a PS….. I have never been to the Cyclone display at the Museum; though I take visitors there and then wander off to look at other things. Father (now Bishop) Ted Collins had taped the sound of the Cyclone while taping Midnight Mass and the noise upsets me, so I won’t go there. Wendy, our daughter-in-law has several photos in the display, of the damage done at Mandorah and at her parent’s motel/camping place at Golden Sands on Cox Peninsula. One photo is of a piece of roofing iron pierced right through a tree and the general destruction of that area.

Christmas 2004….30 years on…..more memories.
Jean told us how cold Gary was in bed, so they put the electric blanket on for him, but he was scared of it, so they had to take it off. He hasn’t changed, as he trained as an electrical mechanic technician after leaving school and still hates electric blankets!
We still have the deep-freezer that acted as our shelter, Chris still has his Onkaparinga woolen dressing gown, and takes it when ever we go south for holidays and we still have the Johnny Walker decanter, which one day will go to Carmel if she wants it. The Dryer Chris bought in March of ’75 is still going strong too and so are the cement troughs that we took from the Millner St house, to use as a fish pond.

Carmel remembers being wrapped in a sheet on Christmas morning and being frightened of the electricity lines that were still sparking.

Among the papers strewn around in the mud, was my bank book with a child endowment cheque tucked into it. I still have it, never having cashed it. There was also a muddy yukky Frangipani flower inside it.