What happened to all of the files after Cyclone Tracy?

Were all of the NT records destroyed during Cyclone Tracy? Certainly not! There is a misconception that Tracy destroyed everything but this is not the case.

A short while after Tracy had done her best to wipe Darwin off the map in 1974, most of the Territory’s records were left water-logged and saturated by both rain and sea-water. Without access to the proper resources to restore these soaked records (files, books etc), much of the Territory’s history could have vanished.

This is where a little-known but lengthy operation started. It was a disaster management process that happened behind the scenes little known to everyone except those involved. Soggy boxes containing Territory files, books, history etc were loaded onto large aluminium skids (much like huge pallets), taken to the Darwin RAAF base and placed into RAAF cargo planes where they were flown to Amberley RAAF Base near Brisbane. Imagine the weight these skids carried loaded up with wet files. From there, a regular run of vehicles transferred these damaged records to a building in Brisbane city (purposely obtained for this exercise) where shipments were received and sorted by Australian Archives staff (now known as the National Archives of Australia - NAA).

It is here that the specialist resources of Queensland State Archives swung into action as well. Small loads of documents were regularly transferred to their Brisbane facilities where they had the proper fumigation equipment where all possible records were carefully treated, dried then returned to Australian Archives to reconstruct and house for eventual return. This went on for months. I believe (although I have no actual proof) that a quantity of records was also sent to Kingston in Canberra for similar treatment. When Darwin had recovered sufficiently to accept these records back, those able to be saved were returned.

So what led me to share this story? In September 2016, my wife and I were sightseeing Darwin for the first time when we stumbled across the NT Library. I enquired about the location of their Archives Repository during the Cyclone Tracy time in 1974 and after a significant amount of file searching, we could not pin-point its actual location... documents and photographs did not help. I related the above story to the NT team and it was they who requested the story as like so much these days, much of one’s history can be easily lost.

I was in Brisbane when all this happened during 1974 - 1976. I was a courier employed at Australian Archives and witnessed some of the planes coming in from Darwin, the soggy documents being transferred into the temporary building in Creek Street in Brisbane and the shipping and return of records to and from Queensland State Archives. It all happened and hardly anyone knew about it. It was an unusual co-operation between Federal and State operations that made this happen....otherwise, much of NT’s records and history could have been lost forever.