

My Cyclone Tracy recollections – Barbara Benporath (now Wright)

My husband, Doug Benporath (1943-2005), was a Civil Engineer at AW7, the Allied Works road construction depot located on Hudson Fysh Avenue in Parap, and we lived at 8 Stretton Street, Fannie Bay.



I will not claim that our experience at the hands of Tracy was as traumatic it was for many, but the terror of the wind and the associated noise as the houses tore apart have remained with me for fifty years. I look back and think that the last 50 years were a gift to be treasured. Survival was not guaranteed that night.

The rental we lived in was the older elevated boomerang style, 3 bedrooms, bathroom, kitchen, living room. It was nothing special, but the owners had strengthened the roof.

Our actions during the evening of 23 December were being repeated across Darwin:

- We filled the bath with water, gathered torches, listened to the radio, etc.
- We opened the louvres on the side away from the main force of the storm, as instructed at the time. Tracy did not receive the same message, and the wind and rain came from all directions at once.
- We listened to the Christmas Eve Mass until transmission failed.
- Three-year-old, Veronica, was well awake by then, so she opened some Christmas presents.
- Nine-month-old, Bronwyn, was sleeping in her cot with a single mattress across the top for protection.

Before long everyone was in the living room, and I was using towels to try to stop the horizontal rain forcing its way through the closed louvres. I soon gave up on that!

At a point during the first half of the storm a D.O.T. employee arrived with his wife and small baby. He was required at the airport and did not want to leave them alone at home. He returned during the second half but by then we had moved to the neighbouring house, and he spent the worrying second half of Tracy curled up in his car.

After the roof of the living room lifted off and the kitchen was under threat, three adults and three children were squeezed into the tiny bathroom, along with numerous cockroaches that had been living quietly above us, and a huge amount of muddy water that was formed by the rain mixing with years of dust in the ceiling.

We were in Fannie Bay, and were lucky to have the eye of the storm pass over us. That period of calm, that so many people did not enjoy, allowed us to move in with the neighbours in a ground level house.

Our neighbours were long term Territorians with previous cyclone experience who had replaced all glass louvres with metal and strengthened their roof. They had been out at the Rapid Creek Hotel celebrating a birthday and they returned home after the early closure. The birthday boy went to sleep and slept soundly. I have never forgotten his surprise on Christmas morning when he saw how Darwin had been reshaped while he slept.

A BOAC plane flew over the airport after sunrise and stayed long enough to have a look and then fly elsewhere.

Our politicians talk of the need for 'resilience' in the face of disaster. Our neighbours taught me a few lessons in resilience. They looked after many people on Christmas Day and I have always been grateful for their guidance. They arranged for food to be collected from the neighbouring houses and cooked an enormous meal in their copper clothes boiler. On that Christmas Day we had a meal to remember. The men dug holes in various locations and buried the food that could not be saved. Sue and Con Bresson who had a property at Humpty Doo brought fresh water. The Chemist at Parap opened his store and allowed me to take any baby formula I needed.

The AW7 depot was back at work on Boxing Day. They had followed their cyclone procedure and most of their vehicles were operational. There is a photo of the group, and their names, on Nat Tunley's Survivors' Facebook contribution. They worked hard for many weeks clearing roads and debris and I would not like their effort to be forgotten.

Doug arranged an Exit Permit for myself, my friend, three children and a dog and we left on our way to Queensland on 27 December 1974.

On the highway were never out of sight of southbound traffic, very different from the normal situation on the Stuart Highway. The Bank of New South Wales, as it was known then, allocated us a staff housing unit in Katherine. I remember how quiet the town was.

When we arrived in Tennant Creek, we were given beds in the Hospital and after a night's rest headed across the Barkly Highway towards Mt Isa. My D.O.T. friend and her baby had headed towards Adelaide, and I agreed to take three more passengers. They were a family making their way to Sydney and they travelled with us to Mt Isa.

I do not remember much about the drive over the Barkly, except for the Brush turkeys that were on the road at night when I really did not want them complicating matters, and a driver who asked if one of us could drive his vehicle so that he could sleep. He was trying to reach the east coast before his wife gave birth. It was arranged and our convoy of two made it to Camooweal where the wonderful ladies from Camooweal were still serving tea and sandwiches at 1.00 am when we arrived.

We were billeted in Mt Isa for a few days and my baby was flown to Brisbane as she was unwell, and had been for several weeks prior to Cyclone Tracy. Two strangers took her on the flight and delivered her to an ambulance crew at Brisbane Airport. I do not know who those girls were, but I am still grateful to them. The airline was very accommodating, and I cannot imagine the same lack of red tape today.

My Father flew to Mt Isa to continue the drive with me. We were now father, daughter, grandchild and dog. We took the route through Boulia and spent New Year's Eve at the Middleton Hotel, the pub with no beer, food or cigarettes. They were down to cups of tea made in a big enamel caterer's teapot with rusty holes. It was a challenge to pour the cups before the leaks drained the tea. The publicans were still smiling, despite the pressures put on the tiny hotel. We slept in the hot, cramped car that night.

The journey through the dirt road was memorable for the effort it took for around 20 drivers to lift the vehicles through the off-road mud in sections where the road was blocked by west-bound trucks that had tried to beat the rain but failed. We were a dirty, tired group of travellers who arrived in Winton that night. As was the case in all the towns enroute people were there to help, no matter what time Darwin evacuees arrived. I was given some clean clothes, the first in a couple of days and the following day we continued to Toowoomba.

My memories of Cyclone Tracy have not diminished over the years, and it is appropriate for us to take the time to remember those who did not survive Tracy. It was a tragic time for many families.

Barbara Wright

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