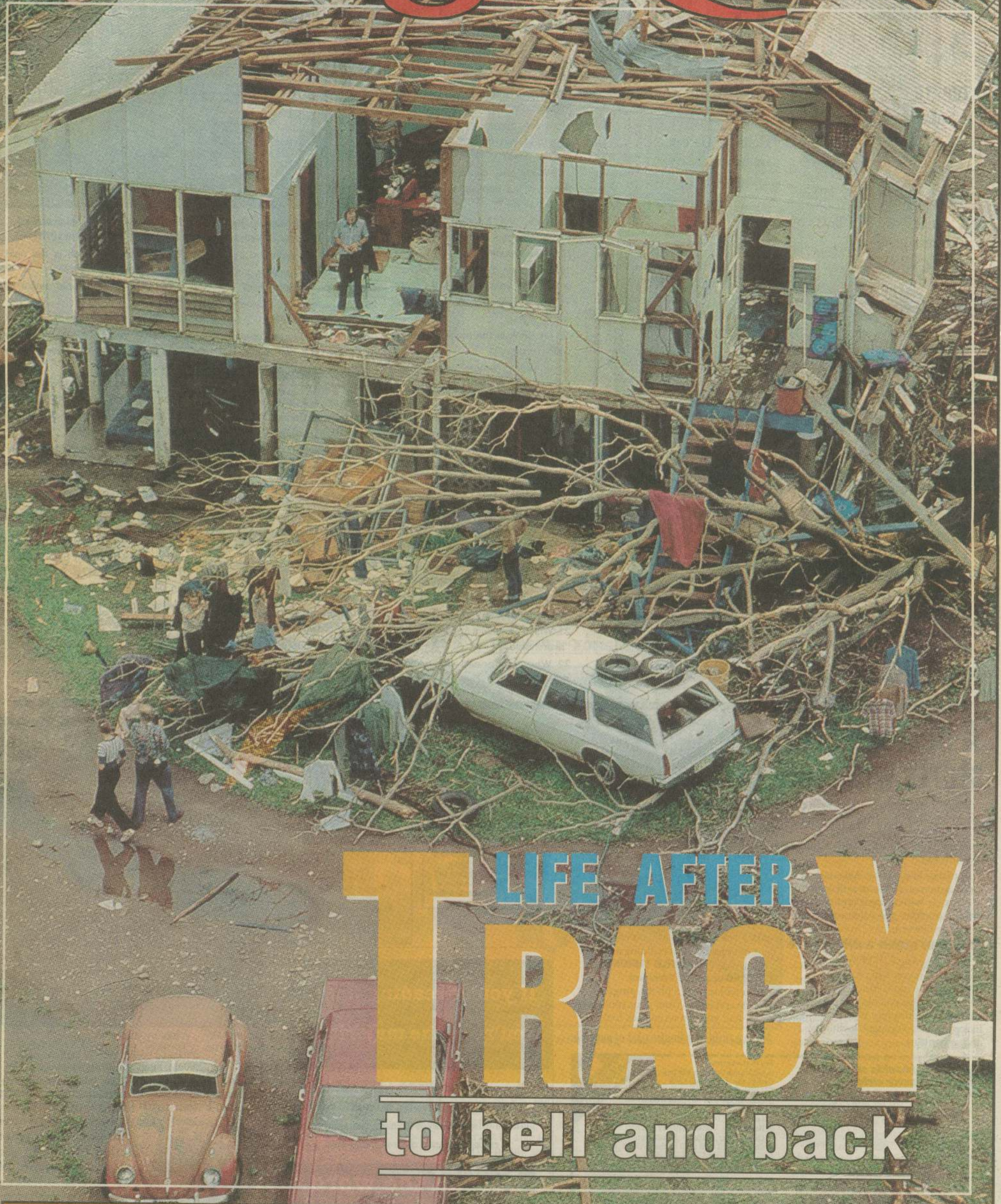


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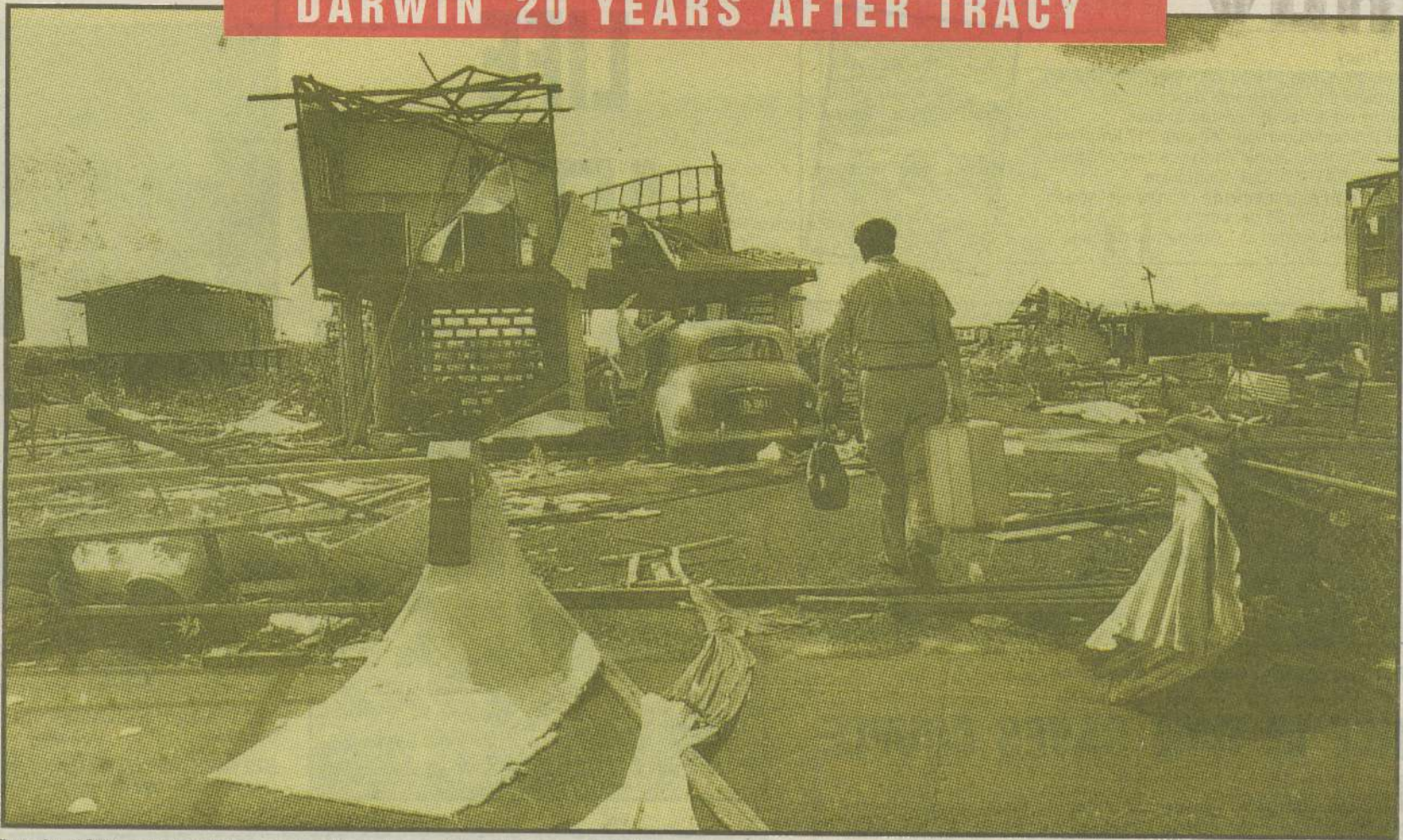
LIFE AFTER TRACY

to hell and back

DECEMBER 10, 1994

INCLUDING TRAVEL AND HOME & GARDEN

DARWIN 20 YEARS AFTER TRACY



Darwin, 1974, and Lyn Cox returns from leave in Perth to find his Nakara home wrecked beyond imagination.

TERROR IN THE Wind

■ CHRISTMAS DAY 1974 AND CYCLONE TRACEY HITS DARWIN. KIM LOCKWOOD WAS THERE — AND WILL NEVER FORGET ...

THE gates to hell burst open, spewing a roaring she-devil who devoured all in her path. Buildings, cars, boats, planes, trees — all blown to smithereens, destroyed in an instant.

Lives gone, lost, snuffed out. She had come down from the northwest with a howl and struck at midnight, immediately obliterating the pitiful street and household lights that might have helped.

Darwin was suddenly black, black as death, lit spasmodically by lightning that gave cruel flash pictures of terror.

Unimaginable noise. The screams of puny humans as they fled or were flung from their homes were as squeaks of mice on the anvils of Hades.

The roaring air was thick with deadly debris: roofing iron, tiles, trees, glass, great lengths of four by two that had once been joists in the frames of houses.

One survivor reported later that he had seen, in a burst of lightning, a full-size refrigerator flung high enough to hit the side of one of the town's elevated steel water tanks, 30 metres up.

Imagination? No. There was a dent in the tank's side next day, and a fridge on the ground not far away.

Cars ended in trees and swimming pools. One naval patrol boat sank, another ran aground. Bricks were clawed from the faces of office blocks and hotels.

The highest recorded wind speed was 217km/h, at which point (3.05am) the anemometer at Darwin Airport broke.

The swathe was less than 40km wide, making Tracy a "small" — though very intense — cyclone. The eye passed right over the city, moving at 8km/h.



Darwin, 1994, and neighbor Nesko Jahic recreates that heartbreaking walk by Mr Cox, now retired and living in Canberra

It lasted five hours. And always the roar, the sound of a thousand jets. Fifty people died on land and 16 were missing, and never found, at sea.

Dawn was grey and drizzly and oddly cold. People numbly emerged from what shelter they had managed to find and looked around in disbelief.

Many — myself included — had imagined this horror was happening only to them, that the next

street or suburb was probably unscathed.

I rang friends in the northern suburb of Nakara to say we — wife Judy, two children and a visiting niece — would not be able to make it for lunch. The phone rang and rang. But it was a phantom, ringing out in the exchange. Their house no longer existed.

But dawn brought more urgent tasks. The Director of Health, Dr Charles Gurd, picked his way over

fallen power lines and trees to reach the hospital, where the superintendent and senior surgeon were already at work.

He went into town — slowly, precariously, in a St John ambulance — and at the police station found a sergeant working the radio and directing the ambulance service. He sent a message into the still-brooding sky.

"The main gist of it," he now recalls, "was that Darwin had been

hit by a cyclone and was very badly damaged and had ceased to exist as a city. I asked for a surgical team to be sent.

"The message was picked up by the Nyanda, which was close to Darwin, and by the VJY radio station way out at a rural community, which also relayed the message to the emergency headquarters in Canberra."

The director of the Natural Disasters Organisation, Maj-General Alan Stretton, later said it was Dr Gurd's message that enabled him to be in Darwin with a surgical team late that night.

But, so professional were the hospital staff and private surgeons who came in, that by nightfall all surgical cases had been treated and the more serious earmarked for early evacuation.

They were among 25,000 people moved out of Darwin within a week in the biggest and fastest movement of people organised in Australia. One Qantas Boeing 747 carried 694 men, women and children.

There were also people moving in. The Royal Australian Navy launched Operation Navy Help Darwin, the biggest aid program mounted by the Australian Defence Force in the nation's history.

Sailors from eight ships, including the aircraft carrier HMAS Melbourne, salvaged, refloated or wrote off hundreds of wrecks in the harbor, including their patrol boats Arrow (sunk) and Attack (beached).

Generators they brought supplied power to the town, and men repaired buildings, removed rubbish and buried rotting meat from fridges and freezers.

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CYCLONE: Tracy.

WHEN: Christmas Day, 1974. Moved in on Darwin soon after midnight, lasting until dawn.

DEATHS: Fifty on land, 16 missing at sea.

WIND SPEED: Maximum recorded was 217 km/h (recording device broke). Gusts almost certainly higher.

DESTRUCTIVE PATH: About 40km wide.

DAMAGE: Up to \$1 billion, only \$218 million of which was insured. More than 90 per cent of Darwin's buildings had what was classed as "substantial damage".



Geoff and Barbara James were saved by a fence.

A FENCE IN TIME SAVES COUPLE

GEOFF and Barbara James stopped at the top of the stairs, watched the cat fly past them and waited while the bedroom furniture followed. Then they went downstairs.

The night had started ordinarily enough. Barbara had gone to work at the ABC, where she was a journalist, and had kept a weather eye on this cyclone, Tracy, that was said to be heading for Darwin.

But things started happening. She noticed her car being buffeted while driving to dinner and noticed it was worse on the way back.

She kept sending updated bulletins to Sydney but, when the power went off between 10pm and 11pm, she decided it was time to go home.

"By 11 it was a bit hairy," she recalls. "I started to make a sweet potato and marshmallow dish for Christmas. Silly, isn't it?"

"Geoff got us to put shoes on and stuff, and went to sleep.

"Then the roar started. Apart from the noise, the other vivid thing I remember is this eerie green light.

"Suddenly something hit the hot water system. Then the roof flew off, like it was cardboard. We got to the back door — I remember the cat flying past — and waited while the bedroom furniture blew past.

"We went down the steps. I remember

thinking we might die. Geoff said, 'run towards the fence'. As we got to it, a power line wrapped itself around my body.

"It was pelting rain. The rain was like needles.

"As we had left the house, I'd grabbed an old Indian blanket. I don't know why. Maybe I was just trying to save something, but we ended up using it as some sort of protection."

With Geoff's mother, Pearl, they were lying along the fence — a Cyclone fence — using it as protection from flying debris.

Pearl kept lifting her head to look around. Her son told her to stay down.

"If I am going to die," she said, "I want to see what hits me."

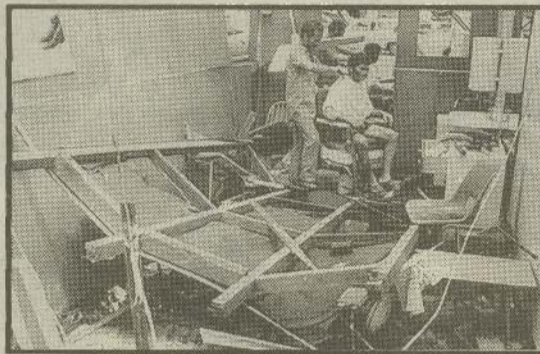
After a while, the three realised the wind was changing direction and that they would now be exposed to flying debris. They ran for the nearby primary school.

"We were really exposed," Barbara recalls. "There was tin (roofing iron) flying everywhere.

"Geoff got to the school and hesitated before he broke in. It's funny how your upbringing affects your decisions. I mean, he was worried he'd get into trouble."

The Jameses sheltered in the school and watched their house next door slowly and inevitably blow to pieces.

LIFE AFTER TRACY



ABOVE and RIGHT: The tropical Darwin suburb of Wagaman is a far cry from the devastated scene on December 25, 1974.

LEFT: A barber shop still operates after the cyclone.

BELOW: Driving into hell... a tour of Casuarina after Tracy.



FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

About 1000 sailors were ashore each day, moving in squads of 10 from house to house to clean up and to search for valuables, which were catalogued at Naval Headquarters before being taken aboard HMAS Stalwart for safe-keeping.

Insurers eventually paid \$218 million but estimates of damage are usually close to \$1 billion.

The Darwin Reconstruction Commission was established to oversee rebuilding. But, like the city it served, it found 1975 a cruel year. Spats, bickering, mud-slinging and resignations from chairmen and managers marked a stormy existence.

The 11,000 Darwinites who stayed on after Tracy and the thousands who started filtering back as early as mid-January (9000 residents had been on annual leave in the south on Christmas Day) found 1975 worse than the cyclone.

By June 20, work had only just started on the construction camps for the builders, and the first sod of the first new dwelling was not turned until a week later.

By July, the population had returned to 35,000, including 600 living on the liner Patris in the harbor.

But facilities were minimal and red tape at a maximum. And

by December, a year after the blow, the city and suburbs were still littered with "dance floors", the bare floorboards of the elevated houses that are the norm in the tropics.

The Chief Minister, Marshall Perron, had just been elected to the new, fully-elected Legislative Assembly and clearly remembers the traumas of that first year.

"The first rumor was that the Commonwealth would not re-establish Darwin," he says in his office in the new \$117 million parliament building the locals call "the wedding cake".

"Then there was a suggestion that they would start with a blank sheet of paper and replan Darwin. These things caused enormous concern, as stories swept back and forth.

"There was turmoil and confusion."

The status of the Darwin town plan was in doubt and there was argument over implementing a building code.

The great healer, time, eventually did its work. Greater Darwin now has a population of more than 90,000, almost double the pre-Tracy 46,656.

Darwin City Council manages an annual budget well over \$30 million. Domestic traffic at the shiny new Darwin Airport has gone from 141,696 in 1972-73 to 504,732 in 1992-93.

The vegetation has long since

returned to normal and Darwin is, again, a beautiful, burgeoning tropical city.

It also has lost its innocence. Men wear long trousers, not shorts, and many also wear ties; high wire fences now cut many more houses off from the street and neighbors than in the past; floors are carpet, not polished wood or concrete with seagrass matting.

Marshall Perron concedes the town has lost many of its carefree former ways.

"We now lock our houses," he says. "More are wearing ties than ever."

And air-conditioning, he says, is partly responsible for the long trousers and carpets.

Size, too, contributes. Towns of 35,000 are far less formal than those of 90,000, and their "bad" element is proportionally smaller.

"But you can still go to the movies and find people there in thongs and singlets," Mr Perron says.

"And that applies everywhere except the casino."

Thongs, singlets, a stubby of VB in a stubby-holder, the sun ensuring the west is red as it melts through the horizon beyond Fannie Bay. Some things will never change.



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Bruno Santalucia, daughter Kerry and wife Yvonne used their front fence as protection.

FURY OF THE CYCLONIC WINDS

BRUNO and Yvonne Santalucia, their daughter Kerry, four weeks old, and Yvonne's parents were lying along their front fence, in the gutter, when their station wagon started rolling towards them from its spot under the house.

"It just got blown out from under the house and across the lawn," Bruno recalls.

"I thought for a minute it was going to run over me but it stopped.

"We talked for a while about getting into it, but as we were doing so a lump of timber speared through it, so we stayed where we were.

"At least it provided a bit more shelter."

The family lived on the semi-rural outskirts of Darwin, on the Department of Civil Aviation reserve on Lee Point Rd. Bruno had arrived home about 12.45am from his job at Darwin Air-

port — where he is now general manager — to find rain being forced through the tightly shut glass louvres.

Yvonne and her mother went to bed.

"Suddenly, the end wall of the house just pulled away from the roof," Yvonne recalls.

"We could see lightning through the gap."

When part of the back wall went, the four adults and Kerry, in her carry basket, went downstairs to shelter behind the storeroom wall. But the wall blew in and Besser blocks fell on them.

"About that time there was a flash of lightning and I saw the Cyclone wire fence," says Bruno.

"We crawled across the front lawn to it and the four of us lay along it, two by two, heads together, with the carry basket between us."

ANNE Taylor, pictured right, was so mad when her dog, Peace, was shot, she got in her car — it had no tyres — and drove down the street and back. "I don't know if I was trying to kill them (the authorities) or myself," she says. "It was only this year, nearly 20 years later, that I have been able to tell the kids what happened."

The shooting of dogs — a health threat — was a sad part of the aftermath of the cyclone.



Anne lived in Parer Dr, Wagaman — later the most-photographed post-cyclone street because it had a water tank tower handy for photographers

— with five children, ranging from 15 to 4. While listening to midnight mass on radio, a friend arrived to say his caravan had gone.

"We woke the kids and ended up in a sort of tent of a big king-size mattress and a table," she remembers.

"I looked through the bathroom window at one stage and saw something from outer space. It turned out to be the chassis of a caravan on its end."



ABOVE: Barry Arthur and his mother Anne reminisce.

RIGHT: Barry taking a bath eight days after being born.



STORM'S NEW LIFE

BARRY Edward Arthur's first cry, in the brief, quiet eye of the storm, is seen by realists for what it was: a gasp for air by a new-born baby. His father, Eric, had driven his mother, Anne, into Darwin Hospital about 10.30pm, through fierce wind and pelting rain.

Mrs Arthur's doctor, Ella Stack, who was later Mayor of Darwin, was just leaving hospital to go home to batten down, but she gave Mrs Arthur something to settle the contractions.

"She felt it wasn't the night to be having a baby," Mrs Arthur says. "But at 3.20am, the deputy superintendent and two nurses delivered him — in the nursery because the labor ward was flooded.

"Eric was there — he couldn't go anywhere — and he held Barry from the time he was born until daylight.

"Just after he was born, the windows on that side of the building started going. Glass was going everywhere. But we were all right.

"I stayed in the hospital. They managed to feed us, which was incredible really.

"Late on Christmas Day, the air-force came around with the doctors to identify who had to be evacuated. I was flown out on the first plane — a Fokker Friendship — to Brisbane, from where I went to stay with Eric's parents in Lismore."

The birth in the middle of a cyclone was easier for Eric and Anne Arthur than the year that followed. They remember 1975 as cruel, a year in which people's nerves were frayed, in which everything was a hassle.

But they stayed, rebuilt and still live where they did when Tracy came in.

Barry is now studying computer science, biology and Indonesian at Northern Territory University and hopes to travel the world working with computers.

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