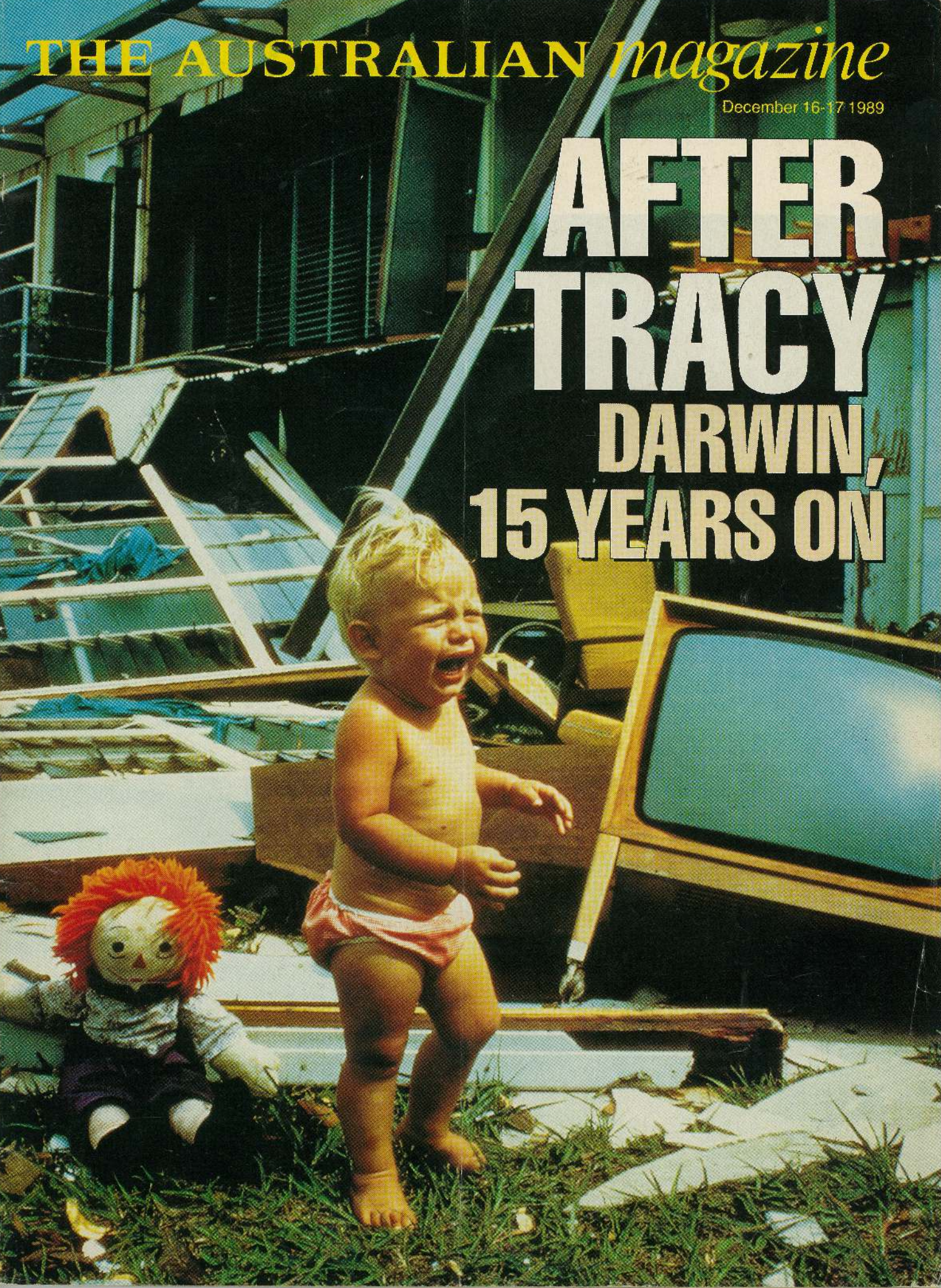


THE AUSTRALIAN *magazine*

December 16-17 1989

AFTER TRACY DARWIN, 15 YEARS ON



On Christmas morning, 1974, the residents of Darwin emerged from a night of terror to find their town destroyed by Cyclone Tracy. Winds of 200km/h and torrential rain had exacted a shocking toll: 68 dead and 1000 seriously injured. Fifteen years on, the horrifying accounts of that night — and the inspiring actions in the aftermath — are recalled by **BRIAN JOHNSTONE.**



THE TRAGEDY OF CYCLONE TRACY DARWIN REMEMBERS



THE ROAR WAS DEAFENING, sounding as though a jet bomber was fixed overhead with its throttle full open. But the roar came from the wind — a wind with the force of an atomic bomb accompanied by torrential rain that was sometimes horizontal, forked lightning and apocalyptic claps of thunder.

As the clock approached midnight on Christmas Eve, 1974, more than 45,000 residents of Darwin huddled in fear before the onslaught of Cyclone Tracy. By 3am on Christmas Day, a 200km/h hurricane was roaring through their homes, which had been plunged into pitch blackness. Houses screeched and groaned, then disintegrated under its force.

An eerie silence descended as the eye of the cyclone passed over the city about 4am, but after 20 minutes the storm changed direction and returned with even more force. Houses weakened by the first onslaught could not resist the second.

Tom Bell, a Northern Territory MP, was holding hands with his wife as they sought cover after their house caved in. Suddenly, her body went limp. Mr Bell stopped to check, thinking she had fainted or fallen. His wife had been cut in two by a missile of sheet iron.

One woman took refuge in a bath. Two mattresses shielded her from nature's onslaught. But the tumult turned a length of iron into a spear that pierced the roof, the mattresses, the woman, the bath and the floor. She died in hospital on Christmas night.

Howard T. (he asked not to be identified), his wife, 12-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son huddled inside their home as the wind raged. At one stage he was forced to open the louvre windows because their "ears were popping due to the pressure". They clung to the floorboards of their split-level home as Tracy tore the roof away and exposed them to the torrential rain. They watched flying corrugated iron and debris glint against the sky, illuminated by the lightning. They watched their Christmas cards float away as the water began building up.

"All of a sudden, this 30-foot piece of timber came through the ceiling," he recalls. "It was a piece six by two inches that had snapped off somewhere over in another building. It came screaming through the sky at about 200 miles an hour. It had a long tapered point on it and it flew like a javelin. It came straight



Darwin, Christmas morning, 1974: Muriel O'Connell sifts through the wreckage of the home of friends. Houses disintegrated under Cyclone Tracy's awesome force.

through the ceiling at us, down about four foot before it jammed on a piece of metal. If it had continued, I reckon it would have speared one of us."

Jim Fawcett, a third generation Territorian, and his wife, Marguerite, were huddled in the living room with their daughter, Donna, then aged 7, and son, Gavin, 5, having piled all the furniture in the middle of the room.

The Fawcetts had put their children to bed earlier in the night but roused them when they heard a neighbour's roof tearing off. Marguerite phoned the Civil Defence to inform them.

"Ours could be next. What should we do?" she asked.

"I couldn't tell you," came the reply from a man with terror in his voice. "My roof's just blown off and I've got to do something about that." He then hung up.

Around 1am, the roof of the Fawcetts' house peeled off and the rain came pouring in. Braving the screeching wind and driving rain, the family bailed out to

seek shelter in their car, a Ford Falcon station wagon, which was propped up under the house with large bricks on all wheels.

Jim took Gavin down to the car first, holding him by the wrist. "At one stage the wind blew him right off the ground," Jim recalls. "If I didn't have a grip I would have lost him."

Marguerite held Donna by one hand with the family's Siamese cat under the other arm. At one stage in her flight, Donna says she opened her mouth and "could not close it again". They eventually got into the car, which had water up to the bottom of the doors. The car would rock back and forwards all night with the force of the water under it.

Jim grabbed a bottle of rum as he evacuated the house. "He had a little set of aluminium cups in a leather case he used to keep in the car," Marguerite says, "so he just sat there with his cup and his rum and every now and again he would open the car door a little way and scoop



The aftermath: Those sheltering in the Travelodge Hotel reported seeing cars fly past them.

◁ up some of the water and add it to his drink."

When the eye of the cyclone came over several hours later, everything became still and quiet — not a sound could be heard. A neighbour finally called out to the Fawcetts in the pitch black. He and Jim decided to go up to the house to look for the children's Christmas presents. "We went up the back stairs," Jim recalled, "and, of course, there was nothing. No house. Piles of timber were all over the lounge. We crawled among the stuff and I found a pillowcase full of presents. That was the lad's. We never found Donna's."

No sooner had Jim returned to the car than the cyclone came back from the south and it blew until daybreak. None of the family suffered any injury, but when they got out of the car they noticed several sheets of corrugated iron had wrapped around different parts of the vehicle. Marguerite and the children broke down and cried when they saw the pitiful remnants of their home.

On Christmas Eve, 1974, Barbara James was working as a journalist on

night duty at the ABC. She travelled out to Nightcliff in the northern suburbs to warn her in-laws that Tracy was heading straight for Darwin.

"The wind was so strong I was having trouble controlling the car. I left there about 7.30pm and the wind had picked up even more. I got back into the newsroom and telexes were coming through every 15 minutes. By 10 o'clock it was extremely windy. I was sending a bulletin off to Sydney and the telex stopped. The power went out. I called the journalist in charge and went home."

Her husband Geoff had already started taping up the windows. "I turned on the radio and was making a sweet potato dish for Christmas breakfast," Barbara says. "It was cooking on the stove when the power went off. I lit a kerosene lamp in the middle of the floor and had the transistor radio going.

"Geoff started to go to sleep. I decided Geoff's mother, Pearl, who was in her 60s, and I should shelter under the piano. We just sat there and listened to the radio until it went off air about 2am. Geoff woke up as things really started to howl

and he suggested we put shoes and socks on. We did that and then the walls just slowly seemed to disintegrate.

"I remember this great rush of water came through the ceiling, and the walls just started to fall apart . . . The piano started to fall on us and Geoff's mother pushed it out of the way. We decided to get out of the house.

"As we went along the corridor the house was disintegrating around us . . . we had to stop to let things fly past. We got to the back door and stood wondering where to go. At that stage you could see things flying around. I remember thinking at that point that we could die.

"We decided to run for a metre-high cyclone fence. As we sprinted to it a powerline wrapped itself around me. I just stood there and screamed. Geoff said not to panic as it was obviously not alive. It was freezing.

"We got to the fence and just lay there. A big tree had fallen along the fence and we were wedged between the tree and the fence. The branches of the tree were stopping any flying debris. Pearl kept peeking up over the branches ▷

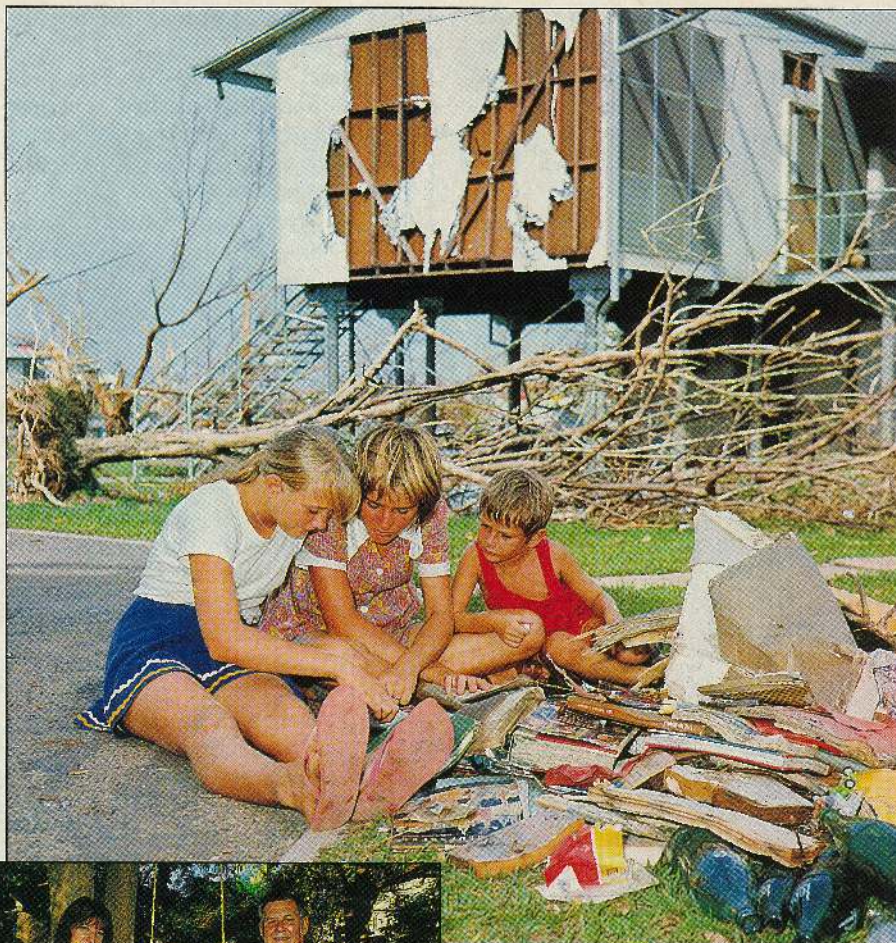
to see what was going on. She said there were sheets of tin dancing down the street. We told her to keep her head down, but she replied, 'If I am going to die I'm going to see what hits me...'

They eventually took shelter in the nearby Darwin Primary School, one of the oldest buildings in the city, which survived intact.

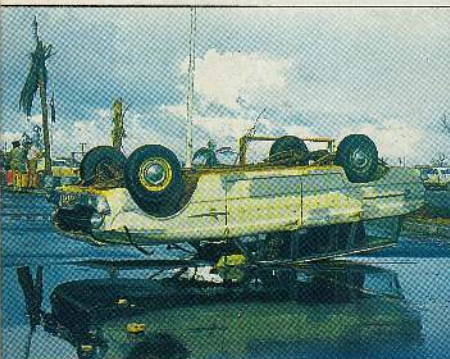
AT DAWN ON CHRISTMAS DAY, the residents of Darwin emerged to find their town obliterated. Fifty-two people were killed on land, 16 were lost at sea. More than 1000 people were seriously injured.

The first radio news bulletins broadcast in southern States in the early hours of Christmas Day reported that Cyclone Tracy had wreaked havoc on Darwin, but that there were no casualties...

In fact, as the first hint of the day's light broke, the injured began arriving at Darwin hospital by ambulance, by car and on foot. Estimates of the number of people seen in casualty that day vary between 600 and 1000. Doctors admitted



PHOTOS: AUSTRALIAN CONSOLIDATED PRESS



Top: Susie, Heidi and Karsten Maruna sift through damaged photo albums and books outside their home. The Fawcett family, and the damage.

145 patients with serious injuries. Two surgical teams swung into action; they would operate side by side for the next 18 hours on 32 of the worst cases. Most of the severely injured were in deep shock. "Blood loss was considerable," reported the acting supervisor of Casualty and Outpatients, Senior Sister Barbara Pottle. "There was general shock. Some were speechless and couldn't give their names or date of birth."

Entire streets of houses in the newly constructed suburbs north of the Darwin city centre were destroyed. Only 10 per cent escaped any significant damage.

Fifteen years on, Tracy remains Australia's worst single disaster. It caused an estimated \$800 million in damage and forced the greatest peacetime mobilisation of resources in the country's his-

tory. But that mobilisation had humble beginnings in the spirit shown by the locals that Christmas morning — a spirit typified by local businessman Ernie Chin in Darwin.

Chin had experienced the full horror of Tracy earlier that morning. He had spent the night with his wife and two children in his city office and emerged unhurt, but most of the city buildings had been damaged. He checked to find all his relatives had survived and then moved around helping people.

He found an old woman, known as Granny Smith, who was in her 80s. She was sitting in what was once her house and had a bad cut to the head. "I took her to hospital and when we arrived there were about 100 people there. The floor was wet with blood. People just sat.

"People were carrying in children who had obviously died. Other children were being carried in with shocking wounds. People were wandering in with their legs cut open. I wanted to stay and help but I just couldn't face it.

"I went back to my home and got the children organised to clean up. The old Chinese Joss House was totally destroyed but sitting among the wreckage were all the statues of the gods. None of them was harmed so we organised to have all the idols placed in a shelter.

"Within the hour I had secured two generators and made sure there was enough food. We were self-sufficient within five hours. We ended up with about 50 people living at our house."

Dr Charles Gurd, Northern Territory director of health, advised local authorities at their first meeting in Darwin on Christmas Day that the ruined city could not possibly cope with 45,000 homeless. There had to be a fullscale evacuation.

Federal Minister for Territories, Rex Patterson, and Major General Alan Stretton, head of the fledgling Natural Disasters Organisation — who was given command of the immediate disaster relief operation — agreed with Gurd and key local officials. They had flown in

◁ from Canberra aboard an RAAF Hercules at 10.20pm on Christmas night, guided into the Darwin Civil Airport and RAAF base by car headlights.

They were met by a perplexed officer in charge of the Darwin RAAF base, Group Captain David Hitchins. "I was appalled by what I saw," Stretton later recalled. "Rubble and debris were strewn everywhere and speed was reduced to a crawl as the car navigated a path through the obstacles. A DC3 aircraft had been swept up and over a hangar to be eventually deposited on the ground several hundred metres away.

"We arrived at the operations room building and found it feebly lit by emergency generators, minus most of its windows and with large pieces of its walls either missing or in peril of falling off at the slightest touch.

"Walking through the outer offices,

● The evacuation of Darwin has been compared to Dunkirk. ●

we passed men, women and children tossing fitfully and probably trying to get their first rest for over 24 hours while stretched out on soaking mattresses. At least the fortunate ones had mattresses; many had to make do with the floor or tabletops. The operations room was manned by tired RAAF officers and

airmen. Hitchins confirmed that the situation was desperate.

"Damage to the RAAF base was extensive and the married quarters almost completely destroyed. The full impact and scope of the catastrophe became frighteningly clear — Hitchins said that he had seen Hiroshima soon after the atomic attack and Darwin looked very much the same."

Stretton decided he had to get into the city, normally a 10-minute drive. Many roads were blocked by fallen trees, the wreckage of houses, overturned cars and pieces of light aircraft.

"Soon we were driving through a ghost town," recalled Stretton. They negotiated their way to the police station.

"We passed a large room that had been pressed into service as a mortuary. We were all shocked and saddened to see the broken and mutilated bodies of men, women and children laid out in neat rows on the wet floor — which was becoming covered in an ever-widening, pinkish stain as blood mingled with the pools of water from rain dripping from the ceiling.

"The Darwin climate, the heat and humidity, had already produced a sickening, pervading odour of decomposition and death.

"Sleeping forms would suddenly start to shudder and cry out as the victims of Cyclone Tracy relived their hours of terror. It was a terrible sight. Then came the first ray of hope.

"In his devastated police station, amid the corpses and the stunned women and children, I found Commissioner Bill McLaren at his post with his officers. Despite the great personal loss that involved all of them, the whole force



WAYNE MILES

Darwin businessman Ernie Chin and the few treasures he managed to save.

rallied to the call of their commissioner and reported for duty."

The evacuation of Darwin has been justifiably compared to Dunkirk. The biggest airlift of people in the history of Australia began at dawn on Boxing Day when seriously injured patients were flown out on a Hercules Medevac.

By New Year's Eve, 1975, more than 25,000 shattered men, women and children had been evacuated on a fleet of aircraft, which included Jumbo jets, DC-3s and 707s.

Qantas set a world record on December 28 when one of its Jumbos carried 654 people. It broke its own record within days when a second Jumbo carried nearly 700 passengers. It's estimated that more than 9000 people left by road, many of them on Christmas Day.

There has been much criticism of the evacuation and the bureaucratic struggle of many Darwinites to return to their homes once the emergency had abated. Yet accounts by witnesses, gathered by the Oral History Unit of the Northern Territory Archives, leave little doubt that the authorities, worried about the outbreak of typhoid, made the right choice. An estimated 20,000 people sought shelter in schools and other civic buildings which had withstood Tracy's onslaught. These buildings also served as evacuation centres, which according to one man, who declined to be named, were a nightmare. "All the toilets of the school I was in were backed up, the stink and the stench, screaming kids, people sitting around in shock, people in bandages, no clothes except what they could find or get from other houses. It was a shocking state," he says.

Just over 10,000 people remained amid the rubble and the filth. There was no power, no water, no services, no ▷



E. CHIN

The aftermath on the waterfront at Dinha Beach: 16 people were lost at sea.

communication and, of course, very few houses.

As thousands were flown out, more than 400 police and medical teams arrived from all over Australia to begin the grisly clean up. Police organised a house-to-house search for bodies, while health authorities began systematically disposing of large stores of Christmas food from cupboards and refrigerators in 12,000 ruined houses, shops and buildings. Both operations were completed within the week but many of those involved still carry the psychological scars from what they saw.

The work of the Natural Disasters Organisation was completed on New Year's Eve and Stretton handed the task of rebuilding Darwin to the civil authorities. He later paid tribute to the people of the city, who came out of the ruins and worked day and night to restore what was left of their city: "It was the citizens themselves who ran the 24 executive committees that put the city back on its feet in under a week."

It was no easy task but they were helped by the millions of dollars in cash and supplies flowing in from people all over Australia who were shocked out of their Christmas cheer by the television images from the Top End.

The rebuilding program began almost

● *If anybody who went through Tracy said they weren't scared, it's just bloody lying.* ●

immediately with the formation of the Darwin Reconstruction Commission — amid some debate as to whether Darwin should be rebuilt at all, given its history (see box — Darwin's Record Of Devastation). The numbers of people flowing back into the city firmly ended that debate.

The authorities introduced a strict permit system for the return of those evacuated, fearing Darwin would develop into a shanty town — but causing conflict between officials and those anxious to reunite their families. The system was eventually dropped and by September 1975 more than 35,000 people were living in Darwin. It would



Journalist/author Barbara James, 15 years on: Tracy made her 'more resourceful'.

be five years, though, before some semblance of normalcy would return.

Tracy exacted a heavy psychological and social toll on Darwinites. Shortly after the cyclone struck, the University of Queensland's Departments of Sociology and Social Work conducted a survey of the disaster. The team interviewed the stayers and the evacuees to find out how they had fared.

Sixty-three per cent of the survivors suffered subsequent emotional disorders, including anxiety and depressive states, fear of wind, sleeping difficulties, excessive drinking and hysterical and aggressive outbursts.

Almost one third of these were evacuees who never returned to Darwin.

Adults were asked: "People say, 'It is an ill wind which blows no good'. Has any good come out of Cyclone Tracy?" Forty-six per cent of the total responded to the question in the affirmative. The research team was moved to comment: "The fact they did so, and even claimed on occasions that they were better and stronger people than before, speaks volumes for the resources of the human spirit."

Sixty per cent of the stayers gave an emphatic yes to this question, although the majority of evacuees who never returned rejected the notion that any good came out of Tracy. Many still refuse to discuss the subject publicly.

Then there are also those who returned but later left, depressed by the enormity of the rebuilding effort. Howard T, whose house was speared by a length of wood turned javelin, was one of them. He had lived in Darwin for 20 years before Tracy. Tourist operators frequently stopped at the front gate of his home in suburban Nightcliff to allow

their customers to photograph his prizewinning tropical garden. He had just finished extensive alterations when Tracy blew through.

The experience left its scars. Howard T and his family went to Adelaide. He returned to Darwin a year after Tracy to rebuild his house but he quit in abject depression. "You'd always be living on the edge," he says. "I don't think I would like to go through that every wet season. If anybody who went through Cyclone Tracy turned around and said they weren't scared, it's just bloody lying. We were all scared."

Howard is still living comfortably in Adelaide. Although he keeps in contact with Darwin through newspapers and friends, he celebrated last Christmas without thinking about Tracy.

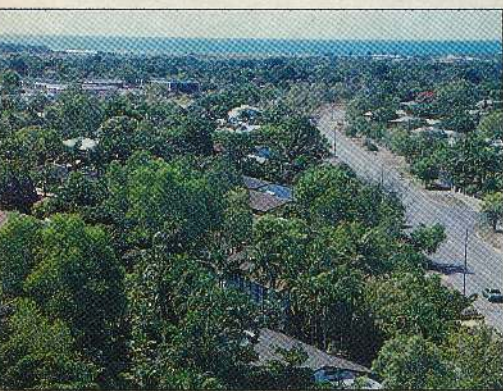
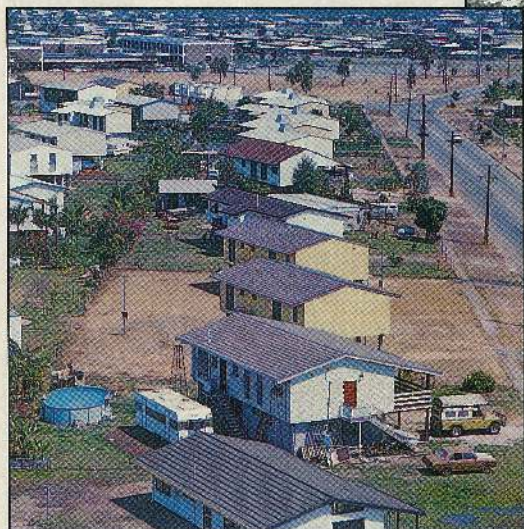
Jim and Marguerite Fawcett, however, are typical of the stayers. The clean-up was foremost in Jim's mind once he had seen his family evacuated. It never occurred to him to leave.

Marguerite never had any doubt she would return. They had bought their elevated house in Fitzer Drive, Ludmilla the year before Tracy.

In the aftermath of the cyclone, Jim was offered a job at the hospital where he still works. His family had another house carted inter-State up to Darwin on the back of a truck and assembled on the same platform as their previous home in less than three weeks.

Marguerite returned to Darwin a few months after being evacuated to Adelaide with Gavin and Donna. Marguerite was unsettled in Adelaide. "I didn't fit into any category, except as a refugee from Darwin. That's what they called us. We even had little refugee identity cards issued to us," she says.

Three views of Parer Drive, Darwin.
 Right: On Christmas morning, 1974.
 Below: The scene three years later —
 the Reconstruction Commission spent
 \$300 million in that time. Bottom:
 Parer Drive as it looks today.



◀ She was glad to return to post-cyclone Darwin which was “a mess for years afterwards. There were derelict houses everywhere. But I felt I could do something, and get things moving again.”

Cyclone Tracy made Barbara James, the journalist on duty that night, “much more resourceful. It also heightened my perception of history and heritage,” she says. “I had not known a great deal about the history of the place. Tracy totally flattened the town but we wanted to retain its identity. I started talking to people who had been here for a time.”

Barbara recently released her first book, *No Man's Land*, the first history of the Northern Territory written from a women's perspective. She had arrived in the Territory in 1967 on a holiday from the US. “My car broke down at Larrimah on the way back to Canberra so I put it on the old railway line back to Darwin. It took six months to fix, so I got a job. I have been here ever since.”

Barbara says one of her enduring memories of the post-cyclone period was the disorientation: “You would find yourself going to shops to buy things and then realise they did not exist,” she says. “We moved seven times in the first two or three years . . . from makeshift home to makeshift home.”

“The resident action groups that sprung up were really strong. People were determined to have their say in things. There was a threat that all historic buildings would get bulldozed.”

“It is to a lot of people's credit that we stopped that happening.”

THOSE WHO LIVED IN DARWIN before Tracy say it was a town straight out of a Somerset Maugham novel. Little had changed since the turn of the century when Banjo Paterson described the city as one of “booze, blow and blasphemy”, unique among Australian towns “inasmuch as it is filled with the boilings over of the great cauldron of Oriental humanity”.

In the early seventies Darwin was a low-lying ramshackle town which contained the most diverse ethnic mix living in splendid tropical isolation. Most Euro-

peans were public servants on two-year postings. The rest were itinerants, drifting through for the dry season, between May and October, looking for work, or from bush muster camps and nearby pastoral stations.

The Asian influence was strong, particularly the Chinese, in business and commerce.

Darwin was a popular departure point on the overland hippie trail to Asia. Hippies lived on the beaches. The only road out of town, the Stuart Highway, was a single-lane bitumen track. Road access to Darwin was regularly cut off with the onset of the wet season from October to April.

The sole high-rise building was the 10-storey Travelodge Hotel, which opened on the city's Esplanade seven months before Tracy.

A number of patrons who were having Christmas dinner in the first-floor restaurant on Christmas Eve reported seeing cars flying past the windows. A number were found in the swimming pool the following morning, but the building survived.

The average price of a uniform pre-fabricated elevated house was about \$27,000 to \$30,000. The Darwin Recon- ▶

struction Commission, established by the Commonwealth Government immediately after the cyclone, and the granting of self-government to the Northern Territory in July 1978, changed all that.

The commission spent more than \$300 million between 1975 and 1978 when it was wound up. In that time it had provided the necessary infrastructure for a modern new town, and new emergency procedures for cyclones.

But it was self-government and the Country/Liberal Party Government led by Paul Everingham which changed the face of Darwin.

Development was the political catchcry of the late seventies and early eighties; success was seemingly measured by the number of cranes in operation. A generous budget of more than \$900 million a year helped transform the city. It now boasts a skyline of multi-storey office blocks and five-star hotels, a Performing Arts Centre, a university



JEAN-PIERRE PILUCHOTTIMAGE BANK

Darwin today: A modern town with strict building codes and emergency procedures.

DARWIN'S RECORD OF DEVASTATION

CYCLONES HAVE WRECKED HAVOC ON Darwin since the first days of European settlement in the North.

November 1839 — The early settlement of Port Essington, before it became known as Darwin, was wrecked by a cyclone. Eight seamen were lost from HMS Pelorus. Seven of the 21 cottages of the non-commissioned officers and their families were destroyed. The remainder were unroofed and rendered uninhabitable.

January 14, 1878 — During the night, every building in Darwin was damaged and several destroyed by a cyclone.

January 16-17, 1882 — Hurricane winds lashed Darwin. Again many buildings were destroyed and every house was reported damaged.

January 1897 — According to newspaper reports, Darwin was "almost completely destroyed" by a hurricane accompanied by "phenomenally heavy rainfall". Twenty-eight people lost their lives and estimates of the damage put the bill at more than 150,000 pounds.

April 1, 1917 — Buildings were damaged and a fishing junk destroyed with the loss of seven lives when winds recorded at 110km/h hit the city.

March 1937 — A severe tropical cyclone again hit Darwin, causing the loss of five lives. A peak gust of 160 km/h was recorded at Darwin Airport. Widespread damage was reported.

complex, casino and modern cinema complex.

Darwin's main thoroughfare, Smith Street, which was mauled by Tracy, has been developed into a palm-covered mall with specialty shops and open-air cafes.

Parallels exist most strikingly between the 1897 cyclone and Tracy. Both cyclones reached their peak at the same time of day, for an hour around 4am; they followed similar paths and pattern of damage. The rainfall recorded in 1897 was 292mm while the estimated rainfall during Tracy was 280mm.

The *Northern Territory Times And Gazette* reported on January 25, 1897: "From a fairly stiff blow at about 8pm the wind gradually increased to hurricane force by 11.30 or midnight, and from that time on till nearly 5 o'clock it raged with terrific fury.

"The crash of buildings and the rattle of iron and timber falling about, combined with the blinding rain and roaring of the tempest, was an experience which those who underwent it will never forget to their dying day.

"Strongly built houses collapsed like houses of cards; roofs blew bodily away; lamp and telegraph posts were burnt or torn up; immense beams of timber were hurled away like chaff; trees were uprooted; in many instances large houses were lifted bodily from their foundations. In short the night was one of terrifying destructiveness that made the stoutest heart quail.

"How it was that hundreds were not killed outright is one of those inscrutable mysteries which will never be explained..." □

It leads down to modern roll-on roll-off wharf facilities. Construction has begun on a \$100 million project to create a State Square, overlooking the wharves.

The Government and the City Council have paid special attention to the city's parks and gardens, which were wiped out by Tracy. Darwin's Botanic Gardens, which were started by Baurice Holtze in 1884, boasted 400 species of plants by 1887. Tracy wiped out 80 per cent of the plants, but the Gardens are now one of the features of the city. The palm garden alone boasts over 400 species.

But the most dramatic change since Tracy has been the growth of the northern suburbs around the coastal cliffs. Most of the population lives in these suburbs in new brick homes on sprawling half-acre blocks.

The average price of a house now is about \$80,000, largely because of the increased cost of building due to a strict building code. No one can build even a wooden fence in Darwin now without engaging a consultant engineer to design it and have it approved.

Darwin is still largely a Public Service town with more than half the workforce employed by the Territory or Commonwealth Governments. It boasts the second highest disposable income in Australia after Canberra, but more and more public servants choose to stay after their initial two-year tenures.

As Darwin prepares to celebrate Christmas 1989, it is still the transient town of old. However its population has stabilised at just more than 72,000. Though many of those residents have had no direct experience of a cyclone, most agree the city is now far better prepared because of strict building codes — and an awareness of how cruel nature can be. □