

INTRODUCTION – CYCLONE TRACY AND THE ARMED FORCES

Cyclones are a fact of life in tropical northern Australia. People moving to the “Top End” can get quite alarmed as the cyclone season – basically November to April – approaches, and advertisements advising on what to do are heard on radio stations. They are advised to plan where they will shelter, check their house is strong enough; and to have a “cyclone kit” of tinned food, a radio, bottled fresh water, and so on. Most of them will have heard of Cyclone Tracy, which hit Darwin on 24 December 1974, and the widespread death and destruction it caused. All of these things can add up to a daunting prospect for the months ahead.

Tracy was an unusual cyclone. The writer has been through several small ones, and they were alarming enough.¹ To sit through one in a strong building is not too stressful, but it’s more the actuality of not knowing what’s going on outside – how many trees are down; how many roofs blown off, what will happen next – that adds to the tension. When the winds die down people can emerge to start inspecting the damage. In a big tropical city, there are always numerous trees that have been blown over, and quite often there have been power lines brought down by them.

Tracy was an exception, but then again Darwin was too in those days. The houses were often ramshackle, built hurriedly after World War II, without much attention to building standards. Post-war, the emphasis for returning townfolk had been on establishing something to keep the rain off. There were few regulations and even less of a government inspection system.

Without the Australian Defence Force, Darwin would likely have even been abandoned as a city in 1974. With most of her population forcibly evacuated after the Christmas Day disaster, in the tropical wet season with torrential rain and high humidity; with no electricity, thousands of dead animals, and scores of dead humans, Darwin was a dangerous place to be, and survival would have been most difficult. But with the Army, Navy and Air Force to the rescue, the Northern Territory capital came back from disaster.

But almost nothing of the armed forces effort has been told. Most stories of Tracy centre around the thousands of people who had their lives wrecked. This book details the story of the cyclone and how some members of the services were directly affected, but then explains how the armed forces rallied for many months to the salvation of a city. Using archival photographs, location visits to what still remains, and interviews with ADF personnel, this account shows the nation’s finest in some of their greatest hours, but also some of the untold stories behind the armed forces and Cyclone Tracy. It settles too, with extensive research, the number of fatalities which resulted from the cyclone, and dispels any stories of armed forces involvement in a cover-up. And it also argues for more formal recognition of the efforts and achievements of uniformed members involved.

Dr Tom Lewis
April 2024

1 The author has lived in Darwin for over two decades during three separate periods: 1968-1969, 1988-1999 and 2007-2021.