

Cyclone Warriors



A profile of Wessex N7-200, one of nine that were extensively utilised during Operation Navy Help Darwin. (Juanita Franzi)

The *Melbourne* took seven Wessex helicopters to the north with her. Later another two arrived on *HMAS Stalwart*. The helicopters “worked as aerial cranes, as people-ferries, as freight vehicles, as search and rescue craft and as reconnaissance helicopters.” They were quick movers, with take-offs from the flight deck even as the carrier was coming past East Arm into the harbour. A small fleet of boats was also lowered to the sea: “Within 60 minutes, more than 400 men were ferried ashore from the carrier.”

Darwin resident Barbara Conje recalled:

In the morning after the cyclone a group of sailors turned up at the wreckage of the house volunteering to help. By then we’d done what little we could, but their arrival was a bright spot in the morning and much appreciated.

Military historian Paul Rosenzweig later wrote:

Eric Johnston co-ordinated the recovery effort from the sixth floor of what became known as *HMAS MLC*, the Mutual Life and Citizen’s Assurance (MLC) building in Smith Street.

He took up his post as naval officer commanding north Australia ... and was heading for an end to an uneventful term in Darwin when he was literally caught in the rubble of naval headquarters, destroyed by Cyclone Tracy on Christmas Eve 1974. Johnston and two sailors crawled out.

Over the next few months, he played a leading role in handling the ensuing emergency and clean-up of Darwin. The Navy under his direction performed an enormously successful job in the demoralised, depopulated city. Johnston was awarded membership in the Military Division of the Order of Australia in 1975 for “... outstanding leadership, exemplary conduct and steadfast performance of his duties while exposed to the dangers of Cyclone Tracy and for his dedication and tireless efforts towards and for his restoration of Darwin’s defence and town services.”

Johnston was no flash in the pan leader either – he had a history of strong service behind him. One comment on his previous service enthused:

... a very fair and passionate naval officer, whom the crew loved. He ensured that the ship was at all times ready for operations ... a true sailor, he kept the ship humming. Sailors would follow him whatever the state of the ship or sea.

Stretton, in his broadcast to the people, said that the arrival of the Navy was “the biggest convoy of Australian vessels that has ever put to sea together since World War II” and furthermore