

# SEMAPHORE

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## DISASTER RELIEF – CYCLONE TRACY AND TASMAN BRIDGE

During the early hours of Christmas Day, 1974, Cyclone Tracy devastated the city of Darwin with winds in excess of 160 knots, killing 49 people ashore and a further 16 at sea. During the following month, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) would embark upon its largest peacetime disaster relief operation, involving 13 ships, 11 aircraft and some 3000 personnel.

The 351 naval personnel then based in Darwin possessed only a limited capability to render immediate assistance to the stricken city and its community.<sup>1</sup> Of the four Darwin-based Attack Class patrol boats, HMAS *Arrow* had sunk under Stokes Hill Wharf with the loss of two lives, HMAS *Attack* was driven ashore at Doctor's Gully by the sheer force of the cyclonic winds, and HMAS *Advance* and HMAS *Assail* were damaged. Darwin Naval Headquarters was destroyed, as was 80 per cent of the patrol boat base and 90 per cent of the naval married quarters. The oil fuel installation and the naval communications station HMAS *Coonawarra* were extensively damaged. Initial relief was limited to search and rescue operations on the harbour foreshore and in waters out to Melville Island. Communications facilities in Darwin, both military and civil, were crippled, and initial communications were dependant upon Army mobile terminals and the communications systems in *Advance*, *Assail* and the motor vessel *Nyanda*.<sup>2</sup>

As the gravity of the disaster became apparent, a naval task force, under the command of the Flag Officer Commanding the Australian Fleet (FOCAF), Rear Admiral D.C. Wells, CBE, RAN, was assembled to render aid to Darwin. A general recall was issued to all personnel. Approximately 50 per cent of all Sydney-based ships' companies were on annual leave, with many interstate. Of the 2700 personnel on leave, 2200 were able to return to their ships prior to sailing, and others subsequently managed to join their ships in Townsville. Volunteers from other Sydney-based ships and establishments filled the positions of those who could not return to their ships in time. All manner of stores were embarked on the deploying ships, ranging from combat bridges, vehicles and building materials down to disposable cutlery.

The response of Operation NAVY HELP DARWIN was swift. The first RAN asset to arrive in the disaster stricken city, on 26 December, was a HS748 aircraft from 851 Squadron, carrying blood transfusion equipment and a team of Red Cross workers. A second HS748 aircraft carrying members of Clearance Diving Team One (CDT1) arrived shortly thereafter. On 26 December HMAS *Balikpapan* and HMAS *Betano* sailed from Brisbane, HMAS

*Flinders* sailed from Cairns, and HMAS *Melbourne* (with FOCAF embarked), HMAS *Brisbane* and HMAS *Stuart* sailed from Sydney. Four S2E Tracker aircraft from 816 and 851 Squadrons prepared to fly to Darwin, but were placed on standby and eventually stood down. The following day, HMAS *Hobart*, HMAS *Stalwart*, HMAS *Supply* and HMAS *Vendetta* sailed from Sydney, and HMAS *Brunei* and HMAS *Tarakan* sailed from Brisbane. Nine Wessex helicopters from 817 and 725 Squadrons were embarked in *Melbourne* and *Stalwart*. HMAS *Wewak* subsequently sailed from Brisbane on 2 January 1975. The submarine HMS *Odin* had been nominated to proceed to Darwin to act as a power station, before the authorities determined that appropriate power conversion facilities did not exist in Darwin.<sup>3</sup>

The Director General of the National Disasters Organisation, Major General A.B. Stretton, DSO, arrived in Darwin on 26 December with his staff officers to establish an Emergency Services Organisation Committee. Captain E.E. Johnston, OBE, RAN, Naval Officer Commanding the North Australia Area (NOCNA), was appointed to the committee as Port Controller, with responsibility for controlling the port and its approaches, and for drafting an Emergency Plan in the event of a further cyclone.

As preparations were made for the arrival of the naval task group, Captain Johnston relocated the naval headquarters to his residence, Admiralty House. Following an exchange of signal traffic between FOCAF and NOCNA, it was agreed that the RAN relief force would be allocated responsibility for clearing and restoring 4740 houses in the northern suburbs of Nightcliff, Rapid Creek and Casuarina. HS748 aircraft continued to ferry personnel and stores to Darwin and evacuees south. Evacuees were accommodated in HMAS *Kuttabul*, HMAS *Penguin* and HMAS *Watson* in Sydney; and HMAS *Moreton* in Brisbane. CDT1 was surveying damage to the patrol boats and civilian craft, searching for missing vessels, clearing Stokes and Fort Hill Wharves, and assessing how to extract the wreck of *Arrow*.

The first ships, *Flinders* and *Brisbane*, arrived in Darwin on 31 December. *Flinders* surveyed the approaches to Darwin to ensure the safe passage and anchorage of the Task Group, while *Brisbane* landed working parties and established communications with NOCNA. *Melbourne* and *Stuart* arrived on 1 January; *Stalwart* on 2 January; *Hobart*, *Supply* and *Vendetta* on 3 January; and *Balikpapan* and *Betano* on 4 January. *Brunei*, *Tarakan* and *Wewak* arrived the following week on 13 January. The ships had brought with them some 3000 naval personnel.



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The arrival of *Melbourne* precipitated the establishment of a Shore Command Headquarters (SCHQ) at Admiralty House to coordinate the working parties, which were tasked by the Emergency Services Organisation. Working parties were typically composed of 10 or 15 officers and sailors, depending upon the nature of the task.

With the arrival of the Task Group, the primary focus for CDT1 turned to the extraction of *Arrow* from Stokes Hill Wharf, a task achieved on 13 January after much work. Unfortunately *Arrow* was damaged beyond repair and was subsequently decommissioned and scrapped.

The raw statistics amply illustrate the magnitude of the relief work undertaken by the RAN. Between 1 and 30 January naval personnel spent 17,979 man days ashore, with up to 1200 ashore at the peak of the operation. Working parties cleared some 1593 blocks and cleaned up schools, government and commercial buildings and recreational facilities. They installed generators, rewired houses, repaired electrical and air-conditioning systems, re-roofed or weatherproofed buildings, and maintained and repaired vehicles. Some parties worked to save rare plants in the Botanical Gardens. Hygiene parties disposed of spoiled foodstuffs from houses, supermarkets and warehouses. Female personnel from *Coonawarra* supported civil relief organisations and manned communication centres. One enterprising sailor from *Hobart* filled in as a relief disc jockey for the local commercial radio station. The Wessex helicopters transported 7832 passengers, 244,518lbs (110,912kg) of freight and made 2505 landings. The HS748 aircraft completed 14 return flights to Darwin and carried 485 passengers and 50,000lbs (22,680kg) of freight.

Like its arrival, the departure of the Task Group was staggered. *Balikapapan* and *Flinders* departed early, on 7 and 9 January respectively; *Stuart*, towing *Attack* to Cairns, sailed in company with *Brunei*, *Tarakan* and *Wewak* on 17 January; *Hobart*, *Melbourne* and CDT1 left on 18 January; *Betano* on 23 January; and *Supply* and *Vendetta* on 24 January. The SCHQ was closed down on 30 January and FOCAF transferred responsibility for the continuation of disaster relief to the Commandant of the Army's 7th Military District. The following day the last ships, *Brisbane* and *Stalwart*, sailed from Darwin.

The departure of the Task Group did not, however, signify the end of the RAN's support to the rehabilitation of Darwin. In May and June 1975 the minehunters HMAS *Curllew*, HMAS *Ibis* and HMAS *Snipe* surveyed the approaches to Darwin and the harbour itself, locating trawlers sunk during Cyclone Tracy, and other navigational hazards.

Cyclone Tracy was not the only disaster that befell Australia during the Christmas and New Year period of 1974-75. On the evening of 5 January 1975 the Australian National Line bulk carrier MV *Lake Illawarra*, laden with a cargo of zinc concentrate, collided with the Tasman Bridge, which spanned the Derwent River in Hobart. The ship sank, killing seven of the crew, and collapsing two pylons and 127 metres of bridge decking into water 110 feet deep. Four motor vehicles fell into the river, killing five occupants.

At 0430 on 6 January 1975, a 14-man detachment from Clearance Diving Team 2 (CDT2), commanded by

Lieutenant Alexander Donald, DSC, RAN, flew to Hobart for search and recovery operations. Following preliminary dives on 6 January, CDT2 was tasked to locate and assist Hobart Water Police recover the motor vehicles. Two additional divers from CDT1 arrived from Sydney, with a one-person recompression chamber. Two vehicles were identified on 7 January; one was salvaged that day and the second three days later. Another vehicle was found buried under rubble on 8 January. Three team members assisted Tasmanian Police divers comprehensively survey the wreck of the *Lake Illawarra* between 9 and 13 January. Operations ceased on 16 January.

The Navy divers operated in hazardous conditions, with minimal visibility and strong river currents. Divers had to contend with bridge debris consisting of shattered concrete, reinforced steel rods, railings, pipes, lights, wire and power cables. Strong winds on the third day brought down debris from the bridge above, and caused unguarded 'live' power cables to fall into the water, endangering the divers. Understandably, Lieutenant Donald described the conditions as 'appalling'.

The breakage of an important arterial link isolated the residents in Hobart's eastern suburbs – the relatively short drive across the Tasman Bridge to the city suddenly became a 50 kilometre journey around the bay. Although ferries provided a service across the Derwent River, it was not until December 1975 that a single lane combat bridge was opened to traffic, thereby restoring some connectivity. Reconstruction of the Tasman Bridge commenced in October 1975 and the bridge officially reopened on 8 October 1977. The wreck of the *Lake Illawarra* remains where it sank in 1975.<sup>4</sup>

The reaction to Cyclone Tracy and the Tasman Bridge disasters demonstrated the RAN's ability to aid the civil community whenever directed by the Government, to deploy a multi-skilled and committed workforce at short notice, to accommodate that work force in self supporting assets, and to maintain that support without impacting on a disaster-affected community's limited resources. Moreover, a maritime response force can move large quantities of essential equipment and materials to a disaster affected area to assist in remediation and reconstruction. This is consistent with the RAN's doctrinal principles of *readiness*, *reach*, and *mobility in mass*.<sup>5</sup> Thirty years on, the RAN's warfighting resources and core skills allow it to maintain the capabilities, skills and preparedness levels necessary to also respond to disasters resulting from natural and human initiated events, both within Australia and in the wider Asia-Pacific region.

<sup>1</sup> Johnston, E., *Operation Navy Help: Disaster operations by the RAN post-Cyclone Tracy*, Northern Territory Library Service, Darwin, 1987, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Odgers, G., Wright, A.G.P. & Austin, M., *The Defence Force in the Relief of Darwin after Cyclone Tracy*, Department of Defence, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> HMS *Odin* was attached to the Australian Submarine Squadron pending the delivery of the RAN's final *Oberon* Class submarines.

<sup>4</sup> Information on the Tasman Bridge disaster was drawn from the official report by the Commanding Officer of CDT2, *Tasman Bridge Operations 6th – 18th January 1975*, February 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Royal Australian Navy, *Australian Maritime Doctrine*, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, 2000, pp. 48-50.

