December 1974, Santa never made it into Darwin

A wayward wind, pounding waves, a wounded vessel

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The award-winning 1975 charity record by Bill and Boyd, "Santa Never Made It into Darwin" says it all in the first verse.

On Christmas Eve of '74 the warning sounded out
For all the broadcast stations, a great storm was near about
The boys and girls asleep in bed, tomorrow was the day
Their mums and dads all prayed the mighty storm would turn away.

Sad to say, poor Santa could not get clearance to land, and his payload of presents would be lost to the wind.

So, what was it like up there during Christmas 1974?

A maritime career

I was a young, 21-year-old sailor on a newly refitted 'attack class' patrol boat called HMAS Arrow (P88). Previously, HMAS Arrow was the training vessel for the Melbourne Port Division of the Royal Australian Navy Reserve.

HMAS Arrow was sent to Darwin as one of four boats patrolling the northern waters of Australia for illegal fishing and immigration breaches.

On the trip up to Darwin, we were sailing off the Queensland coast and were buzzed by an F111 aircraft. Why this is memorable? The patrol boat mast is about nine metres above the waterline and the F111 was long gone before most of us heard the noise of the aircraft. The amazing fact was that observers on board say the F111 had to climb to get over the mast!

The northern waters of Australia can be a trap for untrained seaman, even these days. The tidal rise and fall can be around eight metres. Many trawlers and yachts have hung unceremoniously from the wharf until released by cutting the mooring lines!

Christmas 1974 was planned as a short respite for patrol boat crews, so the boats were tied up alongside Stokes Hill Wharf, fuelled and watered, ready if needed.

Early in December 1974, the

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Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) issued a steady stream of alerts, warning the population to prepare for a potentially devastating storm called Cyclone Selma. On 3 December, the cyclone changed direction and by-passed Darwin. Nothing too alarming or unusual.

When the alarms started sounding for Cyclone Tracy (the next name alphabetically) people were initially a bit hesitant to overreact. It was Christmas Eve, and the last cyclone passed by, so will this one people thought. Most service providers in Darwin were running on reduced staff as many travelled south for Christmas.

Figure 1. HMAS Arrow before leaving Sydney.

Moved out to 'safety'

As a precaution, all patrol boat crews were recalled, and we sailed the boats from the wharf out to the cyclone buoys in the harbour. A cyclone buoy has tons of cement held in place by four anchors. The intention of the cyclone buoy is for the patrol boat to ride out the cyclone in one place.

The ship's anchors were removed from the anchor chains and the boat was shackled to the cyclone buoy. Watches (shifts) were set to manage the ship while it was moored at the cyclone buoy. The crew settled in, and all thought how we would get back early to the wharf on Christmas Day, restock the boat and head off for Christmas Day.

The cyclone was rapidly building strength, and the Arrow was buffeted by the strong winds and waves.

The eye of the storm came and went. At last, we thought we could breathe a sigh of relief. Not so. Things just got rougher! As the 1975 book by John Gibbs relates, Tracy had other ideas.

Around 0300 local time, there was a loud explosion from the front deck of the boat. All crew scrambled to their stations. Main engines were started, and damage assessments carried out.

The cause of the explosion was the equipment that raises the anchor chain had disintegrated. The upshot was there was no restraint to prevent

The remains of HMAS Arrow, wharfside.

the anchor chain running out! This eventually tore out the bulkhead (wall) where the chain end was attached.

Figure 2 shows an example of a windlass; the gypsy wheel holds the chain in place. Other screw clamps lock the chain to the gypsy wheel.

The crew were working as trained and the skipper, Lieutenant Bob Dagworthy, was controlling the ship to keep the bow into the wind.

The wind strength was such that it stopped the RADAR antenna from turning! Meanwhile waves were breaking over the superstructure (top deck).

The lifeboat on the forward deck had a hydrostatic release, enabling it to launch itself when the water depth reaches approximately 10 metres. This is to prevent the lifeboat going down if the ship sank. The bow of the Arrow must have exceeded 10 metres beneath the water as the lifeboat launched itself and was quickly blown away.

The displacement of the Arrow fully loaded was approximately 146 tons, with a draught of 2.2 metres. The cooling water intake for the main engines was directly below the engine room. The boat was rolling so much that the engines could not draw cooling water. One engine overheated and was reduced to idle. The second engine also eventually overheated, and engine control of the Arrow was lost.

Given our situation, the skipper decided to beach the boat, but we hit the wharf instead, and the order 'abandon ship' was given.

Sadly, two crew members, Petty Officer Leslie Catton and Able Seaman Ian Rennie, lost their lives during the cyclone. Several crew were injured, some severely, and required treatment.

The remaining crew, scrambling onto the wharf, found ourselves in a grotesque game of dodgem. The wind on the wharf was so strong that

Figure 2. Example of a heavy windlass, similar to that installed aboard HMAS Arrow.

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A wayward wind...

44-gallon (200 L) drums were blown down the wharf with damaging force. The full drums did not bounce as high as the empty ones!

Morning breaks

Eventually, as dawn broke, the crew gathered in the carpark at the end of the wharf. Our faces reflected the sheer disbelief in the previous events. Our attention turned to a man who exited a car and appeared to be well hung over. He shook his head in doubt, mumbled something then got back in his car. We laughed at such a surreal event.

As we left the wharf, the full impact of the cyclone on Darwin became evident. No electricity or water. All the roads were blocked to traffic by flying debris and the emergency services could not attend those in need.

The Navy headquarters in Darwin, HMAS Melville, was destroyed in the cyclone. Thankfully, no one was injured as the staff sought shelter in the cell block of the jail. After reporting to the Senior Naval Officer in Darwin, we were sent to find our loved ones.

My then partner and I were living in the suburb of Nightcliff, in a block of six units. Luckily, we were in the bottom back unit as all that remained of the top three was rubble!

There are many scenes of the sheer force of the wind that I shall never forget.

My partner was repatriated to Sydney by air very soon after the cyclone. The remainder of the crew were attached to the RAAF base, and I was sent as part of a team to clear a helicopter landing area in the park running along the esplanade in Darwin.

Recovering

Once Australia heard of the disaster in Darwin, the population united. Relief ships and aircraft were despatched to Darwin.

The HMAS Arrow crew left Darwin in January as a convoy, driving to Alice Springs. Cars and personnel were registered on departing Darwin and again on arrival at Alice Springs. Reporting to the Alice Springs police station, we were told that one of our crew members was already there and in jail. He was receiving the benefits of a survivor from the generous local community.

The skipper confirmed that the person was not one of our crew. This annoyed the local police as they were deceived by this character. The outcome of this person's health is not known as we were asked to leave it with the police.

The community of Alice Springs repaired our cars then placed them on trains to take them south as the crew flew to Sydney.

On reflection

This is one small story, but the bigger picture of the events of Christmas 1974 is embedded in Australia's cultural memory. The stories are etched with many tales of bravery, generosity, and resilience of the Australian people. Those who cleaned up and rebuilt Darwin also deserve the nation's heartfelt gratitude.

One of the crew on HMAS Arrow, Able Seaman Robert McLeod, was awarded the Australian Bravery Medal on 16 September 1977 for assisting injured shipmates.

Sadly, it seems to take a major catastrophe for Australians to unite. But, as we commemorate the 50th anniversary of this tragic event, let us continue to honour the memory of those who lost their lives and those who worked together to create a safer and more resilient Darwin.

Facts to make all Australians proud

- Millions of dollars raised for charity in a very short time.
- Loss of life is estimated to be about 70 (numbers vary) .
- 145 people were seriously injured; more than 500 received minor injuries.
- The total damage bill topped $800 million. (A lot of money in the 1970s).
- Between 26 and 31 December, a total of 35,362 people were evacuated from Darwin – more than 70% by air, the rest by road.
- Many evacuation flights were conducted by commercial aircraft with flights often filled to 150% their normal passenger capacity.
- A Qantas Boeing 747-238B (VH-EBB) departed Darwin on 28 December with a record breaking 673 evacuees on board.
- By 31 December, only 10,638 people (mostly men who were required to help clean up the city) remained in Darwin.
- Wind gusts reached 217 kmh before the anemometer at Darwin airport was destroyed.
- Over 80% of buildings were destroyed or seriously damaged.
- The radius of the gale-force winds was only 50 km.
- Cyclone Tracy is the most compact hurricane on record in Australia.

NB: Peter Hawkins article to follow