

# CYCLONE TRACY WRECKED RAAF BASE DARWIN



Previously comfortable married accommodation for families on Base, but after Cyclone Tracy struck, the married path became a shambles. As RAAF News pik shows, a few of the married quarters managed to retain some roofing, but all were substantially damaged in the "Big Blow" to add to the heartbreak of Christmas Eve, 1974.



It was once a mess hall but after Cyclone Tracy struck, the mess hall became a mess. The mess hall was used for medical purposes, but Cyclone almost 300 yards from the Tracy put paid to its table. Transport Section to come to area, and that of every other an illumination end crumpled Kingstrand erected on the and upside down.



Almost impossible to believe, but this Dakota (below) was torn from its moorings beside the Base maintenance hangar and hauled several hundred yards before coming to rest almost in the front garden of the Officer Commanding the Base, Group Captain Dave Hitchens, whose house can be seen in the background.

Cyclone Tracy and its aftermath put the RAAF, particularly the air transport force, to its most severe test of all times outside the war.

How the RAAF answered challenges presented at every level of activity has been recognized by the Chief of the Air Staff who signalled his congratulations to every man and woman involved.

The media had already made clear to the public that the RAAF were the first Service to be involved in the job of evacuating the injured and homeless, restoring order, and maintaining operations throughout all critical phases of recovery.

The RAAF as a whole was in the headlines, on the TV screen and on the radio throughout the period of evacuation. TV films, featuring the RAAF, went around the world.

Yet the whole story only emerged once personnel involved had a chance to reflect on what had happened. In this issue RAAF News recounts hitherto unrecorded parts of the story, citing directly from basic commanders' reports.

The reports unfold a saga of initiative, commonsense, and in many cases, high courage. The background to it all is vividly illustrated by Group Captain D. W. Hitchens, AFC, Darwin's base commander, who was off the base when the cyclone struck.

"On returning command, I discovered that local orders had been complied with and the Base Emergency Plan effectively implemented. One Iroquois and one Dakota aircraft were destroyed because there were no crews available to evacuate them. The SAR Dakota had been flown out to Inlala before the storm and had returned to Darwin the following day.

Conditions were chaotic, but effective action was being taken to restore communications, clear some roadways, and restore airfield services.

The Base hospital was very crowded and the one M.O. (Captain Strickland, Army) and two RAAF nurses were coping with civilian and service casualties (mostly severe lacerations and shock). The medical staff were under considerable stress. The M.O. was operating continuously and an LACW dental assistant was stitching wounds. There was no water, no power except from some portable generators and no lighting except torches and some gas lamps.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

Internal communications were being improved with Army radio equipment and field telephones. Air-ground communications were limited to contact with Katherine through a vehicle and an air-borne civil aircraft. There were no navigation aids and no runway lights. The recovery of generators, etc. was difficult because of collapsed hangars and store houses. Work was already proceeding to clear debris from the runway.

## Appeal Response

Although highly publicized nationwide appeals were launched for money to help Darwin victims, the RAAF was not slow in launching its own appeal to help service members — many of whom lost all their possessions. At the time of going to press for this issue, returns from various bases and units were incomplete, with a number of bases which had submitted returns indicating that their totals could be swelled with late donations.

The most recent list of bases which had submitted returns has been published, but in this meantime the following returns have been received:

Fairbairn, \$1645.42; Townsville, \$884.52; APO Brisbane, \$2233.80; HQ Support Command, \$2560.37; HQ Operational Command, \$4520.00; 1 CAAD, \$713.17; 1 SD, \$146,006.1 SD dat 6, \$450.00; Leeton, \$1941.00; Winton, \$1669.00; East Sale, \$2181.00; Paines, \$1490.00; RFL, \$1000.00; AOC Sydney, \$174.00; Tennessee AOC, \$168.00; Waga, \$2188.00; 7 SD, \$12,668.86; 7 SD, \$281.20; Ambrose, \$5471.86; RAAF SIGAN, \$721.07; Edinburgh, \$1594.74; HQ Operational Command, \$595.25; AFA 5th, Australia House, \$550.00; and Mrs. Menden, Orléans, \$1000.00; \$542.00.

The total of the above donations is \$10,577.74 — a total which should be swelled considerably when further reports are received.

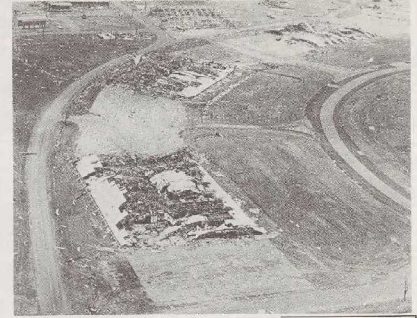
facilities might be required to receive, accommodate and feed evacuees for a considerable period. Base Squadron Richmond and No. 1 RAAF Hospital facilities were prepared to receive, examine and cure for evacuees.

Offers of assistance were also accepted from the local Salvation Army and Red Cross organizations. Six officers of the RAAF Reserve (NSW Air Training Corps) who had volunteered their services were also wanted to report on 27 December, to assist in reception administration.

Seventeen aircraft were flown on 27 December, eight of each type, and eleven crews were available from each Squadron. An extra C130 aircraft was available but not tasked. One load of evacuees, including 82 persons, was processed through the reception centre and accommodated at the hospital. No medical problems were encountered with the processing and disposal of the evacuees.

Army Movement teams (NSW) were also available for duty with Air Movements Section from 0800 hours on 27 December, working in 12-hour shifts with RAAF Air Movements personnel. The extra personnel relieved the pressure on the RAAF movements staff who had worked almost continuously since the morning of 26 December.

Continued on Page 6



The devastating effects of Cyclone Tracy could not be better emphasized by this aerial photograph showing the remains of hangars which were once used for stores and transport. The tangled remains now pose a major problem in the reassembly camp which has begun at RAAF Base Darwin.

## Cyclone Sidelights

As mentioned elsewhere in this issue, Nos. 36 and 37 Squadrons at Richmond can take pride in their efforts during the Darwin disaster. Field facts don't tell the full story but they are illuminating.

No. 36 Squadron flew 554 hours on Darwin tasks, carried 2864 passengers, 79,570 lbs. of freight and had eight out of 12 aircraft flying.

The Darwin task for 37 SQN involved 700 flying hours and resulted in 4000 passengers carried, plus 1,200,000 lbs. of equipment. Eleven out of the squadron's 12 aircraft were flying.

Grin humor from the centre of things. A questionnaire issued to all serving personnel at RAAF Darwin a few days after the cyclone struck contained one section asking for comments on "Problems in general."

Here are some to illustrate the feelings at the time: LAC — "Not enough time to put roof on house, do washing and general clean up in quarters." CPL — "Post me please." SGT — "Knackered." SGT — "I am not enjoying mid-tour leave. Address after midnight—west opposite OC's house." ENSG1 — "Short story to follow—watch for first instalment soon." LAC — "No women."

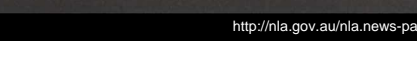
Even in adversity it seems the Dig has not lost his sense of humour.

There are many more sidelights stemming from the tragedy of Cyclone Tracy when it tipped through RAAF Darwin. In the next issue RAAF News hopes to publish more as a tribute to the men and women of the Service who responded so readily.

Photographs appearing in this issue were taken by RAAF public Relations Liaison Officer Bruce Adams, who flew to Darwin soon after Tracy struck.



From late afternoon 27 December, all flights leaving Richmond had a medical team, consisting of a doctor, a nursing sister and a medical orderly. This was considered necessary because of the number of evacuees leaving Darwin on other than designated medical flights, who had serious injuries. Fortunately, there were sufficient RAAF Reserve doctors to allow this without departing from their base.



The Base Hospital (below) which was a landmark outside the main gate (below) relatively unscathed, but the left was wrecked from its moorings by the force of the moored quarters nearby did not fare so well. Fortunately, occupants were evacuated from them before the "Big Blow" struck the Base.



Continued on Page 6



Continued on Page 6



Continued on Page 6



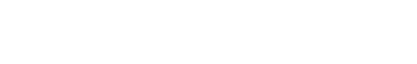
Continued on Page 6



Continued on Page 6



Continued on Page 6



Continued on Page 6