



## A Walk Around Darwin

by Lloyd Nelson

The recent mad weather has brought back some sharp memories. I walked around Darwin before and after Cyclone Tracy. With the Argus's permission, I'd like to tell you a little about it.

Darwin, propped up by Canberra, was growing like topsy – it was a bit of a frontier town – it reminded me of Northam, three big main streets, a lot of highrise in the flour mill area. The peninsular is really built up and out. The northern development came into being to provide dormitory suburbs. Its ugly, flat country, but Darwin was a marvelous place to live in 1972/73, when my family and I were there in Fanny Bay.

My job was to kickstart a new building society – the only one there. There was a huge unfilled demand for what we offered – savings and investment accounts and home loans with a five and a half day week service. I was essentially in the front line, Home Building Society kept all the records in their offline computer facility in East Perth. I worked out of a highrise office suite at first, relocating to street front later, next door to the Post Office. Serious shopping was in the inner city, Tom the Cheap Grocer, - spartan – was hugely popular, as was air-conditioned Woollies. There were heaps of interesting small businesses, many Chinese owned, lots of restaurants and the odd good watering hole. The Darwin Club, equivalent to the Wagin Club, was where the administrator and his aides, the only ones wearing long-sleeved shirts and ties, mixed with the business community late Friday afternoon. Swan Brewery owned all the icon pubs, the Hotel Darwin, the Fanny Bay and others, but few people drank at these. The young populations, all southerners, were CUB devotees and you could hardly get in the door of their inner city pub, the Victoria, or the industrial complex one at Parap, or at Nightcliffe.

Now we turn to what I was doing. I had my nose to a very busy grindstone, Monday early to Saturday noon. At which time we would go to the coconut grove at Fanny Bay for lunch and for me to read the contents of the late morning air bag from Perth. Friday nights we often dined out after I got home from the Club. Once in a while we went to the big outdoor area at the new Rapid Creek pub. The state ships turned around at Darwin. You never knew who would walk in your office door when they were in port. Jack Moyses, Bob Hughes and Horrie Temby come in.

Horrie says, "I fancy a pub crawl."

"Oh, okay," I say.

"Let's start at the Hotel Darwin." Horrie says. So we do.

Horrie has been putting us on. A handsome air hostess comes up and says, "Well, hello Uncle Horrie, I've got a table reserved here for all of us for dinner."

There's good swimming in Darwin in the dry. In the dangerous wet, we go to Berry Springs, Robin Falls and Batchelor.

We take advantage of the marvelous four day weekends in Timor. TAA fly you to the old Japanese air strip at Bacau. Timor Air Lines fly you down in an old Dove to Dili, one third of the big plane load at a time. Dili is full of olive uniformed, red bereted Portuguese National Servicemen. I notice with interest that at the city markets, the centerpiece is a twin of the Galt fountain in the Wagin Park. It still has its cast iron drinking cups on chains, as Wagin originally did. Yachties, going up to Dili, tell me that you can sail flat old Darwin out of sight by mid afternoon. Once the mountains of Timor come up on the horizon, it takes four more days to work your boat round to Dili.

I'm often on planes a lot around the territory. On one memorable trip back from Gove, Rolf Harris is on board with his no-crown hat. He wobble-boards the whole plane, including a dozen manacled prisoners into a spirited rendition of 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down'. Half of Darwin is at the air port to give Rolf a cheer. Also along with half of Darwin, we go to East Point to see the first Jumbo jet and Concorde wing in. Celebrities such as Princess Margaret and Tony Jones likewise draw a huge crowd – a really huge crowd. As does Roy Orbison, who arrives in a black suit and black glasses and a black car, to give a concert in the Gardens Road botanic gardens. All the hippies from Lameroo Beach sit outside the mesh fence, they are not a bad looking lot and they are no fools (despite living in orderly squalor on the beach below the Hotel Darwin). They commute to Bali a lot – to source Blue Meenies, I'm told. The Lion's Club start to run hessian screening along the fence. The hippies chant 'Better not, better not'. The Lion's persist and a big shower of half bricks fly over the fence. The hippies achieve their uninterrupted view.

We come back to Perth on the last voyage of the state ship, 'Manoora'. I financed someone in state ships into a new house. He is appreciative, thus we sit at the Captain's table. Our kids are dark on us as school starts next day and we don't have time to kit them out in their College uniforms.

End of Part One. Part Two starts with the arrival of Cyclone Tracy.

# Memories from a walk around Darwin

By Lloyd Nelson

CYCLONE Tracy now blows into Darwin.

Christmas Day, my phone wakes me up, people who know I'm an old Darwinian are trying every avenue to see how their relatives have fared.

The newscasts sound grim.

I try ringing the society's house—no result, try the office.

There is a strong ringing tone.

I try and try and after a bit, a Kiwi voice answers.

"Who are you?" I ask. "Ah... just passing, I'm answering your ringing phone."

"How did you get into the office?" I dumbly ask.

The voice chuckles. "Believe me, it was absolutely no problem, but I had to step carefully," he says.

"It's absolutely disastrous."

"I've just walked over from the beach and there are bodies in Mitchell Street (the next one over).

"Now I've told you what you asked and I'm now going to use this phone to ring my relatives."

This is pretty grim news and I decide the smartest thing to do is to keep schtum and 37 years later, I'm still comfortable with this decision.

In January, I go up on a late afternoon flight and check in at the Travel Lodge, sharing a fifth floor room (no lifts) with two insurance assessors.

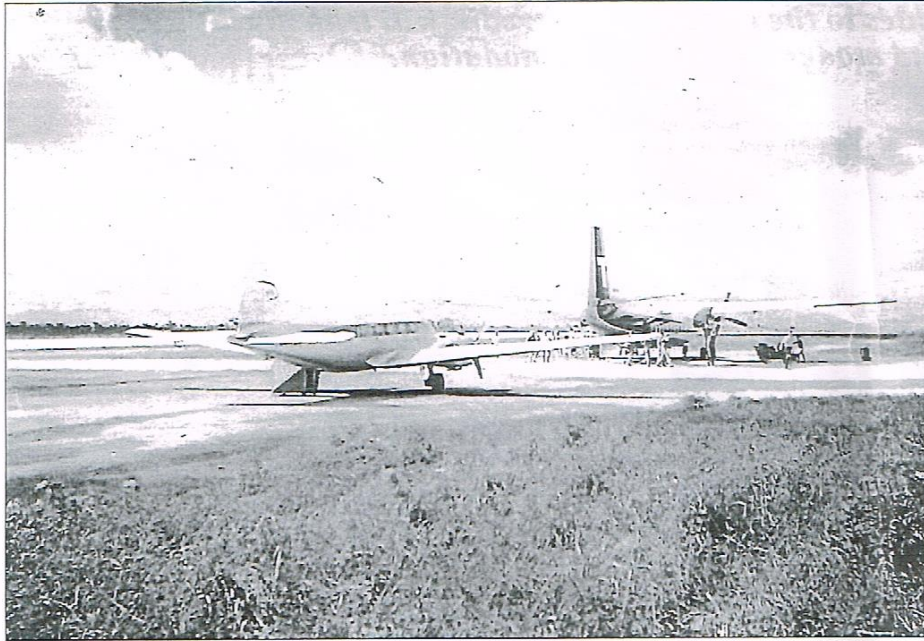
They give me a plastic bucket at check-in. "Fill it from the swimming pool," they said.

"It's for shaving and flushing the loo."

"If you want a shower, go out to the pipeline near the RAAF base."

"The water people there crack a valve every afternoon."

"You should take bathers, towel and soap." For the evening meal, I



LANDING STRIP: Planes mentioned in the last article on the old Japanese war-time strip in Timor.

join a crocodile line in the Safari Room for grills from gas barbies and tinned greens.

Noticeable in the line are Doug Anthony and Dr Jim Cairns.

I sit with some Adelaide Telecom people—the boss pushes over a bottle of port—sweat streaming off his face (the conditions are horrendous).

"Try this," he says. "It helps ward off the chill of evening."

I can now get back to walking around Darwin.

Next morning I'm wheeling a Honda generator, brought up yesterday, on an Ansett two-wheeled trolley.

There's no power in town and I hear big gun shots from the next street

and very, very carefully go for a look.

It's the Mayor, ex-big game hunter and tea planter, Tiger Brennan.

He's busy shooting stray dogs; their owners have all been shuttled south and they're everywhere.

As I lamp him, he lets off several shots down Cavenagh Street from a big gun that opens like a shotgun and takes metal shells.

One of his shots ricochets off the road and takes a big chunk of masonry out of the front of the Don Hotel (later a Casino).

"Heavy metal for Cavenagh Street, Mr Mayor," I say.

"Bollocks," he says. "There's no bugger

around."

I can't source petrol for the generator, but do a deal with the business next door.

He siphons petrol out of wrecked cars in the next street and the generator starts first pop.

I put it in a storeroom and run extension leads to each shop, to power our telex machines and desk fans.

Most of our staff is camped at Leigh Creek awaiting instructions.

Just one girl, a Greek, living under a wrecked house nearby is at work.

The lost windows have been replaced by sheets of iron.

The office is a sodden mess and it is as dark as.

By and large the substantial city buildings

have been shredded, the lesser shops, many of them old Chinese ones, have been blown to bits.

The suburbs of course, have been razed and New South Wales armed police patrol the streets. Signs read 'Looters will be shot', army teams are everywhere.

They draw their supplies and mechanical equipment from naval supply ships in the harbour.

They are working house to house, street to street, suburb to suburb.

Everything loose, including wrecked cars, is piled in huge verge heaps.

The society's house is lying on its side on the floor deck and later it is rebuilt on elevated piers

as many others are.

When I get a bit ahead of things at the office, I do a run around my old haunts.

Wrecked shopping centres, de-roofed warehouses, razed houses; the coconut grove outside the Fanny Bay Hotel is jammed into the window frames and the roof is gone.

It is all an unbelievable mess and along with most of the town, I don't believe the casualty figures (60 dead), but of course, Darwin being a young population, (the oldies can't hack the climate) with strong southern ties, empties out pre-Christmas.

Many of those left have been flown out since, they herded them onto

planes, whether they wanted to go or not.

I bump into a contractor friend.

He's busy front-end loading out perishable stuff from warehouses in Winellie and one roofless warehouse is full of beer and sodden cartons.

He bends the rules a bit and instead of dumping this in the Leander Swamp tip, he runs timbers between his house piers and dumps it in there.

He invites me out to tea and after does some sums with chalk on a sheet of tin.

"I've got enough beer for 4.83 years," he says.

I'm not so sure; they are steel cans, have been doused in cyclone carried sea water and are already rusting.

Part of my busy schedule involves liaising with the insurance assessors.

The re-insurers have a huge operation going on in Darwin.

They are working from a building with scaled windows and no airconditioning; it's the biggest sweatbox I've seen in town.

I'm down there getting priority, where possible, for our borrowing customers to get insurance payouts.

As mortgage holders the prompt payments come first to us and I then distribute the good or bad news and the surplus funds to them.

The town, our customers and others, is awash with insurance payouts and a big heap of this money comes to us.

It will take quite a while to rebuild Darwin, so with the registrar's approval, we lend this money out on short-term commercial loans in Perth, to keep it working, also of course on the short-term money market.

To be continued.



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## Part Three (Final)

Locals, who were in Darwin for Tracy, pass on personal accounts. A chap tells me he went around to his insurance agent to complain about the paucity of his cover. He is horrified to find that the house and the whole family had been wiped out. A contractor friend tells me that his mother-in-law was up for Christmas. At their Stuart Park home, she is petrified by the clangor of the blow. He reassures her that it was all quite okay and the roof was still there. He lifts the man-hole cover to prove it. Daylight reveals that only two sheets of iron were left on the roof – those over the man-hole.

After the blow, a chap at Casuarina, which was hit hard (see picture), took some helpers over to retrieve his roof from his neighbour's yard. They are on bad terms. The neighbour says,

"I can't see your name painted on it, so begger off." And they had to.

A leading lawyer tells me they took no notice of the warnings due to the previous weeks' false alarm – that cyclone veered off.

"When did you realize it was for real?" I ask.

"Oh," he says, "when the window air-conditioners blew into the middle of the room. The thunks woke us up."

Just at the moment he is in town for the day. His and his Dad's house were blown away and they have taken the left-over French Champagne and are tenting at the Daly River landing. Such are the oddball lives of Darwin's rich and famous.

A school teacher, a single lady, who I financed into a new home in the northern suburb, Millner, rings me from Mt Barker, South Australia, 'Can I check her wrecked house to see if her Maltese terrier has survived'. I can hardly tell her that the Mayor is personally attending to stray dogs. I know the house well, I was out there for five months straight, monthly to pay the builder progress payments. I haven't yet been out to the badly hit northern areas, so mid-morning I abandon the office. On the way out, I take a run down the prime living spots of old Darwin. Larrkeyah Terrace is quite blitzed and up on Myilly Point – arguably the finest house site in Australia, or at least tropical Australia – an old Darwin lived in by a top civil servant has blown off its peers, but is still standing upright on four cars parked in the undercroft. The cars have been squashed down to door height. It's a graphic scene and I send a Polaroid of this down to the Sydney Morning Herald.

At Daly Street I notice a shotgun carrying chap guarding the Toyota premises and the next door wrecking yard. Next door to that, the Chinese restaurant and the Antique shop are flat on their sides. I check on Verne Elder; Verne's showing his usual initiative in getting a big wrecked pharmacy up and running. He comes round later for tea at the Travel Lodge and joins us next Sunday for a swim at Berry Springs.

First up in the battered 'burbs, I swing past Jim West's sister, Judy's, house. I've been out there socially in my past life here when Jim and Geoff Scanlon staged through en route to Timor. They are footloose bachelors at this time. I warn them about the infamous Timor palm wine. Next I call at the Rapid Creek Chinese

Australian owned pub. It's a new one, looks out over the Arafura Sea and sides rushing Rapid Creek, which is chokka with wrecked pleasure craft. The Fong Lims' are barbecuing mud crabs on a wood-fired hot plate in the middle of their covered outside area. The pub is shut – no power. Richard is spiking coconuts on a fixed steel spike. He is getting the milk out; he adds a stiffener to this and hands one over.

"Try the entrée first," he says, "it's the famous Singapore Beef Rendang. Beef simmered in fresh coconut milk with added spices."

"It sure makes the hotel fare look ordinary," I say.

Richard's forebears came out on the Pine Creek gold rush. I have been down there on a dig for old Chinese beer bottles. He's been promoting the idea of every new house in the bare, ugly northern suburbs, be given two coconut tree seedlings for their front yards to preserve the integrity of old Darwin. This idea has a deal of merit. After lunch I locate the Millner house. The roads are covered with the detritus of the cyclone. The house is not there really, it's blown into the next house, but the dog is – to my amazement. I don't know how he's existed, but the monsoon rains fall every day and with thousands of kitchens lying open on the ground, I suppose he lived from this. Anyway, I pet-pack him south on an Adelaide plane that evening. As a result of my trip, I locate the Chinese cooks from Daly Street. They are working in the free food centre in the undercroft of the Vestys Point High School. I take my entire table out that night; we dine on top-notch Chinese food, with a balmy breeze running through the undercroft.

As things settle down a bit, the administration holds some public meetings. What do the few locals in town want as safety pre-requisites against another cyclone? A big chap stands up.

"Well, for starters," he says, "we want a twelve-lane one way road to Adelaide River. If you don't supply it, we'll make it as we go."

I'm due back in Perth, so I fly back. My family meet me. I've been away quite a long time and never found a barber operating.

"You long-haired larrikin," Stephanie says, "Its time you were back."

This ends my second stint as the on the ground manager of the Building Society.

Quite a bit later, I attend the opening of our new building, two doors from the old, in Darwin. It's quite a big event and the Administrator invites us back to the much repaired Government House, for drinkies after. He's a nice chap, an ex Pollie. I ask his aide – "What's this chap's claim to this marvelous job?"

"Oh, he's got a gong," he says.

"What sort of a gong?" I ask, envisaging a Korean War VC or similar.

"Oh – ah – it's an E.D." he replies.

"What the hell is an E.D.?" I query.

"Ah – well now – it's an Efficiency Decoration."

By and large Darwin gets rebuilt much as it was, but wisely to much stricter building codes. Peripheral work in the way of malls, etc has taken away its original frontier town look.

The End.