

# Cyclone Tracy

Cyclone Tracy was a tropical cyclone that devastated Darwin, Australia, from December 24 to December 25, 1974. It was recorded by The Age as being a "disaster of the first magnitude...without parallel in Australia's history." It killed 71 people and destroyed over 70 percent of Darwin's buildings, leaving over 20,000 people homeless.

Most of Darwin's population was evacuated to Adelaide, Whyalla, Alice Springs and Sydney, and many never returned to Darwin. The town was subsequently rebuilt with newer materials and techniques. Cyclone Tracy was at least a Category 4 storm, although there is evidence to suggest that it had reached Category 5 when it reached Darwin.

## The Cyclone

By late afternoon, the city was heavily overcast with low clouds and was experiencing strong rain. Wind gusts appeared and were starting to cause physical damage. Between 10 PM and midnight, the damage became serious, and the cyclone's effect became imminent to the residents. After midnight, the cyclone passed directly over Darwin, with its 'eye' centred on the airport and northern suburbs. The wind gauge at Darwin Airport officially recorded winds of 217 kilometres per hour before being blown away itself. Unofficial estimates suggested that the wind speed had reached 300 kilometres per hour. The winds and torrential rain continued until dawn.

Due to the destruction of infrastructure, the distance between Darwin and the rest of the Australian population and the fact it was Christmas Day and most media outlets had only a skeleton crew rostered on at best, the news of the cyclone took some time to reach people. Most Australians were not aware of the cyclone until late in the afternoon.

## Repercussions

In time, some good would come out of the experience of Cyclone Tracy. The main benefit was the introduction of greatly improved building standards that would apply across the entire country. These included requirements that buildings be clad to protect them against flying debris, and that their roofs be tied to the foundations.

When Cyclones Larry and Yasi both stronger than Tracy – hit Innisfail and Mission Beach on 20 March 2006 and 3 February 2011 respectively, there were no casualties.

The events of 1974 remain indelibly marked in Australia's cultural memory. The cyclone's timing and ferocity, the mass evacuations of distressed and injured residents, and the terrible images of destruction shocked many, and reminded them of their human frailty.

**DARWIN WIPED OUT** — By Tracy, the killer cyclone

**THE TOLL: DEAD, 49 HOMELESS, 30,000**

**The Sun NEWS-PICTORIAL**

**WEATHER** WEATHER Bureau (containing) Shows indicated thunderstorms in the south. 7:57 PM shows in the north. 8:25 AM — 7:25

**At least 49 people died in the cyclone which smashed Darwin yesterday.**

Officials say the toll could reach 100 after rescuers search rubble.

Cyclone Tracy has destroyed or badly damaged 95 per cent of the city's 40,000 people are homeless.

**7 ships**

All power is off. There is no fresh water. Makeshift camps are being set up.

Tracy's 240 kmh (150 mph) winds sent two ships and several life rafts adrift in Darwin harbor.

The city's hospital is a wreck — with the roof ripped off.

The hospital patients were taken to safer places.

The police station and post office also are wrecked.

All houses and 80 per cent of the terminal buildings at Darwin airport are smashed.

Highways are strewn with rubble.

Photos show high-rise buildings with top city view cut.

Hundreds of shocked people wandered wreckage-littered streets.

The Acting Prime Minister, Dr. Cairns, said: "Geez. This is a jolt. He will fly to Darwin today.

A big Federal Government relief campaign was under way last night.

A pilot who flew over the city said it was wrecked. Rubble was ripped from

A 1:25,000 satellite picture showing Cyclone Tracy centered over Darwin. It was taken from the Earth satellite from 1200 kilometres (740 miles).

**Cairns on the way**

At 5 p.m. the Acting Prime Minister, Dr. Cairns, will fly to Darwin to see the disaster scene. — Report P. 2.

**They need our help...**

THE AID and the British and French governments have agreed to help with the disaster.

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### Questions

1. What date/s did Cyclone Tracy devastate Darwin?

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2. How many people were left homeless after the cyclone?

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3. The wind gauge at Darwin Airport was blown away by the strong winds.

True / False

4. Why were most Australians not aware of the cyclone until late in the afternoon?

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5. Cyclone Tracy led to greatly improved building standards across the entire country. True / False

6. Sequence the following events in order. (1 to 4)

- Building standards improved and applied across the entire country.
- The cyclone passed directly over Darwin, with its 'eye' centred on the airport and northern suburbs.
- The city was heavily overcast with low clouds and was experiencing strong rain.
- Darwin's population was evacuated to Adelaide, Whyalla, Alice Springs and Sydney.