



Severe Tropical Cyclone Tracy

21 - 25 December 1974

Summary

Tropical Cyclone *Tracy* is arguably the most significant tropical cyclone in Australia's history accounting for 65 lives, the destruction of most of Darwin and profoundly affecting the Australian perspective to the tropical cyclone threat.

By world standards, *Tracy* was a small but intense tropical cyclone at landfall, the radius of gale force winds being only about 50 km. The anemometer at Darwin Airport recorded a gust of 217 km/h before the instrument was destroyed.

Tracy was first detected as a depression in the Arafura Sea on 20 December 1974. It moved slowly southwest and intensified, passing close to Bathurst Island on the 23rd and 24th. Then it turned sharply to the east southeast, and headed straight at Darwin, striking the city early on Christmas Day. Warnings were issued, but perhaps because it was Christmas eve, and perhaps because no severe cyclone had affected Darwin in many years - many residents were caught unprepared. But even had there been perfect compliance, the combination of extremely powerful winds, and the loose design of many buildings at that time, was such that wholesale destruction was probably inevitable anyway. Forty-nine people were killed in the city and a further sixteen perished at sea. The entire fabric of life in Darwin was catastrophically disrupted, with the majority of buildings being totally destroyed or badly damaged, and very few escaping unscathed. The total damage bill ran into hundreds of millions of dollars.

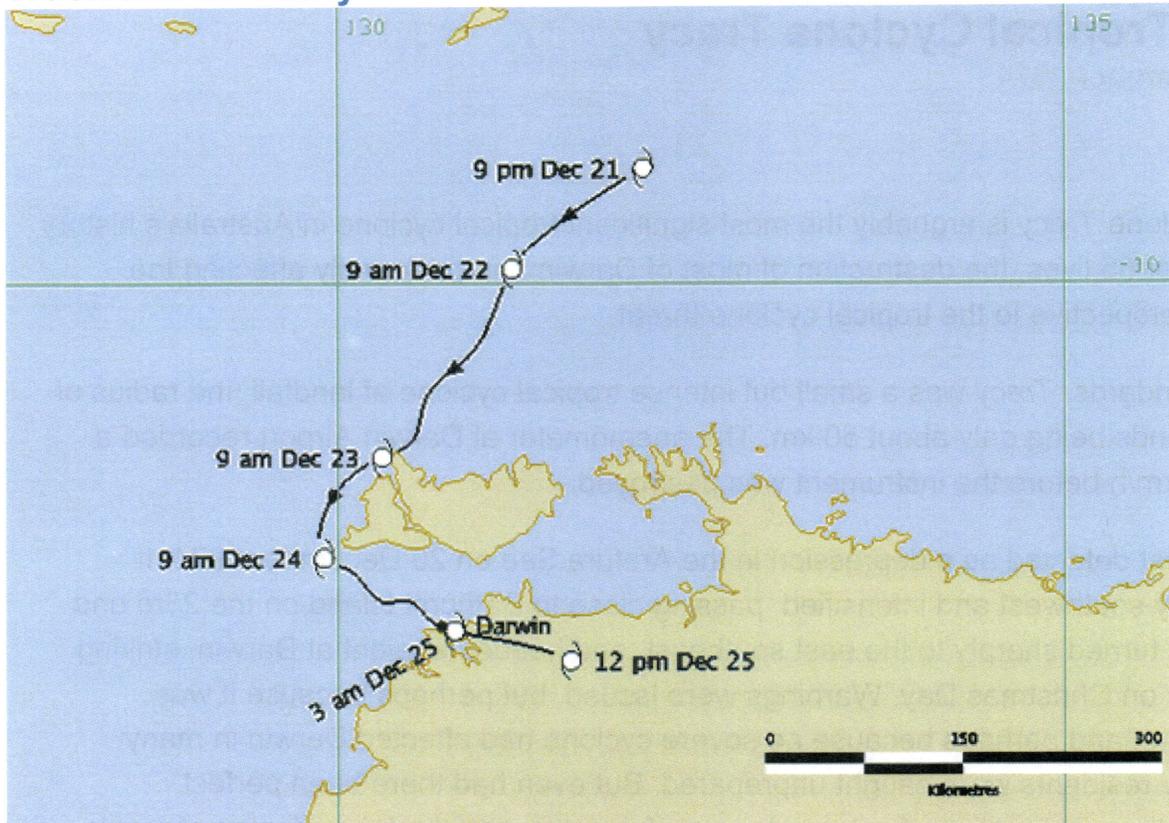
As usual in such disasters, many communication links failed, but enough survived to let the world know of the catastrophe, and relief measures were soon under way. An airlift involving both civilian and military aircraft was swiftly organised, while many residents chose to drive out. Within several weeks, three-quarters of Darwin's population had left.

This was not the first time Darwin had been severely damaged by a cyclone: it was badly mauled in both January 1897 and March 1937. But as a result of *Tracy*, much more attention was given to building codes and other social aspects of disaster planning. Darwin was rebuilt and now thrives as one of our most important gateways to Asia.

A comprehensive report was published by the Bureau in 1977: see [Report on Cyclone Tracy December 1974](#) (pdf 6.4 MB). For more information see the (pdf).

See also: [Big Blow Up North by Kevin Murphy \(5.75 MB pdf\)](#) Copyright held by Kevin Murphy and reproduced here with author's permission.

Track and intensity



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