

The Australian Book of Disasters

Larry Writer

Pier 9
July 2011

Unedited sample chapters

This is an uncorrected manuscript sample and is not for sale. It must not be quoted without comparison to the finally revised text.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The Wreck of the *Dunbar* off Sydney Heads, 1857

Hurricane Mahina, Far Nth Qld, 1899

Australia's Pneumonic Flu Epidemic, 1918-19

Mulligan, Qld, Mining Explosion, 1921

The *Tahiti–Greycliffe* Collision on Sydney Harbour, 1927

Tasmanian Floods, 1929

The Great Melbourne Storm, 1934

Broome Cyclone, 1935

Black Sunday: Freak Waves at Bondi Beach, 1938

Mackay, Qld, Air Crash, 1960

Melbourne's West Gate Bridge Collapse, 1970

Darwin's Cyclone Tracy, 1974

Granville Train Smash, 1977

Alice Springs Hot Air Balloon Crash, 1989

Newcastle Earthquake, 1989

Boondall, Qld, Bus Crash, 1994

Thredbo Landslide, 1997

Sydney Hail Storm, 1999

Lockhart River, Nth Qld, Plane Crash, 2005

Victoria's Black Saturday Bushfires, 2009

Asylum Seekers Perish at Christmas Island, 2010

Queensland Floods, 2011

References

Index

THE TASMANIAN FLOODS

April 3–13, 1929

The rain began to tumble down across Tasmania on Wednesday, April 3, 1929... and it tumbled and tumbled. The north-east of the island state, in particular, and the Burnie/Ulverstone region, were deluged, and the heaviest falls came on the Thursday. In the worst hit areas, some 500 mm of ceaseless, torrential rain fell in three days. The Esk, Briseis and Tamar rivers, and others as well, swelled and burst their banks and homes, and drainage systems proved pathetically inadequate to cope with the deluge.

Farms and roads were soon underwater. Bridges were swept away by the raging torrent as if made of matchwood. Electricity and telephone lines were cut. Hobart was isolated from the rest of Tasmania when the main road and the railway line disappeared. After four days of ceaseless and heavy rain, 22 people had died.

Launceston began to resemble a vast lake when the North and South Esk Rivers, which were running at 19 metres above normal levels, overflowed. When the city fathers realised that the town would be under water, the post office bell was rung to warn locals to evacuate their homes and move to higher ground. The warning proved too late for some. Streets, houses and shops were suddenly metres underwater and many pedestrians were knocked clean off their feet by the rushing water and swept down the street.

Boats were the only means of transport, and escape. As many as 3,500 were rescued by boat and ferried, with a few precious belongings, to safety at the Albert Hall and other centres. To make matters even more terrifying, there was no power. The gas works and the hydro-electric power plant were rendered useless and the Duck Reach power station was simply carried away, leaving the town with no electricity for three days. The waters converged on the Tamar Valley from east and west, and the river rose to record levels. The mass of water that powered through Cataract Gorge on the 5th flooded more than 1000 houses near Launceston.

At Launceston, as elsewhere, members of the public as well as rescue workers, doctors, nurses and ambulance officers, Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, the Red Cross and police offered their services and rose to the occasion helping others, even while risking their own lives. Brave men and women dived into the icy, swirling waters. It fell to some to head out in boats and pluck people from the roof of their home. Some cleared the mountains of debris that carpeted the streets, or took food, blankets and clothing to the stranded. Honorary constables were sworn in, many of them were returned soldiers, and posted at houses and shops to deter, and if necessary arrest, the bands of looters that prowled in the town, seeking to profit from the misfortune of others.

Drivers of cars and carts flocked to Launceston on whatever roads were still navigable. Reported one witness, "The motor drivers have spared neither themselves nor their cars in their endeavours, and the sight that was presented shortly after the sounding of the alarm

when hundreds of cars were dashing to the scene was one that is never likely to be forgotten by those who witnessed it. There was no speed limit, and with headlights full on because there were no other lights, the cars tore through the city, and the air was full of the raucous notes of motor horns. It was truly a wonderful sight, and the manner in which the motorists dashed into the water with a total disregard for risk was a wonderful tribute to them. ... If ever Launceston had reason to be proud of its citizens, it was during the past day or so. There were no social distinctions and everyone worked with a will.”

One reporter recorded surreal scenes. Boats of every description were plying the flooded streets, while cars, vans and trucks were abandoned, up to their hoods in water. People carrying on their back what belongings they could salvage from their homes wading in waste-high water out of town to higher ground or the various refuge centres. It reminded the writer of a Venetian scene, “though there was no glamour about it.” At the junction of Invermay Road and Foster Street a boy, not more than 10 years, emerged from a gateway. “The water was nearly up to his armpits and he was struggling with a cat, which was attempting to get out of his arms. He tried to force his way through the water to a nearby motor lorry. He explained, ‘I climbed onto the roof and got her.’ However he had done so seemed a mystery for there appeared no one else at the stricken home. The feline instincts of the rescued cat were rather contrary, and no sooner had the boy placed her on the lorry than she dived back into the water. All efforts to persuade the little chap to stay were fruitless, and, eluding the grasp of those on the lorry, he sprang back into the stream and feverishly pursued his cat. The last that was seen of him was when he cornered the cat near a fence and took it into his arms once again.”

One homeowner returned to his ruined home to find a dead horse in his lounge room. The animal had sought shelter in the abandoned home and, once inside, was unable to get out again. In a panic, the horse destroyed the furnishings of the room before drowning in the rising waters.

On the Thursday, the rock-fill Cascade Dam on the Cascade River, 5km north of the tin mining town of Derby, which contained 750 million gallons of water, burst and a 32-metre wall of water containing trees and boulders, including one 10-tonne specimen, careened down the Cascade Gorge and flooded the village, destroying houses, the railway station and bridges. On its way, the water demolished Derby’s Briseis tin mine. Fourteen people, including miners and five members of the Whiting family whose house was struck by the wave while they were eating dinner, were drowned. The nearby Ringarooma River flowed uphill for six hours. Word of the tragedy came first in a terse telegram from the Derby council clerk to A.L. Wardlaw, warden of the Ringarooma Municipality: “Dam burst. Fourteen lives lost and families destitute. Will you wire instructions to grant relief necessary. All bridges down.” The missive did no justice to the horror. More apt was the description offered by a reporter who visited the town: “Thrilling stories of the overwhelming disaster, occurring as it did with a warning of seconds only, were related by residents” who told of “the cataclysm which swept husbands to death in the sight of their wives, children from

their mothers' arms and caused a mining disaster... The heroism of the assistant manager of the Briseis mine, Mr W.A. Beamish, while trying to warn the miners to reach safety, the valour of senior constable W. Taylor who, single-handed in a small boat, braved the rushing waters and brought many men to dry land, and many other instances of supreme heroism serve to make what will go down in history as the 'Briseis Disaster' another bright page in the book of Tasmania's deeds of self-sacrifice and heroism associated with the mining industry."

Certainly self-sacrifice and heroism were not in short supply that Thursday, and nor, of course, was horror and tragedy. Those who experienced the appalling events when the wall of water and swamped the town of Derby and the Briseis mine would never forget it.

When the dam burst, the torrent swept down the river in what was described as a "mighty turbulent roll." Local man W. Kerrison stood awe-stricken as the wall of water descended on Derby. "The wife and I were looking out of the window, overlooking the Briseis stables up towards the Cascade," he gasped to a reporter. "We saw Richardson, Broadley, Bracey and Eadie coming from the timber stack towards the stables. Just after seeing the men my wife called out. 'The hill is slipping away.' I was standing at the back door. When I saw the water I called out, 'Run for your life, the dam has gone.' We ran up the hill about 20 yards and as I turned I saw the water rush in a huge, muddy foaming wave towards the stables. It took the stables in its course, together with several of the men and eight draught horses." The wives of Broadley and Richardson saw their husbands drown. Continued Kerrison, "The water came within a few feet of our veranda and our house is about 70 or 80 ft above the level of the river. I thought I had nerve but I never want to see such an awful sight again. I saw the water rush across the flats to where the men were working on the lower face [of the tin mine]. It was impossible to warn the men. It all happened so quickly."

"My wife was standing on the veranda when she saw the water coming down in one high wave and swept Whiting's house away," reported George Inverarity. "She heard heart-rending screams." The water smashed into the Inveraritys' house too. Mrs Inverarity was swept away but managed to cling to a gum tree until rescued.

The baby of a Mrs McWatters was snatched from her arms by the water when their house was deluged. Her son William somehow grabbed the baby's leg and saved her. Tragically, another McWatters child, a teenage girl, was lost.

W.A. Beamish gave his life saving others. Instead of running for higher ground when he saw the water approaching the mine, he turned and returned to the face, crying for his workmates to run for their lives. Many did so, but Beamish was dragged under the wave and never resurfaced.

Also on Thursday, at Gawler just out of Ulverstone, a covered Ford truck with nine on board was washed off a bridge crossing the Gawler River and eight of the occupants drowned, including six of the seven Lynch children.

Not all the damage wrought by the rains and wind took place on the land. The ocean liner *Zealandia*, en route from Sydney with 190 passengers, was pounded by 15 metre waves and her wireless aerial was blown overboard by gale force winds. So deeply did *Zealandia* roll and pitch that often her propeller was well clear of the water. The passengers were confined to their cabins and few escaped sea-sickness. One man sitting in a lounge chair in a smoking room was injured when his chair was hurled across the room by the motion of the violent sea.

The destruction wrought in the town of Longford was typical of those affected by the flooding. Scores of houses were destroyed and 200 people were homeless. At midday on Friday, April 5, the town seemed likely to avoid being flooded despite the teeming rain. By 1.30AM, the town was under a metre of water. People with two-storey homes scampered to the top floor, those with only a single storey were forced to abandon the house. There were numerous rescues by boats and craft were tethered to trees in the streets and avenues of Longford. As day dawned on Monday, April 8, the water had subsided but left in its wake half a metre of thick viscous mud and slime and debris. Affleck's Mill, which had stood in the town almost longer than any other building, was so badly inundated it needed to be demolished.

Everywhere, because of the large numbers of drowned domestic and farm animals, outbreaks of disease were feared. E.J. Tudor, Tasmania's Secretary for Public Health, issued an health warning to the public: "in view of the possibility of outbreaks of infectious disease following the floods in the northern part of the state, the Public Health Department is taking active measures to cope with the position as far as is possible. The South Esk River, which is the source of water supply in five large towns has been polluted by the carcasses of dead animals and other offensive matter and the local authorities concerned have been instructed to warn all residents to boil all water required for domestic purposes as a safeguard against the outbreak of disease. As soon as the flood waters have subsided, officers of the department will make a survey of the river with the object of ascertaining the extent of pollution and will also advise means and assist local authorities as far as practicable to place the supply in a satisfactory state." Tudor added that he was despatching chief inspector of the department Riley to go with "disinfecting apparatus" to cleanse premises before being occupied again. Too, inspectors with fumigating equipment were sent to stricken towns to test meat.

Thousands of pounds were raised, from within Tasmania, the rest of Australia and Great Britain, and designated to the areas most in need. J.C. Williamsons, the theatrical producers, stages performances of *The Student Prince* in Hobart and Launceston. The actors and behind the scenes crews worked for nothing and the takings were channelled into the relief fund. Because of the enormous demand, seats at the shows were auctioned, which led to more money raised. There were also pleas for clothing, footwear, blankets and food, and these pleas were generously met.

Looting was not confined to Launceston. Many people caught pilfering abandoned homes were arrested by police or dealt with by furious townspeople.

Because Hobart was out of contact with the rest of the state, news of the havoc caused by the rain and flooding eked in over the first few days, it was only on the Saturday that people in the capital had any idea of the enormous toll exacted on Tasmania. An aghast editorialisist in Hobart's *The Mercury* newspaper said that while Hobart was "isolated from the sources of knowledge by the total failure of the means of communication... there has been disaster after disaster in widely different places, accompanied by an almost general devastation... As a rule we escape in this well-situated island the ravages of hurricanes, typhoons, tropical thunderstorms, earthquakes, volcanic outbursts, tidal waves, water spouts and other throes and visitations to which tropical and less-favoured countries are subject. Yet we have our strong sun, high winds and water deluges occasionally to test and sometimes to destroy the puny handiworks of man." The writer then reeled off the known roll call of calamity: "the disastrous floods in the north, centre and east of the state; the washing away of substantially-built bridges and flimsier structures; the bursting of the great dam at the Briseis mine; a landslide on the northern coastal railway; the loss of lives; the havoc amongst orchards and properties and the general swamping, blocking and destruction of roads and railways..."

By April 12, the sun was shining again, and the flood waters had receded. The great mop-up commenced. Debris and silt was moved from streets and houses by emergency workers and gangs of volunteers. Water-spoiled goods were dumped and burned. While vast numbers were homeless and living in camps, some people were able to gingerly return to their homes and begin to clean and disinfect the premises. Railway lines, postal, telephone and telegraph services were restored. Bridges were rebuilt. The proceeds of relief funds were distributed to the needy.

Yet, while spirits were lifting, each day brought terrible reminders of the great flood of 1929, and no reminder was more heart-rending than the discovery of the final two unaccounted-for bodies of those killed in the Briseis mine disaster. The remains of Jack Brodie and Hector McCormack were unearthed, buried in mud, some 6 kilometres from the mine. McCormack left behind a widow and two children.

THE BROOME CYCLONE

March 25-30, 1935

From November to April every year, those who live and work on the north coast of Western Australia are on edge, for this is the cyclone season. More than 200 cyclones have been recorded in the region since recording of the events began in 1870.

On Christmas Eve 1875, 59 people died and several pearling luggers were sunk when a willy-willy assailed Exmouth Gulf.

Seven years later, on March 7, 1882, the houses of Roebourne were razed by a cyclone.

Some 140 men were drowned and 18 luggers destroyed by a hurricane on April 22, 1887.

Roebourne copped it again in 1894, when on January 8 of that year a cyclone struck that town and nearby Cossack and the death toll was 52.

More than 50 lives were lost when a cyclone battered La Grange Bay and Broome on April 26 and 27, 1908, and that December another 50-plus seamen died in a terrible tempest that extended from Broome and La Grange to Wallal.

Broome was again smashed by a hurricane on November 19, 1910, and 40 died in that storm, whose winds gusted at an estimated 175 kmph. Twenty homes were totally destroyed, 20 badly damaged and 50 partially damaged. Thangoo and Enjadine stations sustained major damage. Thirty four of the 300 pearling luggers in the region were sunk or wrecked. Some 67 were blown ashore. The schooner *Eclipse* was left a ruin on Cable Beach.

One of the most destructive cyclones in the nation's history occurred two years later, in March 1912, when it crossed the coast near Balla Balla and destroyed numerous ships, including the *Koombana*, and cost more than 150 lives.

When the eye of a cyclone passed over Broome between 6.30 and 7.30 on February 14, 1957, two people were killed and four injured by a collapsing house. Many buildings were smashed.

The most recent devastating cyclone occurred on April 20, 2000 when ferocious rain and 153 kmph winds battered Broome's upmarket Eco Beach Resort and lashed Thangoo and Yardoogarra Stations. Power was cut but there were no fatalities.

Yet arguably the most devastating cyclone ever to strike the north of Western Australia attacked the historic and picturesque pearling town of Broome in March, 1935.

The first time that the cyclone came to notice was as a storm that blew in from the sea on Monday, March 25, and caused strong winds and rain in Broome and Derby. In the days prior there had been no sign of impending storm activity. But suddenly, on the Wednesday morning, the barometer plummeted and Broome, particularly, was lashed by fierce winds and heavy driving rain. Reported *The West Australian*: "Already Broome is assuming a

desolate appearance, with many of its ornamental trees stripped of their foliage and deposits of leaves and rubbish everywhere. Several buildings in the Asiatic quarter [most of the pearl lugger crews and the divers were Asian] show signs of the strain and should the velocity of the wind increase, which seems almost certain, considerable damage will probably result. The residence of Mrs Errington, at the corner of Carnarvon Street and Napier terrace, appears to be on the verge of collapse.”

There was worse to come, far worse. The storm that hit on March 25 was but a harbinger of a cyclone that at that time was lurking out to sea, and on March 28, it advanced to the coast.

Cyclone warnings were issued and, as turned a forbidding and lurid purple, the people of Broome and Derby took shelter, fearing the worst and hoping for the best. They got the former. Their towns were devastated. Telegraph and telephone poles were knocked down by the 110 kmph westerly gale. Homes, including Mrs Errington’s, and Low’s ice works were destroyed. Houses, shops, offices and stables were damaged by the winds which ripped free corrugated iron roofs, verandas and awnings and flung them into the air or along the street. Trees were uprooted. Vessels were torn from their moorings and smashed on the beaches. Broome’s four pubs, to the chagrin of the townsfolk, were badly damaged. Up to 10 cm of sand, blown from the beach, lay thick upon the streets.

Although in December 1934, the Victorian Branch of the Seamen’s Union warned of the need to install radio receivers in coastal vessels such as pearling luggers so they could be apprised of weather conditions, the estimated cost, 350 pounds, was considered prohibitive by proprietors. So, in March 1935, when the cyclone struck Broome and Derby and surrounds, no advance notice could be given to the captains of the 26 pearling luggers operating in the Lacepede Islands, off Cape Leveque, between Broome and Derby, of what they were in for. All they had to rely on was the falling and rising of the barometer.

Pearling vessels in those days typically carried two divers (one of whom was usually the captain of the ship) and two tenders and a crew of six. The divers wore heavy helmets and suits. Air was supplied by hand pump into the helmet by those manning the tenders. Most divers and crew were, as noted, “Asiatics.” Occasionally the shell openers, that is, those whose job it was to extricate the pearl from the oyster shells collected by the divers, would be Caucasian. In the Depression, at the time of the cyclone of 1935, the pearling industry was on its knees, there not being much demand for pearl jewellery. A lugger would cost around 1,400 pounds and the diving equipment about 500 pounds. It was a sign of desperation that luggers were forced to venture out during the treacherous hurricane season.

A diver whose lugger did ride out the cyclone and make it to Broome later testified, “We were fishing off Barred Creek on Tuesday afternoon in very clear water and raising good quantities of shell [oyster shells], and the barometer began to fall, and we suggested to the other boats that they should make for Barred Creek. The other boats did not consider that

the barometer drop was serious, and decided to wait until dawn on Wednesday morning. During the night and early morning, however, the blow struck them with terrific force. All boats immediately tried to make Barred Creek, but found this impossible, and had to put out sea anchors – a difficult task in the raging seas... if they had left their pearling grounds some hours earlier they would have been able to make the creek and shelter...”

When the storm hit, four luggers were able to avoid being driven out to sea and reach safety under their own steam. Two, the *B95* and the *Cleopatra*, were disabled and dismantled by the storm and their combined complement of 18 men, predominantly Japanese and Malays, was rescued by the passenger ship *Koolinda* minutes before the vessels sank. The *Koolinda*'s skipper, Captain J. Eggleston, had noticed distress flares being fired into the sky and raced to the scene.

Eggleston later told his tale. “We left Broome at 12.30PM on Monday [March 26], with the weather rather unsettled. We were off Cape Leveque at 5AM on Tuesday, with the weather becoming much worse. I kept manoeuvring the vessel, sailing west of Leveque light, in hopes of the weather clearing at daylight. The weather grew worse. I endeavoured to get into King’s Sound as I feared there was a cyclone about. At 7AM on Tuesday I ordered the ship to be battened down and everything lashed. All hands turned to. At 8AM the fresh gale struck the ship with continuous heavy rain, but at 8.40 we managed to check our position. At 1PM we received advice that there was a willy-willy between Derby and Broome. I decided, owing to the lee shore, to put the ship out to sea. We went out at full speed. We met the whole gale that afternoon. The wind was blowing at between 80 and 90 miles an hour. The vessel was standing up magnificently. The ship’s log read, ‘whole gale, wind of hurricane force, almost continuous wind and rain squalls, high mountainous seas, heavy confused swells. The vessel shipping water and heavy spray over all.’”

At 7PM, wrote Eggleston, we had crossed ahead of the centre of the cyclone, and then the gale slowly moderated. I manoeuvred on the outer edges of the cyclone for 24 hours and on Wednesday evening I set the ship back to Derby. The weather was still very bad but the worst had passed. At Thursday at 8.15AM I was on the bridge when I saw an object on the troubled seas. We did not know that luggers had been in the cyclone. Through the glass I made out a lugger flying the reversed ensign, the sign of distress. I altered the course of the ship and proceeded to the lugger, about four miles away. The vessel was manoeuvred and oil pumped over the rough sea. A ship’s lifeboat was sent away, in charge of the chief officer, Mr Sinclair. The lifeboat was very ably manned and the lugger was reached. It had been dismantled by the storm. While transferring the wrecked lugger crew to the lifeboat the chief officer was thrown overboard by the sea, but quickly got out of the water. The boat returned to the ship from the lugger with 10 cold and hungry men. They were given food and clothing and accommodated on the afterdeck...” This stricken vessel was the *B95*.

Early on Thursday afternoon, the *Koolinda* passed several pieces of floating wreckage and apparel and at 2.52PM Eggleston and his shipmates sighted a dismantled lugger. They

approached it and found it was the lugger *Cleopatra*, flying distress signals... Another eight men were rescued.

On Friday, March 30, 20 pearling luggers were declared missing. On board were 142 men. The *Koolinda's* Captain Eggleston, during an extensive search for the vessels, reported seeing wreckage in the sea and a submerged lugger with its broken mast and cabin rising above the water. This time there were no survivors.

By then, the cyclone had abated, but, despite the best efforts of search craft, there was no sign of the missing boats or any of the men... alive anyway. Some bodies had been sighted in the water or washed onto the shore, a number bearing the dreadful marks of shark attack. The waters were shark-infested for it was the time when turtles hatched their eggs.

After searchers followed footprints up the sand on the west coast of Lacedpede Island, they had a grisly find: the body of a man covered in wounds that were result of either being dashed upon rocks or bitten by sharks. He had struggled from the sea, staggered up the beach and fell and died in the scrub.

More happily, a Japanese crewman appeared with a story of how he had been swept overboard from a lugger by a wave and washed up on an island. There he had survived for five days on oysters and birds eggs.

After the cyclone passed, a Father Worms arrived from Beagle Bay, 120 kms north of Broome, with the news that the settlement had suffered catastrophic punishment. From Tuesday afternoon to Wednesday afternoon, 20 inches of rain had fallen on Beagle Bay. The roof of the Roman Catholic Mission there had been blown off, as had the roofs of the children's dormitory and the leper hospital. No building remained unscathed. The powering winds had uprooted baobab trees coconut trees, many more than 50 years old, and stripped the bark from gum trees.

In time, as a direct result of the 1935 disaster, radio sets were installed in a number – but by no means all – of the pearling luggers. By the mid-1930s, the heyday of pearling was long-past. The years 1880-1914, boom times for pearling in Roebuck Bay, are considered pearling's golden age, when Australians, Europeans, Japanese, Chinese, Malays, and Koepangers came to the beautiful port with its colourful rock formations and cobalt blue seas with a fervour equalled in Australia only by those caught up in the great gold rush. As stated, the Depression reduced demand for pearls, then with World War II many of the Japanese divers and crew, though innocent of conspiring against Australia, were interned as a precaution in indentured camps as security risks. The invention of plastic in the 1950s and its use in the manufacture of buttons and cutlery and other goods made mother of pearl largely redundant. Only the cultured pearl industry remains viable today, with Broome supplying around 80 percent of the world's best quality cultured South Seas pearls.

CYCLONE TRACY

December 25, 1974

In Australia's history, there have been more ferocious cyclones, but Cyclone Tracy is the only one ever to lay waste to an entire capital city.

Christmas Morning, 1974: while Australians were waking to pleasant thoughts of the presents and feasting to come, Darwin and its inhabitants were being assailed by a tempest that would kill 49 on land and 16 at sea, flatten the city (scarcely a building escaped total destruction or severe damage), and turn its citizens into homeless refugees.

Cyclone Tracy – AKA “The Bitch” – first came to the notice of the Australian Bureau of Meteorology on December 20 as a depression in the Arafura Sea. The weather watchers tracked it as it slowly moved south-west, intensifying all the time, and passed by Cape Fourcroy, on the western tip of Bathurst Island, on December 23 and 24. It was a formidable storm, but there seemed no cause for alarm, until late on Christmas Eve the cyclone, for this is now what it had become, turned sharply east-south-east and headed straight for Darwin.

On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, an eerie, troubling calm descended on the city, borne of low and heavy cloud, intense humidity, squalling rain and keening winds. This, however, did not stop the Christmas parties which were in full swing that day. Darwin's saviour, Major-General Alan Stretton, captured the mood of Darwin on Christmas Eve when he quoted a newspaperman in his book *The Furious Days*: “Pubs were full of cheerful people discussing the cyclone forecasts. They were laughing and joking, even singing how cyclones never hit Darwin.”

Other Darwinites took the situation more seriously and hoped against hope that the mighty storm would change course once more, as storms had in the past, and spare them. Their prayers went unanswered.

Cyclone Tracy struck Darwin at 1AM on December 25. The eye passed over the city at 3.20AM. Though small as tropical cyclones go – Tracy's radius was only around 50 kilometres – it was extraordinarily powerful and because it was slow-moving, its winds had much more than ample time to create maximum havoc over four terrible hours until it passed over Darwin and rumbled on to Arnhem Land. Before it was obliterated, the anemometer at Darwin Airport recorded wind gusts of 217 kmph (though many who lived through them swear that the winds reached 280 kmph at their peak). Also, the damage done to Darwin by Tracy was increased by the inadequate construction of many houses.

In the last hours of December 24, when weather authorities realised that Cyclone Tracy was bound for Darwin, then a city of 48,000 people, warnings were issued. Advised the RAAF Cyclone Operations Bureau: “277 degrees. 17 miles. Leading Edge 3½ miles Charles Point. Indications are will deflect across Charles Point to Darwin.”

“Cyclone Tracy has destructive winds of up to 120 kmph and these are expected to hit the Darwin area tonight and tomorrow,” broadcast the Bureau of Meteorology.

But the warnings went largely unheard. With most people by now asleep or preoccupied by tomorrow’s festivities, few Darwinites were listening. The first they sleeping knew of Tracy was a loud roar which many likened to that of a jet plane or a speeding train and then the smashing and pounding as their homes were dismantled and came crashing down or, with cars, boats, and anything else not nailed or tied down, being flung high into the air. The areas that suffered worst were the coastal suburbs of Rapid Creek, Nightcliff and Fannie Bay. Six prisoners took their chance to escape from the Fannie Bay Jail, which was demolished by the cyclone.

In the coming days, people would tell of their experiences...

“The top of the house just went *Pow!* Then there was nothing left.”

“We lost everything. Our clothing, our crockery – the lot.”

“The roof went first, then the walls. We just got out in time before everything went.”

“The roof was torn off our house with a frightened roar. Seconds later the walls were peeled off the four sides of the building, leaving us shocked and exposed to the cyclone. I grabbed one of the children by the leg as the gale looked like blowing her away into the darkness. My husband, my mother, myself and our two children retreated into the bathroom. I climbed into the bath with the children while mother and my husband huddled under the hand basin. By this time, the walls of the bathroom had gone and we were virtually hanging on to the fittings. When the wind subsided a little we made a dash for shelter under the house wreckage.”

“It was as though our home was being shaken by a giant. I was waiting for us to become airborne at any moment. The miracle of Tracy is that there were not thousands killed. Many people did die, but the city was so completely destroyed it is a mystery how the majority survived.”

“There were furious winds and then when the eyes passed over, nothing. The lull, in which there was not a breath of wind or rain, lasted 20 minutes. Then the wind began to build again and I heard it ripping the tin from the roof of my home.”

“It was still raining, teeming, though the wind had abated. Hardly anything was left standing. All our 15ft high mahogany trees were uprooted, lying about the yard and over the broken fences. Everywhere there was corrugated iron. Our fridge had been tossed like a toy halfway across the yard. Our car had been swivelled right around. We’d had wallpaper with pretty flowers on it on our kitchen wall. Bits of the wall with the flowers were scattered all over our neighbour’s fence. That’s what hit me the most... the flowers on our kitchen wall.”

“I saw a Volkswagen car that had been picked up by the cyclone and deposited on the roof of a two-storey building. Even today I can scarcely believe it.”

Darwin Hospital and 20 especially-established first aid centres were overwhelmed by patients with broken bones and suffering cuts caused by flying glass, iron and assorted debris, and falls.

Parliament was recalled, and acting Prime Minister Dr Jim Cairns, red-eyed and haggard on his return to Canberra from the ruins of Darwin, was typically eloquent. "Darwin represents so much to Australia that it will *have* to be rebuilt, but I can't say yet whether it will be on the present site," said Cairns. "What happened in Darwin on Christmas morning has never happened in Australia before. Darwin is devastated. Darwin is destroyed. There is virtually no building in Darwin that is not seriously damaged. Darwin looks like a battlefield or Hiroshima. The people have been magnificent and their morale is high. It was an honour yesterday to move often silently among them and try to share a little in their tragedy and their courage. The loss of Darwin is a national loss. Its cost must and will be shared by the Australian people. A plan is emerging to safeguard the health of those in Darwin and for the rebuilding of the city which will take time and come later." Dr Cairns had met with Opposition Leader Bill Snedden who agreed to work in a bi-partisan manner with the Government to reconstruct the flattened city. Continued Cairns, "The Government and the Opposition must join together in this matter. There will be failures and mistakes, but critics can be constructive and will always be needed. Most of the people of Darwin have lost their homes – often the result of a lifetime's work – and none is able to do more than search in the wreckage, moved by some hope of finding something of value, some link with yesterday. Some work feverishly, some with calm application, and some have not yet emerged from their shock."

When dawn broke and shaken residents stumbled out from under their beds or from their bathrooms (deemed the safest room in most homes) into the daylight they realised that they were residents of a destroyed city. "There was nothing out there," said one Darwinite. "It looked like a bomb had hit." Mourned another, "The heart has been ripped from our city,"

The residents' horror was shared by the rest of the nation as word seeped out during Christmas Day via Darwin's ruined telephone, telegraph and telex systems. The city was declared a disaster area and Australia's emergency and defence forces were marshalled and sent there to mop up, recover the dead from the rubble and evacuate the living. The National Disasters Organisation and the Red Cross rushed doctors, nurses and medical supplies to tend the hundreds of injured, as well as clothing, blankets and food to Darwin. Construction workers flew to Darwin to help rebuild homes and repair damaged water and power lines.

Amid fears of disease, volunteers were designated to collect garbage, already rotting and verminous in the high summer heat, in the street. Stray cats and dogs were shot.

Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, declaring himself "horrified by the appalling loss of life and destruction," returned immediately to Australia from his trip to Sicily, Malta and Crete

and walked the battered streets of Darwin with residents and visited the city's schools, those of which were still standing being turned into refuges for the homeless. As the Minister for the Northern Territory, Dr Rex Patterson, opined, "People are huddled everywhere. They are in schools. Thousands in schools... Little children in schools."

By Boxing Day, Australia and the world knew a calamity of terrible proportions had befallen Darwin. As well as the death toll (on December 26 it was put at 44 but it would rise), the destruction of homes and buildings and the consequent homelessness, an unknown number of ships had been sunk and RAAF and commercial planes destroyed. ("I flew over Hiroshima," said Group Captain D. W. Hitchins, commander of the RAAF base at Darwin, "and Darwin looks just like it.")

Everywhere trees and power poles had been uprooted or snapped clean. There was no electricity or sewerage (trench latrines were dug with front-end loaders and back hoes), no fresh water or food. Major-General A.B. Stretton, Director-General of the National Disasters Organisation, announced that while details were still fairly sketchy, but spoke of cars being piled against telephone poles, grief-stricken and traumatised people wandering the streets, and an 8-story building which had "danced the tango." He arrived at Darwin airport at 10.20PM on Christmas Day and met immediately with the Commissioner of Police, the Director of Emergency Services, the Secretary of the Department of the Northern Territory and the Minister for the Northern Territory to devise a strategy to effectively and cool-headedly coordinate disaster relief operations. Stretton, who, like his colleagues, would barely sleep for the next week, later labelled December 25, 1974, as "one hell of a Christmas Day."

In a poignant – and prescient – Boxing Day editorial, the *Sydney Morning Herald* attempted to come to terms with the disaster. "We in Australia expect Christmas Day to be a happy time for most of us; and so no doubt it was, for most of us... But for one Australian city Christmas Day brought terror and tragedy. The extent of the death and injuries and the damage caused early on Christmas Day by the cyclone which struck Darwin with such terrible velocity may not be known for days. It is certain that it is very extensive: we have on our hands probably the worst natural disaster to have afflicted an Australian city.

"There are at least 40 dead. Hundreds are injured. About 90 percent of the city has been wrecked or badly damaged. A great number of the population (about 40,000) are homeless. Some 20,000 may be without food or clothing. The city is without fundamental amenities, such as power and communications. The loss in money terms can hardly begin to be estimated. Australians, it can be said with confidence, will respond in two ways. There will be everywhere profound, but also practical, sympathy for the sufferers; already last night authorities in the south were receiving many offers of help or enquiries about how to help.

"The more important immediate response depends on the capacity of the nation to mount a swift rescue operation and to rush aid to the devastated area. The difficulties involved in this immense challenge are great because of the remoteness of the area. The

new National Emergency Operations Centre, opened in Canberra only in October, faces a test of unimagined magnitude. It will be astonishing if it is yet equipped to meet it. The great burden will fall on existing State emergency organisations and, above all, on the Armed Services. Most of us at this stage can do little but sympathise, but our chance to help will come soon enough. No matter how large Canberra's aid will be – and it seems likely the bill will be huge – there is bound to be a need for other funds to which cities, communities, organisations and individuals can contribute.”

Australia heard the call to arms and responded to stricken Darwin's need. There were moving scenes across the nation as people gathered to offer what aid they could. At the Salvation Army headquarters in Sydney, people queued for hours to give clothing, tinned food and cash. A boy donated his entire stash of Christmas presents and a man named Robert Horan gave his car, a Ford Falcon station wagon, handing over the keys to the Salvation Army officer with the words, “Darwin needs it more than I.” Brigadier Padre Jock Geddes sat in the foyer, writing receipts and blessing the generous. As well as the Salvos, St Vincent de Paul Society, CHUMS (Care and Help for Unmarried Mothers) and the Smith Family, the Federal and State Governments, newspapers and television and radio stations, church and community organisations and sporting clubs, trade unions and the Lord Mayors of all capital cities and towns established charity funds. The RSPCA sent inspectors to handle animals affected by Tracy.

By December 27, with the cyclone still lingering in a now-weakened state over Arnhem Land, limited communication had been re-established, and RAAF, Qantas, TAA and Ansett planes as well as the aircraft of corporations such as BHP, Comalco and Conzinc Riotinto, were delivering emergency personnel and supplies to Darwin, and evacuating the most seriously injured. Six Royal Australian Navy ships were including the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* sped to the city.

Money was pledged by the Governments of the United States and Great Britain and Queen Elizabeth sent the following message, “I am much distressed to learn of the tragic loss of life and damage caused by the cyclone which struck Darwin on Christmas Day. Prince Philip joins me in sending our deep sympathy to all those who have been bereaved and who are homeless.” Pope Paul bestowed “ God's comforting blessing” upon Darwin.

One of the most pressing tasks that fell to Major Stretton was the evacuation of more than 20,000 residents, in planes, ships and cars. [The final figure, it transpired, was 31,678.] Said Stretton on December 27, “Anyone who is ill, pregnant women, babies and children will be going first. They will be flown to relatives if they have them in other states. If not, they will go into shelters that we are setting up in the capital cities. Apart from airlifts, there will be further evacuations when Navy ships arrive next week. Bread winners in general are expected to stay behind.” That day, some 2,500 women and children were flown out. Residents were allowed to take pets with them. Government grants were made available to tide over the dispossessed. It was early 1978 before Darwin regained the population level it had on Christmas Day 1974... although some 60 percent were post-Tracy newcomers.

Today, time in Darwin is measured in terms of “pre-Tracy” and “post-Tracy.” Those who endured the cyclone and have remained are known by many in Darwin as “true Darwinites” while those who came later are “transients.”

With the lack of electricity plunging the city at night into pitch blackness, and so few inhabitants left in what was now a wasteland, police feared that Darwin was ripe for the plucking by looters, and their fears were justified. The unattended possessions of victims, including cars, tyres and petrol, boats, televisions and radios and household goods, were pilfered. In the first days after the cyclone, 11 men and two women were arrested and charged with being in unlawful possession of goods. Others who behaved shamefully when so many were covering themselves with glory were two Sydney men who went door to door with bogus identification claiming to be collecting for Darwin and keeping the money they extracted from good-hearted people for themselves. Another pair stole from an office \$11,000 that was earmarked to aid Aboriginal missions. There were also allegations that local police and a small number of the 348 officers sent to Darwin from other forces to maintain order were themselves guilty of assault and theft, as well as being drunk in uniform. Later, when Darwin was being rebuilt, some bricklayers and carpenters were exposed for charging desperate home owners exorbitant fees for their reconstruction work and some businesses were able to callously cash in on supply shortages.

On December 28, the death toll of 65 was confirmed. That day, the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised once more: “... even with the extensive coverage given it by the press, radio and television, the magnitude of Darwin’s tragedy is still difficult to grasp. Some 50 [sic] people are known to have died and more are missing; hundreds have been injured; thousands are homeless. A major city has been devastated and will have to be rebuilt... at a cost estimated at \$250 million. To that must be added the cost of relief work, particularly the evacuation of at least a quarter, perhaps a half, of Darwin’s population. Yet who will count the cost today? Statistics merely indicate the immensity of the disaster. They say nothing of the physical or psychological suffering being endured by those who survived, nor of the bravery of individuals, such as Darwin’s meteorological staff, who stayed at their posts until their equipment was blasted away by the wind.”

As the new year loomed, authorities were able to report that there had been no outbreaks of disease (incidences of cholera, tetanus and typhoid were particularly feared) and that food stocks were mounting and water supplies were improving. Also arriving were containers of shelter materials, electrical and water purification gear. The Australian and English cricket teams, in the midst of an Ashes series, and tennis champions contesting the Australian Open, gave donations and prize money to the suffering of Darwin. The Australian and English cricketers moved among the crowd at the Boxing Day Test match at the Melbourne Cricket Ground collecting donations from spectators in buckets and blankets. It was announced that a glittering concert in aid of Darwin would be staged at the Opera House on January 4. It was hoped that the show, which would star, among others, Dame Joan Sutherland, Rolf Harris, Helen Reddy, Barry Humphries, Dame Joan Hammond, Barry

Crocker, Roger Woodward, Tommy Tycho and his orchestra, Donald Smith, Johnny Farnham, Graham Kennedy, David Frost and Kamahl, would raise \$100,000. To this end, a handful of premium tickets priced from \$1000 to \$1 million were offered to the wealthy, while the balance sold for \$10 each. When the tickets went on sale, they were snapped up by people who had been queuing all night to buy them. The two \$1 million tickets and 10 \$10,000 tickets, however, went unsold. The concert was ecstatically received and a much-moved Roger Woodward published an open letter to those who attended. “The support given by the people of Sydney for the Sydney Opera House Concert for Darwin last Saturday was nothing short of magnificent,” wrote the acclaimed classical pianist. “I would like to thank the people of Sydney for their most generous response, together with all my colleagues and friends. All proceeds have gone to the Mayor of Darwin. I fly back to [my commitments in] Europe today, the very proud holder of an Australian passport.”

Younger generation performers led by rock star Johnny O’Keefe travelled to Darwin and played a concert at Darwin High School. Half of the then-population of the city showed up. The stars performed free and their transport to Darwin from the southern capitals was provided by TAA. The only difficulty was finding a piano for Jade Hurley to play that had not been splintered by Tracy. Happily, one reasonably intact piano was located on the roofless top floor of a building and manhandled to the venue in time.

On his walk through the ravaged streets of Darwin, Prime Minister Whitlam assured locals that the city would be rebuilt and restored and the people rehabilitated. The scenes he saw, he said, reminded him of when Darwin was bombed by the Japanese in 1942. “People living here now live in no better conditions than they did during the war. I suppose 90 percent of the buildings in Darwin have been built since the last cyclone in 1947. It’s clear that the method of construction was not suitable for people living in a cyclone belt.”

Shortly after, the Prime Minister announced that the Federal Government’s Darwin Reconstruction Commission to plan and co-ordinate the rebuilding of the city would be formed. The new Darwin would spring from the site of the old one, and he expected the job to take at least five years and cost \$600 million. The Commission would comprise captains of industry as well as representatives of the Departments of the Northern Territory, Housing and Construction and urban and Regional development, as well as officials chosen by the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly and Darwin City Council. The first priority would be to ensure building codes that would ensure that the new buildings would withstand a cyclone. Suggestions that flowed in the following months that would be incorporated into Darwin building codes included the recommended (though not compulsory) construction of a core within each new house strong enough to withstand flying debris and that could be used as a cyclone shelter, smaller windows and the use of roof battens tying the roof to the foundations, stronger window frames, bolts and cyclone ties to hold the house together even in winds of up to 240 kmph. Darwinites would be repatriated to their city as soon as there was somewhere for them to live and work.

Some \$58 million would be paid by the Federal Government to compensate those who lost homes and businesses. Some \$6,395,654 was donated to the Darwin Cyclone Tracy Relief Fund. Insurance companies faced a \$220 million payout.

Meanwhile the grisly task of identifying the bodies of those killed – most died of asphyxiation – in the cyclone, on land and on sea. Among the deceased were 13 children aged under 12. Police officers had their work cut out, because only about 10 of the bodies carried identification. They were photographed and the photos, along with details of clothing and distinguishing marks, were sent to police stations in Darwin and police headquarters in every state in case anyone came seeking information about a missing loved one. There was widespread dismay from the Darwinites who remained behind when Major Stretton, mindful of heightened emotions in the city and the hard work to be done, decreed that no alcohol be consumed on New Year's Eve. The people of Darwin were grateful to Stretton, and admired him enormously for all that he had done for them, but there was no chance, in this case, of his orders being followed.

On December 31, Major Stretton – “Darwin's Churchill” as people were now calling him – handed over the city to civilian control. In June 1975 he would be appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia for “eminent services in duties of great responsibility” and Australian of the Year for 1975. In taking his leave, Stretton made a broadcast to the people of Darwin: “It would be wrong of me, now that I judge my job as over, to stay on here. There is nobody in Darwin, from the highest to the lowest in the land, who has not been magnificent. I am no longer wanted here. I just came in and did a pretty simple task given to me by the Acting Prime Minister. I feel my duty is to get back home... I can't really say how I feel. But to those who have shared with me, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I feel it would be improper to steal the glory that belongs to you all. Thank you. I will be back. I want to make sure that the bloody garbage is cleared up and there is no sign of a cyclone in this town. Otherwise I'll be asking a few questions. God bless you all.”

LANDSLIDE AT THREDBO

July 30, 1997

The popular ski resort of Thredbo, 1365 metres above sea level in New South Wales's Kosciusko National Park, was in the midst of its 40th birthday revels when the mountainside collapsed and slid. Those who heard it described the noise as being like that of an explosion, a freight train, a tornado, an F1-11 taking off, or a tidal wave. One eyewitness said that to her it looked like a giant had taken a huge bite out of the mountain.

At 11.35PM on Wednesday, July 30, a steep embankment on the Alpine Way highway at Thredbo subsided, sending tonnes of earth crashing more than 100 metres into the Carinya Ski Lodge, a four-storey hotel. In turn, the lodge was torn from its foundations and careened a further 100 metres down the hill, where it slammed into Bimbadeen Lodge, another tourist hotel, and its adjoining staff quarters. The mountainside and the two destroyed hotels became one horrific landslide, comprising 3500 tonnes of rock, trees, dirt, mangled timber, concrete, furnishings, the vehicles of guests and staff... and human beings, plummeted on to the bottom of the slope.

Thredbo was declared a regional disaster area, and by 20 past midnight police, doctors and rescue teams, some specialising in mine rescues, had arrived by vehicle or flown in on Navy helicopters. The terrible cries of the trapped could be heard, but faded as the night wore on, leading a policeman to observe, "It doesn't look good." And it wasn't. In all, 18 people – 11 men and seven women – were killed by the initial impact, or died in the rubble.

At dawn on July 31, before the job of freeing the bodies and rescuing survivors was in full swing, yet it being clear that the death and injury toll would be high, an unwell Prime Minister John Howard addressed the nation from his hospital bed. "The thoughts and prayers of all Australia are with those people unaccounted for and their families and friends. The horrifying pictures of the scene at Thredbo [which even in those early hours were being broadcast on televisions throughout the land] are a reminder to all of the fragility of life and reinforce the strength which can be gained from a sense of community in times of national tragedy."

Despite exhaustion and hypothermia in the minus 14 degrees Celsius night temperatures (that rose only marginally by day), the rescuers toiled for the next two days, delving through the rubble, hauling free survivors and removing bodies from the ruins and earth. The first body was taken from the rubble at 5AM on the 31st. The injured were ambulanced or air-lifted to Cooma Hospital which had been stocked with large supplies of the blood that would be needed so badly in the days to come.

For a time, when the rubble was seen and heard to shift, all rescue efforts ceased because the site was deemed too unstable. Glenn Milne, today a renowned journalist and political commentator, was staying with his family at Leatherbarrel Lodge, adjacent to Carinya Lodge. His reporter's instincts came to the fore despite the horror and shock of the

disaster. Milne, who himself pitched in to help rescuers, gave a graphic report of the disaster to *The Daily Telegraph*: “We started the rescue attempts as soon as we evacuated families and children. We got down into the rubble and started clawing away chunks of rubble, concrete. Because of the terraced arrangements, when the lodges came down, cars came down too. There were four or five that I saw come down and there were more just teetering up on the edge of the rubble while we were digging. We heard voices, we heard three separate voices, one definitely a male that we could identify – we couldn’t get to them. We could hear two more voices further down. We don’t know if they were male or female. We were trying to get to these people. When the rescue services arrived they told us that we had to get out of there and that’s what we did. I keep thinking of this word pancake – floors have collapsed one on top of the other as they have come down the hill. An almighty gush of rubble just slid down the hill and collapsed the lodges. It was an almighty roar. There was tonnes of concrete, earth, trees. It just collapsed down the side of the hill, spilled across the access road to our lodge, the Leatherbarrel, and then further down the hill. There’s bedding, personal belongings, everything just sandwiched in there. When it first happened I grabbed my two daughters and wrapped them in doonas and took them down the hill. Since then police have sealed off that area. Police are now saying that the whole area is geographically unstable...”

The rescuers, in the fluorescent orange overalls and hard hats that forever will be synonymous with this disaster, threaded their way through the rubble, slowly removing the tonnes of debris virtually brick by brick, rock by rock, so as to avoid starting new landslides, and passing the materials gingerly from person to person in a human chain. The precariously piled rubble was “like a pack of cards which could collapse with one false move,” said one member of a rescue squad.

Later on July 31, a diamond-tipped concrete cutter arrived, as did thermal imaging cameras to detect a survivor’s body heat, seismic detectors and a miniscule fibre optic camera to detect signs of life among the twisted mess. Floodlights were mounted so rescuers could work day and night.

Many of the rescuers were volunteer emergency services personnel, white and blue collar workers, students, the unemployed, good Samaritans all, hailing from Sydney, Canberra, and the bush. Afterwards, a group of school students wrote to the rescue organisers, summing up the gratitude of the nation: “To emergency workers and volunteers, we have been watching the Thredbo disaster on television and we would like to express our admiration for the courage, bravery and determination you have shown us.”

On Saturday, August 2, the list of the known dead was released. Among the sad roll call were the names of Sally and Stuart Diver. Sally was a 27-year-old resort employee and Stuart, her husband, 27, a ski instructor and part-time fireman at Thredbo.

Sally Diver, tragically, had passed away, but reports of Stuart’s death were, like those of Mark Twain’s, greatly exaggerated. At 5.37AM on August 2, 65 hours after the landslide,

sensitive sound equipment lowered far down into the rubble of a destroyed bedroom in Bimbadeen Lodge picked up crackling static, possibly human groans and murmurs, a noise described by one ambulance officer as “the most electrifying sound we had ever heard.” After all the digging equipment was shut down to give silence, fire brigade rescuer Steve Hirst lay flat on the ground and called down into the rubble, “Rescue team overhead, can you hear me?”

A voice, picked up by a listening device, replied, “I can hear you.”

“Have you sustained injuries?”

“No, but my feet are bloody cold.”

When asked his name, Diver was able to give it.

Diver, dressed only in shorts and t-shirt, was wedged two metres under the ground, lying in his mangled bed in pitch blackness in a cavity 2.5 metres long by 1.5 metres wide under concrete slabs and reinforcing rods crushed together and entwined like spaghetti. Between bouts of unconsciousness, to sustain his spirit Stuart Diver later told how he thought of being freed and seeing his loved ones again. Nearby, although he did not know it, lay the body of his wife, whom he had known since they were 16.

An oxygen mask, a torch, a tube conduit for rehydration fluids and a hot air pipe was poked into the depths and through gaps into the debris until it reached Diver. The ski instructor, who was suffering internal injuries, damaged limbs, poor circulation, lacerations, bruises and hypothermia, managed to grasp it when it protruded through a small hole and put it close to his skin. The rescuers painstakingly removed sufficient wreckage, earth and rock to see and make physical contact with Diver through a small gap. Paramedic Paul Featherstone, who has proven in various disasters over the years that he has few peers in his field, aided by his colleagues, worked his way through the debris until he was crouched virtually beside Diver, chatting quietly to him, telling him how the rescue was progressing, doing his best to keep his spirits up, and diverting his thoughts from the horror he had experienced. Featherstone later said that Diver was “in a world of hurt, the worst imaginable.” Said Featherstone to Diver, “It’s going to take a long time, but we’ll get out of this. Stick with me and we’ll see the mountain again.”

Eleven hours’ digging later, Featherstone, who chose to remain beside his man despite the periodic blast of sirens warning that another landslide was imminent as the rubble creaked shifted ominously, and Diver emerged from the tomb. They were greeted with a roar from the other rescuers that Featherstone says he has only ever heard at a football grand final.

On August 4, after it was clear that Stuart Diver’s rescue would be the one and only miracle, a memorial service was held in Thredbo’s John Paul II Ecumenical Centre to honour the 18 who died in the disaster. Two hundred mourners crammed into the church, including the loved ones of the deceased, rescue workers and Thredbo employees in their various

uniforms, Acting Prime Minister Tim Fischer, Opposition Leader Kim Beazley and New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, and hundreds more gathered outside to pray and listen to the service. “In the days ahead, give us wisdom and understanding because the scars of the mountain we will carry always,” intoned Pastor Clare Singleton. “May these scars help us remember that true love and life never end.”

On August 6, as the final body was recovered and removed from the site, the Thredbo Family Relief Fund was established to help the families of those killed. All governments contributed, as did the ever-generous public.

The Princess of Wales on August 9 sent a heartfelt letter to the grieving families. Noting that she had been receiving constant updates on the disaster since the mountain collapsed, the Princess, just 12 months from her own death, continued, “... Freak storms, floods, earthquakes and landslides, it is difficult to understand why nature can be so awe-inspiring and then so cruel. I cannot begin to imagine the desperation felt by those people first on the scene, frantically trying to dig out any survivors. Then the feeling of hopelessness as their efforts were hampered by the threat of further landslides. The joy, however, when it was realised that there could possibly be one survivor – it seemed as though the whole world held its breath as slowly when that one person was pulled from the carnage. I send my deepest sympathy to those who have lost their loved ones, and also to the rescuers and members of the local community, who will be affected by this tragedy for many years to come. I am thinking of you all at this very difficult time. With lots of love from Diana.”

At the official inquest, after hearing expert testimony, Coroner Derrick Hand reported that the direct trigger for the landslide was that flowing water from a leaking pipe had destabilised the mountainside, but ultimate blame lay with the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Roads and Traffic Authority, who had neglected Thredbo for 40 years. The Coroner had arrived at the view that the agencies knew of the region’s tendency for landslides but did nothing to shore up the land and avert the disaster.

The Supreme Court of New South Wales largely concurred with Coroner Hand’s judgment in December 2004 when, after hearing four months of evidence to decide whether a multi-million dollar personal injury claim brought by a Thredbo victim could proceed, ruled that the cause of the disaster was indeed a leaking mains pipe and a road built on slope of unstable debris. Giving the green light for Bernd Hecher to sue the New South Wales Government, the Roads and Traffic Authority, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and Lend Lease, the company that laid the broken pipe, Justice Michael Grove ruled that the landslide was “equally caused by leakage from the main, the marginal instability of the slope above Carinya Lodge, the existence and state of the Alpine Way, and the failure to improve the slope and roadway.” Justice Grove stressed that there was nothing wrong with the design and construction of the pipe, “but those responsible for the installation and maintenance of the water main ought to have been aware of the risk of failure and consequent leakage as a result of soil creep. No adequate steps were taken to accommodate and avoid this risk...” Also, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the

Roads and Traffic Authority, who were responsible for the care, control and management of the Alpine Way “ought to have been aware of the condition of the slope supporting the road near Carinya [Lodge] but did nothing to stabilise it.”

In 2007, 10 years after the landslide, survivor Stuart Diver was interviewed by reporter Luke Mcllveen. In the past decade, Diver told Mcllveen, he had remarried and was moving on with his life. He ran a bed and breakfast establishment at Thredbo and gave ski lessons. Still, a large part of his soul and, one suspects, a piece of his heart remained buried in the rubble on the mountainside at Thredbo. “There’s still a massive amount of emotional attachment to everything that happened at Thredbo and I deal with that every day. You don’t just draw a line and say, ‘Thanks very much, that’s the end of that.’ Obviously, I lost my wife and 17 other friends. It is unbelievably difficult. I know other people who have been sole survivors of things. It’s hard because you can never ever sit down with another person who survived and talk to them about what went on down there. But I never feel [survivor] guilt. I never asked to be put in that situation, it’s just what happened. You can go through life thinking, ‘I should feel guilty for this or that,’ but it’s such a wasted emotion.”

At 3PM on July 31, 2007, on the 10th anniversary of Australia’s worst alpine tragedy, a commemoration service was held on the now landscaped slope. Looking at the area where so many died, people who attended mused, you would scarcely know that it had been the site of a disaster. A pianist played “(The Hills are Alive) With the Sound of Music” and then the names of the lost 18 were read aloud. Eighteen bells were tolled and 18 candles lit. Then, as those who had gathered wept, the hymn “The Lord Is My Shepherd” was sung before the mourners sadly collected their thoughts and filed back down the mountain.

THE BLACK SATURDAY BUSHFIRES

February–March 2009

The Black Saturday bushfires were a series of apocalyptic blazes that burned across Victoria on and for some weeks after Saturday 7 February, 2009. As a result of the bushfires, 173 people died. It was the nation's largest loss of life from a bushfire event – and 414 people were injured. More than one million animals perished. Some 2,030 homes were destroyed, displacing 7560 people, and thousands more dwellings were damaged. More than 450,000 hectares of urban districts, rural fringe land, farm land and national park were scorched. The disaster cost \$45 billion. Victorian Premier John Brumby described the fires as being tantamount to “hell on earth,” while Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, visiting the seared Yarra Valley on February 8, called the fire storm, “Hell’s fury unleashed,” and continued, “Many good people now lie dead. Many others lie injured. This is an appalling tragedy for Victoria but, because of that, it’s an appalling tragedy for the nation. The nation grieves with Victoria tonight...” Victoria was shrouded by smoke and profound sadness.

Given the prevailing weather conditions, it would have been a miracle if Victoria’s disastrous series of fires in February and March 2009 had not happened.

Warnings of the fires to come were given, but proved of little value when it came to the ferocious crunch.

On February 6, Victorians were warned by fire services, police and politicians that tomorrow, February 7, would be the worst day for bush fires in the state’s history, and to take every precaution to save their lives and their property. A total fire ban was ordered, and 3582 fire fighters were put on red alert. Victorian Premier John Brumby announced, “It’s just as bad a day as you can imagine and on top of that the state is just tinder-dry. People need to exercise real common sense tomorrow... It will be the worst day for bushfires in the history of the state.” So it proved.

As the bureau of meteorology, police and fire services forecast that they would, temperatures roared into the mid-high 40s, making it the hottest day in the state’s history, and winds blew at a gale force 100 kmph. Humidity was low. Following a recent heat wave, and there having been no rain for many months, the bush was bone-dry.

The fires that sprang to life were ignited by bushland bursting into flames in the intense heat, fallen power lines, by sparks from machinery, discarded cigarettes and, terrible to think, but true, by arsonists. A cool change at 5PM that day brought no relief. Quite the opposite. It summoned south-westerly winds in excess of 120 kmph which turned the flanks of the fires into monster conflagrations that altered direction and burned with unimagined speed and ferocity towards towns whose residents were praying they had been spared.

The 78 towns and townships towns attacked by the fires, and where there were fatalities, included Kinglake, Strathewen, Marysville, Flowerdale, Narbethong, Wandong, St Andrews, Koornalla, Callignee, Taggerty, Steels Creek and Humevale.

The inferno swept on at a frightening rate, jumping highways, whipped into a vast and deadly fireball by the wind which gained pace as it raced up the steep wooded hills in its path. At points in its rampage, the roaring, shrieking fire was leaping 100 metres above the tree line. Anyone approaching within 300 metres was roasted by the radiating heat. The sky was black and scarlet, the colour of a bad bruise, and the air in the vicinity of the fires was chokingly acrid and burned the lungs of those who breathed it. Many of the victims perished in their homes, either caught by surprise or having made the decision to stay and fight. Others were incinerated in their cars after they bundled their loved ones, pets and prized possessions into their vehicle and tried to speed to safety.

But back to noon on that terrible day, Back Saturday. The wind was blasting at more than 100 kmph and the temperature was recorded in places at 46 degrees. Fires ignited simultaneously. Powerlines at Kilmore East in the Kinglake-Whittlesea district were knocked down by the gale, and the sparks that flew from the fallen powerlines ignited the surrounding grasslands. Fanned by winds that were now 125 kmph, one monstrous blaze entered a pine forest, hurdled the Hume Highway and raced across the treetops, growing in intensity all the while, and made south-east towards Wandong and the surrounding district. At 12.30 the Horsham fire began, followed at 2.50 by a bushfire that started in the Murrindindi Mill and which grew to terrifying proportions and burned parallel to the Kilmore East fire. By 4.20, the Kilmore East fire was laying waste to Strathewen. At that time, too, Narbethong was ablaze. Across the state, the fires numbered in the hundreds. It was 4.45 when the Kilmore East fire attacked Kinglake. The appalling number of lives it claimed, 122, and the destruction it wrought would not be known for days. At its height, smoke plumes from the Kilmore East fire soared 15 kms into the air.

At 5PM on the 7th, the north-westerly wind became a south-westerly, causing the Kilmore East and the Murrindindi Mill fires to merge. The united conflagration destroyed much of Flowerdale, and then linked with the Beechworth fire. This fire complex was the largest of the Black Saturday bush fires. It caused the deaths of 159 people, including those at Kinglake, destroyed 330,000 ha and burned 1800 houses.

Prime Minister Rudd announced that a Federal-State emergency relief fund of \$10 million had been established for those affected by the fires, and that those in need of immediate financial assistance were eligible for emergency Centrelink payments.

Fire fighters, emergency services, police and the defence forces were engaged to battle the fires invaded the fire region.

As helicopters began ferrying the burned and smoke-affected to safety, as well as many who were injured in car crashes as they attempted to flee the flames on smoky roads in vehicles, by now every hospital in the state was as ready as it could be to play its role in battling the disaster, prepared to be inundated with burn victims. At 10PM on Black Saturday, the official death toll was estimated at 14. It turned out to be laughably, tragically low.

Flames from the Murrindindi Mill fire soared more than 100 metres into the sky as the fire crossed the Black Range. It turned to cinders 95 percent of the houses of Narbethong and then, when the wind changed at 5PM, advanced on Marysville and did its worst. When it finally moved on, an eyewitness described the burg as looking as if it had been “nuked.” Reported a shattered Premier Brumby, “There's no activity, there's no people, there's no buildings, there's no birds, there's no animals, everything's just gone. So the fatality rate will be very high.” It was. Some 34 died and 386 of Marysville's 400 buildings were destroyed.

People died protecting their homes and livestock (sisters Penny and Melanie Chambers perished protecting their beloved horses at Kinglake), and sacrificed themselves so that loved ones may live. They died huddled in, and under, their homes, they died in paddocks and mills and factories and offices. Some were scalded to death after they sought refuge in swimming pools. There was the six who were incinerated in their car while trying to escape from Kinglake. Arthur Enver, 57, mounted his Harley-Davidson motor cycle and sped out of Kinglake, but was overrun by the fireball and killed.

Among the deceased in the fires that assailed Kinglake West area were renowned ornithologist Richard Zann and his wife Eileen and daughter Eva, and the popular former television newsreader and children's talent show host Brian Naylor and his wife Moiree. Because their home was below a ridge, the Naylor's were taken by surprise by the fire that advanced on them, literally riding the treetops. They had no hope of surviving even though they had taken every precaution: in the yard of their property was fire fighting equipment and a Mercedes-Benz four wheel drive vehicle; they had created fire breaks around their home with bulldozers. They fought to the end. “Moiree and Bryan were the kind of people who might have died with their arms around each other,” said their friend, newsman John Sorrell. Another victim was the character actor Reg Evans who had been ubiquitous on Australian television and in films since the 1960s, appearing in TV's *Skippy*, *Prisoner*, *A Country Practice*, *Blue Heelers*, *Homicide* and *Number 96* and the movies *Mad Max*, *Gallipoli* and *Charlie and Boots*. Evans's partner artist Angela Brunton also perished.

Melanee Hermocilla, 23, her brother Jaeson, 21, and her boyfriend Greg Lloyd, 22, called Lloyd's family to say their final farewells when they realised that they would die at the home where they were house-sitting at Yarra Glen.

The nation was unstinting in its praise of the fire fighters on the battle-line, both professional and amateur, protecting what was dear to them, doing their utmost to the point of being badly burned and suffering exhaustion and asphyxiation, in the face of bushfires unprecedented in the destruction they wreaked. They fought the conflagrations to the death, with bare hands, hoses, fire trucks, water bombing helicopters. In newspapers, TV and radio, these ordinary citizens, eyes red and hollow, mouths grim-set and bodies blackened, brought the horror of what they faced in the Black Saturday fires into homes Australia-wide and their experiences left a nation in profound shock and awe.

Eye-witnesses invariably spoke of the speed at which the fires travelled, of their terrible power and unbearable heat, at the ear-splitting roar that emanated from them. At the way the fires plunged their towns into blackness though it was daylight. At night you could see the glow of a bushfire approaching from great distances, and still it was often too late to escape it.

The words of those caught in the maelstrom, spoken to each other, to fire fighters, or to members of the press and electronic media, capture the devastation of those who uttered them. "Holy Christ!" "It's a holocaust." "God help us." "Trees are exploding in front of me." "All of a sudden we were in a raging inferno. There was coloured smoke and the noise was indescribable. It was terrifying." "Burnt out cars are strewn along the road." "I prayed to the Lord to save my home... but He didn't." "There are dead animals everywhere." "I saw a man disappear back into his home. He never came out. The house burned to the ground." "We only have the clothes on our back, but there's hundreds of people dead up there. Hundreds." "Don't bother donating televisions or fridges, we've got no home to put them in." "Mummy, am I going to be alive tomorrow?" "I stared the devil in the face today." "Before we knew it, the fire was on top of us." "It's devastation, and people have seen horrific things today." "The fire was howling like every jet plane on the planet." "Darling... I'm alive!" "There is only one building left standing in Marysville." After the flames were put out at that benighted township, police prevented cars from entering because bodies remained strewn on the street.

Readers wept when they read of the plight of Marysville man Dan Walsh, as recounted to *Daily Telegraph* reporter Terry Brown... "The 74-year-old looks to be one of the lucky ones," wrote Brown, "but his handshake is weak and his eyes are haunted. A car pulls up and he excuses himself, 'Got to talk to my son.' He tells his boy Michael, 'Mum's dead,' as bluntly as that. The young man drops to his knees by the roadside and sobs. Mr Walsh left his 73-year-old wife Marie at the plush Cumberland spa in the town's main street. They had gone there to sit out the worst, and by early evening the fire around there seemed over. 'I said, 'It's gone now, but in case of fire, [go] out the door and down to the swimming pool area,' I told her I'd go back and see if I could save the house.' Wisps of smoke still rise around the yard and he walks in a daze putting them out. 'She must have gone further

inside, thinking it was safer,' Mr Walsh says, trying to make sense where there is none. 'I'm just too shell-shocked to think. I'm just buggered.'"

Prime Minister Rudd declared, "As human beings we salute the extraordinary courage of all the emergency workers," and he could easily have been referring to the fireys who bundled 19 people, including babies and toddlers, into the river at Murrindindi and hosed them under fire blankets as the flames devoured all around them. Or to the volunteers of the Country Fire Authority who fought the fires until they dropped from fatigue and smoke inhalation. Or to the RSPCA workers who cared for pets and livestock burned and injured in the blazes. Or to the Salvation Army officers who moved among the devastated and the grieving offering hugs and cool drinks and sandwiches. Or to the counsellors who comforted the young school friends of the 10 children who died at Kinglake. Or to Peter Thorneycroft, 43, who, in T-shirt and thongs, climbed onto the roof of Kinglake's National Park Hotel with a garden hose and extinguished the embers that threatened to burn down the hotel in which 400 sheltered. Or to the so-called "lunch ladies of Toolangi" in the Yarra Valley who prepared hundreds of meals for the fire fighters. Or to CFA volunteer 17-year-old Kelly Johnson who joined other fire fighters to train a high-powered hose on the CFA building in Kinglake where several hundred homeless people sheltered inside.

On February 13 it was announced that Australians and people from all over the world had pledged \$76 million to a national appeal to aid the victims. Celebrities such as Russell Crowe, Orlando Bloom, Nicole Kidman, Hugh Jackman and Jimmy Barnes, as well as sports champions such as Shane Warne manned phone lines to take note of the samaritans. The stars gave donations themselves. A CD, *Bushfire Aid*, the proceeds of whose sales all were donated to the victims and which featured songs by Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel, Eurythmics, John Farnham and Jimmy Barnes, soared to the top of the charts.

Australians in huge numbers attended National Day of Morning: Together for Victoria memorial services that were conducted across the nation on Sunday, February 22, including at Melbourne's Rod Laver Arena, Sydney Olympic Park and the forecourt of Sydney Opera House. The Rod Laver Arena memorial service was broadcast nationally on every television network.

Even as the fires still burned, the insurance industry received nearly 10,000 claims, totalling more than \$1 billion. Rudd's successor as Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, hoped that, "given the devastation," the industry would react to the claims "sympathetically and quickly." Mostly it did.

Victorians, unlike people in other states who were left in no doubt that they were expected flee if their home seemed likely to go up in flames, had been encouraged to decide for themselves whether to stay and defend their homes or to evacuate them on "code red or catastrophic fire risk" days. Black Saturday changed all that. The Victorian Government on

October 11, 2009, announced that in future residents under threat would be advised that the safest course of action on a code red day was to flee at the earliest opportunity. Many of those who died in the Black Saturday fires of course had been killed while defending their property. Specific actions were recommended for each of the six fire danger day categories: low-moderate; high; very high; severe; extreme; and code red (or catastrophic). The modification to policy would have received the blessing of Dan Walsh, who lost his wife Marie in the Marysville blaze. Said Walsh, a staunch supporter of community bushfire refuges, “You only stay and defend if you have a chance of winning and in that situation, in that extreme heat, there’s no chance of winning at all. The fire came down like a blast furnace. Telephone poles were spontaneously combusting 200 ft from the nearest burning thing. How do you stay and defend against that?”

By the first week of March, when the fires were extinguished or expiring, it was clear that 173 people were dead and 414 injured. More than a million birds and animals died as well, and millions more were badly burned.

Then the merciful heavens. On March 4 rain fell and the temperature dropped. The Kilmore East-Murrindindi fire complex, and many others, were contained at last. By mid-March, the fires were over. The pain never would be.

And that pain was exacerbated when police confirmed that the Murrindindi Mill fire had been lit by arsonists, an act described by Prime Minister Rudd as “mass murder.” When it emerged that many of the fires had been deliberately lit by fire bugs, no one argued with Rudd’s assessment.

Incredibly, arsonists, having lit the deadly fires, returned to reignite them after they had been extinguished, condemning exhausted and singed fire fighters to quell the flames once more. When he heard this, Premier Brumby broke down. His South Australian counterpart Mike Rann lambasted arsonists as “terrorists within our nation, they are the enemy within and we have to be increasingly vigilant about them.” And an outraged New South Wales Premier Nathan Rees weighed in, saying anyone caught lighting fires should be swiftly and severely dealt with, “This is not fun, this is not clever... This is something that can kill people.” Victoria’s Deputy Police Commissioner Kieran Walsh warned arsonists that if they were caught they could be charged with murder.”

One outraged resident of Churchill, Janice Michelsson, would write a furious open letter to the arsonist who set the fires that turned her township to ash. The letter was as angry as it was sad. “You bastard,” she began. “You are a fire terrorist. You are a murderer. You have taken my neighbours, my friends. You have taken my home. Do you hate people so much that you really want to see this misery. The damage you have caused is so great, I can’t even bear to think of the horror my neighbours who sadly didn’t make it were going through on Saturday. They would have thought, ‘Oh my God, I’m trapped. Oh my God, I’m going to die.’ In the end they were probably praying for death. What do you say to their families, friends and loved ones? As their neighbour, I am so incredibly sad. I will never see them and

stop and say, 'Hi' down at the supermarket. I will never wave to them when they drive past in their cars. I am lucky I got out of my home with just minutes to spare. I managed to save my cat and a photo album and that was all I could do before I had to run for my life.

"Yesterday I went back to where my home once stood. It was complete devastation. Today, I will go back with a crowbar and a sifter. My mum died not long ago and I kept many of her possessions. Today I will sift through the rubble and dust to look for her wedding ring.

"God bless the CFQA and other emergency services. They risked their own lives to save ours and they are the true heroes who are still doing an amazing job.

"I heard a rumour yesterday that there was a person spotted riding a motorbike out in the pines with a can of petrol on his back. To him, and any arsonist, I would say, 'I'd like to get that can of petrol, pour it on you, and light a match. I've never wished harm on anyone before. Perhaps before that I would like to drive them to The Alfred Hospital in Melbourne, march them to the burns unit and have them explain to every single person there why they did what they did. If this person, or people, are ever caught, I never want to hear that they were suffering from a mental illness, from pyromania. They would get off with a slap on the wrist. This person, or people, knew exactly what they were doing. I am disgusted with you."

When disturbed loner Brendan Sokaluk was arrested and charged with setting fires, he received death threats. As did Jason Farrell who, police say, admitted to them that when he was unable to start a fire with a cigarette he resorted to his cigarette lighter.

The question incredulous and outraged people were demanding to know was, "Who on earth could do such a thing as light a bush fire?" Brendan Sokaluk, and most of the other arsonists arrested for starting a number of the Black Saturday fires, fit in many ways the profile of an arsonist that was published in the August 2009 edition of *Psychotherapy in Australia* in Andrew Campbell's article that asked "Bushfire Arsonists: Who They Are and Why Do They Do It?" and gave the psychological characteristics of the bushfire sociopath. Traits typically exhibited by arsonists, found Campbell, included: "Deceitfulness, reckless disregard for the safety of others; Consistent irresponsibility in occupational roles; Lack of remorse and indifference to, or rationalisation for, hurting and mistreating others... chronic emotional detachment, and absence of consequential thinking; Dominated by primary process thinking and the pleasure principle at an infantile and regressed level but capable of manipulation and deception to avoid detection; Alexthymia, a condition of impaired cognition and affect, and inability to express their feelings and thoughts in language, is evident in their confessions.' Poverty of affect and thought and concrete thinking reflect their incap[acity to symbolise or empathise with human suffering; Emotional life is dominated by negative feelings – boredom, contempt and devaluation of others. Exhilaration and pleasure is felt through dominance; Framed by early manifestations of psychopathology including cruelty to animals and fascination with fire; Early signs of conduct disorder, persistent oppositional disorder, poor task completion, and in teenage years illicit drug use and anti-social conduct, and contact with law enforcement; May have

obsession with sexual objects that have become fetishised, and collect pornography. Fire-setting may be part of a paraphilia. Likely sexual dysfunction and impotence. Fantasised mastery achieved by fire-setting; Inability to maintain relationships involving trust, love reciprocity. Tends to be misogynist with unresolved Oedipal conflict and enmeshment with mother; Fears and resents dependence, and loss of an imagined loved object can initiate explosive rage in terms of fire-setting; Recognised in local community as 'loners' and 'weirdos' with no web of social affiliations; Fire is the compensatory and primary interest in their life." Shockingly, many arsonists were employed as fire fighters.

In the wake of the Black Saturday disaster, Victorian Police Commissioner Christine Nixon was empowered to form a task force comprising Victorian forensic police, their counterparts from other states and from overseas to assist in the identification of the victims, some of whom were burned beyond recognition. Investigations were also made into the causes of the fires and was able to confirm, repeatedly, that the answer was, as at Murrindindi, often arson. There was also looting, and one of the most reprehensible cases involved thieves lurking nearby, waiting until bodies had been removed from burned houses, then moving in and pillaging the belongings of the deceased. Said Paul Lackas, whose brother Steve died, "They are vultures." At Kinglake, where a number of suspicious people were seen loitering near abandoned homes, a makeshift sign was erected: "Looters Will Be Shot."

A Royal Commission sat in April 2009. Focusing on the fires at Kinglake, Delburn, Bunyip, Kilmore East, Horsham, Coleraine, Pomborneit-Weerite, Churchill, Murrindindi, Redesdale, Narre Warren, Upper Ferntree Gully, Bendigo and Beechworth-Mudgegonga, its brief was to probe all aspects of the fire fighting strategy, including the causes, the chronology of the fires, the damage done, and to assess how authorities from fire services, police, emergency services and governments performed in the Black Saturday crisis, designated Australia's worst bush fire events, ahead of the Ash Wednesday fires in South Australia and Victoria in 1983 in which 75 people died and Victoria's Black Friday fires in 1939 which killed 71. The Black Saturday fires were declared the eighth worst bush fires in recorded history.

On July 31, 2010, the four-volume 900-page report of the Bushfires Royal Commission was released... and while laudatory of the fire fighters and emergency personnel on the ground, was scathing in its criticism of some fire services and emergency management. The report said that poor leadership, a lack of warnings and government failures had left residents defenseless and at the mercy of the Black Saturday bushfires. The then-Victorian Police Commissioner Nixon was criticised for her decision to visit her hairdresser and have a meal in a hotel on Black Saturday. "Ms Nixon's approach to emergency co-ordination was inadequate," noted the report. "Ms Nixon herself acknowledged that leaving the integrated Emergency Co-ordination Centre and going home at about 6PM on February 7 was an error of judgment." Also under fire were Fire Authority Chief Russell Rees and Chief Fire Officer Ewan Waller. Rees, maintained the report, could have been expected to have done more in relation to warnings, supporting statewide fire planning and supporting incident

management teams. He had made the error of relying on underlings to do these tasks. He had also not acted on the deadly 5PM south-westerly wind change at around 5PM of February 7. Waller had not increased the warnings and could have lent more support to incident management teams after the wind change. He had failed to pay attention to meteorological reports, and delegated tasks to subordinates that he should have performed himself. The Emergency Services Minister Bob Cameron had made the decision to remain at his home on February 7 after being assured by fire authorities that they could cope. He had come to his office in Melbourne at 8PM, but had been let down by “insufficient communications from emergency authorities.”

The Commissioners, Chairperson The Hon. Bernard Teague AO, and Commissioners Ronald McLeod AM and Susan Pascoe AM, confirmed that 173 people died as a result of the fires: 119 in the Kilmore East fire, 40 in the Murrundindi fire, 11 at Churchill, two at Beechworth-Mudgegonga, and one at Bendigo. The great majority died on February 7. Wrote the Commissioners: “The Commission heard many accounts from people who survived the 2009 bush fires, but it was only examining the circumstances of the deaths that it could complete its investigation... In particular, the examination of the circumstances of the deaths helped the Commission expand its knowledge of the way people understand and respond to bushfire. These inquiries also cast light on its consideration of matters such as planning and building regulation, the need for a broad range of safety options, and what makes a home defensible against bushfire.”

SHIPWRECK AT CHRISTMAS ISLAND

December 15, 2010

As Abdul Khaliq Fazal, the Afghan Australian Association of Victoria president, would later sadly note, “These people had committed no crime. They were coming for a better life to a place they thought would be paradise.” Instead on the jagged limestone coast of Christmas Island, location of a burgeoning asylum seeker detention centre, they found hell.

A number somewhere between 70 and 90 Iraqis, Iranians and Kurds huddled and crammed on board the flimsy 16-metre wooden vessel, later designated the SIEV 221, approaching Christmas Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean some 2,600 kilometres from the mainland and 3,000 kilometres south of Indonesia, at dawn on December 15, 2010. The men, women and children were fleeing misery, war, oppression and poverty in their native lands. Most had weighed up the pros and cons of embarking on such a risky journey, through treacherous seas via Indonesia, and, after further persuasion from rapacious people smugglers who packed them onto the unseaworthy vessel, decided that asylum in Australia was worth it.

Though numerous vessels transporting asylum seekers from such benighted lands as Sri Lanka, Iran, Afghanistan and Iraq had safely landed on Australian shores, the poor souls on this flimsy vessel were not so fortunate. Conditions were treacherous. Driving rain had reduced visibility to less than 150 metres, the swell was pitching at 4 metres high, and the wind blew at 40 knots.

At around 6.30AM, while its navigators were trying to find a safe inlet on Christmas Island on which to land, the boat collided with the cliffs and rock shelves on the shoreline of aptly-named Rocky Point at Flying Fish Cove at the north tip of the island. The collision destroyed the power and steering of the vessel, rendering it unnavigable. It was now at the mercy of 3-4 metre waves and an onshore gale and the backwash which, for more than hour, smashed it again and again against the rocks, breaking the boat into pieces. Many asylum seekers were flung overboard and drowned. Others grasped flotsam and jetsam which was dashed onto rocks with fatal results for those using them as life buoys.

Christmas Islanders, including around 50 members of the community and Custom and Border Patrol officers, rushed to the scene but were largely powerless to help because of the huge seas and the razor-sharp rocks. They threw life jackets, surfboards and ropes at the floundering boat but to little avail. By the time rigid inflatable tenders from HMAS *Pirie* and ACV *Triton* arrived an hour or so later to assist the rescue efforts of the locals, it was too late for as many as 40 refugees, perhaps more. (The exact number of those who died can never be known, for although 42 asylum seekers were rescued and 30 bodies recovered from the sea, a number of bodies were never recovered.) The navy men were met with the terrible and never-forgotten sight of lifeless forms, including those of babies and children, bobbing pathetically in the roiling seas.

One man saved himself by making a mighty leap from the vessel and hanging onto rocks until he could be saved.

A witness who watched the tragedy unfold from the shore said he knew as soon as he saw the beleaguered vessel being pummelled against the rocks “that it was obvious that someone was going to die. They were sitting out within metres of the cliff and they were all screaming, ‘Help us!’ There were waves pounding into it and a lot of backwash, really bad weather.”

Recalled one Christmas Island resident who was standing on the cliff top, “We saw people drowning who did get off the boat but unfortunately were hit against the limestone rocks. One person jumped off a piece of flotsam and swam to a naval rescue boat, but that ended in tragedy.”

One Christmas Islander told a reporter from Melbourne’s *Herald Sun*, “I went down to look and all I saw were people hanging on for dear life and the boat was being smashed against the rocks. It was horrible. They were screaming and yelling for help and falling into the ocean. We just felt so helpless, there wasn’t anything we could do.”

Added another onlooker, “There was debris and people everywhere in the water. The water conditions were horrific. You couldn’t blame this incident on anyone bar those who sent them.”

The Government announced that it would conduct a criminal investigation into the shipwreck, under people trafficking laws. The feeling of the nation was summed up by Allison Millcock, a contractor with the Shire of Christmas Island, who railed, “Those bastards who are bringing these boat people should be shot. They’re criminals. They’re absolute criminals.”

Answering criticism that the boat should have been intercepted by the Navy and Customs officials before it collided with the cliffs, officials insisted that it approached Flying Fish Cove under cover of darkness, and by the time its presence was known it was being dashed against the cliffs. The boat’s dawn arrival had been “a huge surprise.”

The survivors, who almost to a person suffered bruising, abrasions, broken limbs and/or immersion, were treated on the island by doctors flown in on Royal Flying Doctor Service aircraft, and the Flying Doctors jettied three asylum seekers with severe head wounds and abdominal injuries to Perth hospitals after Western Australian Premier Colin Barnett offered the Federal Government all assistance. In the days after the calamity, forensic pathologists, Western Australian police and Federal Police officers arrived on Christmas Island to identify victims.

On December 19, a “dignified, respectful” memorial service was organised by immigration officials and Islamic leaders at the island’s Phosphate Hill for the known victims of the disaster: 13 men, nine women, four children and four babies. It was the first ceremony of many. The survivors attended, still traumatised by the shipwreck and the grisly

task of identifying their dead fellow asylum seekers. Said Immigration Department spokesman Peter Richards, “It is a very difficult time for the survivors but also for other people within the detention facilities. There are a number we’ve identified that have relatives among the deceased... The issues around asylum and what will happen with the survivors, including the orphans, is something that it is too early to speculate on.” Federal Immigration Minister Bowen announced that counselling was being offered to asylum seekers in the Christmas Island facilities.

According to the Federal Government, the boat was the 126th to arrive in Australia in 2010, and some 2,971 asylum seekers were being housed at the Christmas Island Detention Centre. (The Opposition took issue with figures, putting the numbers at 197 vessels and 5,400 detainees respectively.)

Prime Minister Julia Gillard insisted that most Australians acknowledged the need to be sympathetic to the plight of those who put their lives at risk to start a new life in Australia and called for a non-partisan political approach to the problem of increased numbers of creaky and dangerous vessels crammed to bursting with asylum seekers leaving trouble spots at the instigation of people smugglers and setting out for Australia. “This has been a tragic event,” she said, “and it will be some time before there is a full picture of what has happened. The Government’s focus and absolute priority is on rescue, recovery and treatment of the injured.” Opposition Leader Tony Abbott spoke for many Australians angry at the hundreds of fatalities among asylum seekers – In April 2009 five Afghan refugees died when their boat blew up; in November that year 12 Sri Lankans perished when their boat sank near Cocos Island; in May 2010 five Sri Lankan asylum seekers drowned; in October 2001, 353 asylum seekers perished when their vessel, the SIEV X, went down off Indonesia; and other boats have disappeared in heavy seas with the loss of all on board, numbers that cannot be known. Abbott blamed the Government’s relaxation of the restrictions implemented by the previous Liberal Government. He pressed for a return to temporary protection visas, offshore processing at the Nauru Detention Centre and the option of turning boats around and sending them back to their country of origin if it was safe to do so. “In the last five years of the Howard Government’s life, we had three boats [arriving in Australia] a year, not three boats a week. Obviously there is far less capacity for tragedy if there are far fewer boats and far fewer people coming in them.”

When the decrepit vessel came to grief on the rocks at Christmas Island, the fate of asylum seekers coming to Australia had long been a pressing and controversial political issue. Vessels transporting asylum seekers began arriving on Christmas Island in the late 1980s, where the refugees were processed and detained before either being returned to their homeland or allowed to assimilate into Australian society. The island was the site of the notorious Tampa controversy in which the Howard Liberal Government refused to allow the Norwegian ship MV *Tampa* to unload its human cargo of 438 asylum seekers. The government’s stand polarised opinion and laid the foundations for the fierce debate that ensues over the fate of asylum seekers who make it to Australian shores to this day.

There was another explosive incident when it was claimed on October 6, 2001, by Federal Liberal Government ministers that after a boat, which was believed to be operated by people smugglers, was intercepted by HMAS *Adelaide* 190 kilometres north of Christmas Island, asylum seekers on board had hurled their children into the ocean in protest at being turned away. It was theorised that the conservative, anti-asylum seeker politicians were trying to galvanise public opinion against the arrival of refugees. The claim was later proven false.

In another step to curb the arrival in Australia of asylum seekers, and, consequently, the burgeoning wealth of people smugglers who took payment from desperate refugees and herded them onto leaky boats navigated by incompetent seamen, the Howard Government passed legislation excising Christmas Island from Australia's migration zone, so preventing asylum seekers from automatically applying to the Australian government for refugee status. After being housed, treated and returned to health on Christmas Island in \$400 million, 800-bed detention facilities there, the Royal Australian Navy would repatriate asylum seekers arriving on local shores to Nauru, Manus island in Papua New Guinea for processing and for decisions to be made on their future. The new Rudd Government, on ousting the Liberals from power in 2007, opened discussions to deregister the Manus Island and Nauru centres and have all processing done at Christmas Island. The Gillard Government remains allied to this decision.

The tragedy of December 15, 2010, continues to incite emotions. But, politics put aside, what should never be forgotten, say those who witnessed the terrible events unfold, is the heroism of the rescuers. Said harbour master Dave Robertson, "The Navy and Customs acted swiftly and heroically in manoeuvring their inflatable boats in dangerous conditions. What they did to save that many people in those conditions was extraordinary. Those coxmen are heroes."

An internal Australian Customs and Border Protection Command report into the tragedy was made public on January 23, 2011. It found that the Command had no way of knowing when SIEV 221 sailed from Indonesia or when it would arrive at Christmas Island. The report also stated that Customs and Border Protection personnel had acted appropriately throughout the disaster, and deserved recognition for their deeds. "In putting their own lives at risk in extremely dangerous circumstances to rescue 41 people from the sea, the crews of HMAS *Pirie* and ACV *Triton* deserve our highest praise," said CEO Michael Carmody. "The material available to me has indicated that all persons involved have acted in accordance with policies, processes and procedures relevant to the exercise of their duties and, where there was not a specific policy, process or procedure in place due to the unprecedented nature of this tragic event, have acted appropriately and exercised good judgment."

The report recommended that, to avert further disasters, a land-based radar surveillance system be trialled and that extra safety and rescue equipment, such as life jackets which can be "fired" toward people in the sea some distance away, be stored at

strategic locations. Radio equipment programmed to the same band-width would be installed at points around Christmas Island so those in trouble can communicate with the Command. The Australian Federal Police and the Department of Regional Australia would upgrade their Christmas Island ships.

While Prime Minister Gillard commended the actions of the Customs and Border Protection Command and its recommendations, Federal Attorney-General Robert McClelland said the review was no substitute for a more thorough inquiry being conducted by the West Australian coroner, and investigations by the Australian Federal Police and WA police. The results of those inquiries have not been released at time of going to press.

Attorney-General McClelland defended the Government's inability to track SIEV 221's voyage. "Intelligence is an imprecise science. All I can say is our agencies do their best. They are well resourced to do it, but given the clandestine nature of these criminal activities, it is difficult."

On the heels of the Command's report, three Indonesian fishermen among the survivors of SIEV 221 were arrested and charged with people smuggling. The trio, aged 22, 32 and 60, were charged with one count each of facilitating the bringing to Australia of a group of five or more persons, contrary to section 233C of the Migration Act 1958. At the same time, Indonesian police arrested Hayden Khani, 40, amid claims that he was the mastermind of the ill-fated voyage. His trial continues.

THE QUEENSLAND FLOODS

December 2011 and January 2011

The great flood of 2010-11 was a disaster of Biblical proportions. The result of more than 40 days and 40 nights of torrential rain which burst the banks of rivers and proved too much for dams, it turned three quarters of Queensland into a vast and deadly lake.

In its history, Queensland has suffered horrific bush fires, droughts, floods and cyclones. It's intrinsic to the laconic Queensland spirit to mull over past disasters and argue, perhaps on the porch over a beer, just which was the biggest and baddest disaster, then marvel at the way the hardy locals survived and prevailed. These days, at least as far as floods are concerned, and despite the great floods of 1893 and 1974, there can be no further argument. The worst floods to befall Queensland were those that inundated central and southern Queensland in December 2010 and January 2011. The floods were caused when the torrential rains of Tropical Cyclone Tasha coincided and combined with a La Nina event. As many as 35 people died and at press time nine are still missing, most likely dead. Tens of thousands of people were evacuated from their homes. Damages were estimated at more than \$30 billion.

People and livestock, homes, cars, boats, trains, buses, trucks and bridges were simply swept away in the rush of brown water that reminded many of a monstrous chocolate milkshake. Up to 400 roads, including major highways, were rendered impassable, mines were flooded, railways closed, and towns on the northern coast were infested with snakes and crocodiles. At the flooding's height, three quarters of the state – including the cities and towns of Brisbane, Ipswich, Toowoomba, Rockhampton, Emerald, Bundaberg and Dalby – was declared a disaster zone, as the Brisbane, Fitzroy, Burnett, Ballone, Condamine and Mary Rivers and the dams along them broke their banks and burst or were opened to release the gathering water. Queenslanders took the advice of Police Commissioner Bob Atkinson when he told them, "We ask people not to panic. Stay calm and act wisely, and if you're in doubt, evacuate. Don't take any unnecessary risks."

The rains fell and fell... and the towns went under. In December, Chinchilla and Condamine were drowned. The residents of Theodore – numbering more than a thousand – were air-lifted by helicopter, many plucked by helicopter from the roof of their homes, to safety at evacuation centres when the Fitzroy River broke. On December 29, 1,200 Emerald residents were evacuated when the Nogoia River rose and peaked at a record 15.36 metres. Rockhampton knew what was coming and precautions were taken, nevertheless by early January the town was underwater. The Burnett River flooded Bundaberg; 300 homes were evacuated. Chinchilla, Jericho and Dalby and Warwick went under and were isolated when the surrounding roads were cut off. The Condamine River reached a record high of 14.25 metres on December 30, and the town of Condamine was consequently evacuated.

Television cameras captured James Perry, his wife Jenny Thorncraft and 9-year-old son Teddy perched on their car waving for help as the waters swirled around them. Mother and son were rescued by a helicopter which lowered a winch to them. The rescuers could not save James who was swept away.

After 160 millimetres of rain teemed down on January 9 and 10, flash floods struck Toowoomba. The two creeks – East and West Creeks – that course through the centre of Toowoomba and

converge to the north of the CBD smashed their banks at 2PM on January 10 and a 3 metre wall of water rushed through the streets of the city, sweeping cars with it down James, Kitchener, Margaret and Chalk Streets at a rampaging velocity that destroyed buildings, trees and other vehicles. Furniture, refrigerators, television sets and other items were swept from inundated stores and plunged down the streets. Carcasses of drowned animals cruised down the waterway. A house on the corner of Russell and Victoria Streets was washed off its foundations and fell in a crumpled heap with a crack like thunder.

The flash flood claimed the lives of Donna Rice and her 13-year-old son Jordan, who died when their vehicle was swept away. Jordan and Donna Rice were tied with a rope to the roof of their car in Toowoomba's main street in a bid to thwart the flood waters from sweeping them away. Truck driver Warren McErlean came to rescue the boy. Jordan, who could not swim and was terrified of the water, nonetheless beseeched the truckie to first save his younger brother Blake, 10, which McErlean did. By the time he returned to rescue Jordan, he and his mother had been washed to their doom. Days later, when the details of their deaths became known, Jordan would come to epitomise the bravery and selflessness of Queenslanders in the floods.

From 2.30PM on January 10 flash floods roared into nearby Grantham, Helidon, Withcott and Murphys Creek. The bodies of Sandy and Steve Matthews, parents of four children, were recovered near their home at Murphy's Bluff, near Toowoomba. The Matthews had assisted their family to evacuate the home when Sandy Matthews was trapped in the kitchen by a refrigerator that fell and blocked the door. Steve Matthews returned to help his wife, but as he was doing so a wall collapsed upon them and they were washed away.

In Grantham, around 30 kilometres due east of Toowoomba, the bodies of nine townsfolk were recovered and some 66 were reported as missing. Queensland Premier Anna Bligh said that Grantham had been swamped and destroyed by an "inland tsunami."

Amid the tragedy, there was at least one happy ending at Grantham. After searching for two days for his wife Natalie and their children without success, local man Norrie Blume was certain they had died. When Natalie finally contacted her husband – she had been and the kids had been rescued by police from the roiling waters and taken to Helidon, but was unable to tell Norrie because there was no telephone communication – he collapsed with relief. "I'm not going to lie – I blubbered and blubbered. There is no way to describe the relief," Norrie told a reporter. He then reflected on his ruined town: "Grantham is like a bomb site, completely destroyed. I keep seeing house after house smashed up and thrown all over the place."

Grantham, too, was the scene of extraordinary efforts by Ray Van Dijk and Daniel Moore to save their neighbours in a craft that resembled an Indian canoe and which cost Van Dijk a bargain \$200 at a roadside stall. The pair paddled and pushed their boat in the chest-high water in the dark, the rain falling heavily all the while, calling out, "Is anybody there?" and plucking those who called for help from the waters. Van Dijk and Moore saved dozens of people, depositing many of them on the increasingly congested roof of Van Dijk's submerged house. By the time they had finished there was a crowd clustered high, if not dry. Said Moore when lauded for his and his friend's bravery, "We're not special. We just did what had to be done."

In Toowoomba, traumatised and terrified residents told their stories to the converging media, including the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* and the Sydney *Daily Telegraph*:

“... You could see the water rushing at speed. It came up quickly and covered the roundabout,” reported bank worker Judith Grauer. “Then it started moving toward a row of parked cars along the street. The cars started to buckle under the stress. The water was absolutely tearing through the park, ripping out trees. Some people tried to move their cars but others just watched as the water washed them away... I’ve never seen anything like it.”

And Toowoomba local Penny Cowell, “I saw tyres, wheelie bins, a water tank, a shipping container, and a pedestrian footbridge swept away. One car kept getting smashed against a power pole, eventually ripping off the back bumper. A young woman was sitting inside that car, but there was no way anyone could have got close enough to her to get her out of it.”

A regional councillor in Grantham, Peter Friend, told reporters from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and AAP, “There were people hanging onto the gutters of their houses, caught in trees, and an entire house that crashed over the railway line... The pub was destroyed. It was unbelievable... you just can’t comprehend it until you’re in the middle of it. [When Lockyer Creek broke its banks, the water] came straight down the highway in a big ball about 2 or 3 metres high and 2 kilometres wide. It took 15 minutes from when I saw it on the horizon to when it came roaring past. You could hear it. It had all sorts of debris – trees, wood, animals, parts of people’s houses, sheds... Houses were washed off their stumps.” People and wildlife dashed to what they hoped would prove to be higher, safer, ground.

At Gatton, Lockyer Creek rose to 18.92 metres, the highest level in recorded history.

Before the deluge, Queensland Labor Premier Anna Bligh was unpopular with the electorate and seemed certain to suffer a landslide defeat at the next election. But her tirelessness, cool aplomb and knowledge of her state as she travelled the state, dispensing compassion and sound advice, speaking plainly without overblown rhetoric or offering false hope, shedding some tears along the way when she surveyed the damage, changed all that. She gave Queenslanders an inspiring, Churchillian performance in Queensland’s darkest hour. The Premier, in rising to the occasion, found her way into the hearts of even staunch political opponents. In Grantham, where people had died and some 60-odd folk were missing and homeless people were sleeping on their rooftops and in school halls, she said, “Right now, we have every possible available resource deployed in this region to search for those people who we know are missing. This is going to be, I think, a very grim day, particularly for the people in this region, and a desperate hour here in Queensland.” Later, she declared, “We have a grim and desperate situation. It might be breaking our hearts, but it will not break our will.” And again, this time with her voice cracking with emotion, “As we weep for what we have lost, and as we grieve for family and friends and we confront the challenge that is before us, I want us to remember who we are,” she said. “We are Queenslanders. We are the people they breed tough north of the border. We’re the ones that knock down and we get up again.”

Teeming, ceaseless rain flooded the Lockyer Valley and when the deluge linked with the torrents that continued to fall over south-east Queensland, Brisbane found itself in terrible danger. The waters rushed into the already swollen-to-bursting Brisbane River and into the catchment of the Wivenhoe Dam, ironically constructed to stop a repeat of the devastation wrought by the 1974 floods. Authorities had to release water from the dam so it would not overflow, or burst with the pressure of the water it was retaining. The overflow, supplemented by enormous amounts of uncontrolled water from the Bremer River and Lockyer Creek, headed down the Brisbane River towards Brisbane which, to make matters even worse, was due for a king tide.

Brisbane CBD and suburbs, especially Fortitude Valley, St Lucia, Graceville, Rockville, New Farm and West End, Bellbowrie, Moggill, Karana Downs and Pullenvale, were inundated on January 12, when the Brisbane River, which simply could not cope with the onrush of water, broke its banks. Said Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman as the torrent approached, “Today is very significant, tomorrow is bad, Thursday is going to be devastating... Who knows what happens then on Friday.” He was right to be deeply concerned.

There were incredible sights as the raging waters turned the modern city with its wide thoroughfares, historic buildings, picturesque parks, shopping precincts and office towers into a wet and wild Waterworld. On the 13th, the Brisbane River hit its highest level of 4.46 metres. Around 20,000 homes and businesses were inundated. Some 9000 homes and businesses were flooded. Millions of dollars worth of leisure and fishing boats were picked up by the floods and many were smashed into splinters on the river banks. The Brisbane Riverwalk, a floating walkway linking the city with nearby suburbs was smashed by the waters, and a 310 metre section breaking off and floating at 12 knots down the river. It would have crashed into the structural supports of the Storey Bridge, certainly badly damaging it, possibly bringing it down, were it not for the brave efforts of tugboat captain Doug Hislop and fellow skipper Peter Fenton who piloted their tugs to manoeuvre the monster chunk of debris away from the bridge. Suncorp Stadium, home ground of the Brisbane Broncos rugby league team, was awash. On the field the water was 2 metres deep, rising as high as the fourth row of seats, and leading some to wonder if the ground would now be better suited to water polo or butterfly swimming.

Aside from Grantham, the working class city of Ipswich, 30 km west of Brisbane, was worst hit. There the Bremer River rose to an incredible 19.4 metres. Residential streets and the business district were metres underwater. A third of the city was submerged. Bull sharks swam through the streets of the Ipswich suburbs of Gailes and Goodna.

Gympie was bisected by the flood waters from the Mary River – normally around 20 metres wide it neared 600 metres in breadth in some sections – with scores of homes and shops underwater as the water rose to 1.5 metres in the central parts of town. Fish were seen swimming in the viscous and murky water that rose to a metre in the front bar of the Royal Hotel.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard addressed those besieged by the floods. “There are people who are frightened, people desperately waiting for news of their loved ones. My sympathies are with you.” As were those of Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, who assured the suffering that “the prayers and thoughts of all Australians will be with the families of those who have died and those who are missing.” Donations from the public and corporations literally flooded in from all around Australia and overseas to the Premier’s Disaster Relief Appeal (which would raise well over \$55 million) and to the St Vincent de Paul Flood Appeal, the Red Cross Disaster Relief and Recovery appeal and the Salvation Army.

English cricket champion Kevin Pietersen took time out from helping his teammates wallop the Aussies in the Ashes series to auction his shirt and bat, all proceeds to go to flood victims. For good measure, the man Australian crowds love to hate threw in two tickets to the Australia-England one day international to be played in Perth on February 6, flights from anywhere in the world to the highest bidder and two nights luxury accommodation. Other sports stars, such as Socceroo Tim Cahill who offered a “Tim Cahill Experience” to the winning bidder, and musicians played and donated the money they earned to the sodden and needy.

The Nine Network broadcast the *Flood Relief Appeal: Australia Unites* telethon which raised more than \$10 million, at the Twenty20 cricket match between Australia and England on January 12 the players donated their match payments and the crowd kicked in \$28,450, throwing their coins, notes and cheques into buckets and blankets carried around the ground by the cricketers. There was a *Rally for Relief* tennis match at Melbourne's Rod Laver Arena attended by 15,000 who came to see Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Lleyton Hewitt, Novak Djokovic and Andy Roddick play for the cause. And on January 27, Parramatta Stadium in western Sydney was packed for the *Legends of Origin* rugby league match in which champions of yesteryear defied age, burgeoning weight, aching joints and brittle bones to strap on their boots one more time for a State of Origin game. The match, which was played with no quarter asked or offered, raised \$380,000 for the flood victims.

On January 19, Jordan and Donna Rice were laid to rest in the one grave in matching white coffins, the son's resting on top of the mother's to signify that he was safe in his mother's keeping. The nation joined their family and friends in farewelling the little hero and his mother. Cat Stevens's "Father and Son" and Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven" were played as the coffins were lowered. In his eulogy, Jordan's brother Chris, 22, spoke to Jordan, whose nickname was "Weedsy," "You were so shy, always hanging off Mum. You were petrified of water, heights and even the dark. How wrong was I. Here you go losing your life from one of your biggest fears to save your little brother. You made me so proud. What you did took heart, courage and love. You're my little hero. I love you, Weedsy. You will always be missed, mate, but I take comfort in the fact that you've got Mum there with you, taking care of you." There was scarcely a dry eye at the service, or in the land, after Chris spoke. Then, Jordan and Donna's father and husband John Tyson stepped up. "The fire in my heart will continue to burn until my time comes to join them. God speed, my little angels."

When the waters receded, leaving debris, mud, broken lives and shattered dreams in their wake, Premier Bligh remained indomitable. "The task ahead of us is of post-war proportions," she said, as tradespeople, demolition and construction workers from Queensland and Australia-wide prepared to roll up their sleeves. "That is how we are seeing it and that is the sort of steely determination that it will require." Amid the camaraderie and volunteerism (some 55,000 volunteers with buckets, shovels, brooms and gumboots dubbed the Army of Angels pitched in to mop up), there was a discordant note when some insurance companies refused to pay out on policies, claiming that certain people were covered for damage caused by rain but not by rivers breaking their banks. The vast mop-up and rebuild would be conducted in tandem with a Judicial Inquiry which would investigate the floods and probe how early warning of the impending disaster in such towns as Grantham were not acted upon.

At time of writing the drying out and the reconstruction of Queensland, which was expected to account for much of any hoped-for 2013 Federal Government Budget surplus, was gathering pace. The Queensland Reconstruction Authority would decide whether – and if so, which – suburbs should be rebuilt and flood-proofed to avert such disasters in future.

