

Abstract

Catastrophes present leaders with complex and significant challenges that they have not previously experienced nor have had time to deeply analyse. Leaders must collaborate and demonstrate agility. To develop such leadership skills, it is useful to reflect on the experiences of people who have faced catastrophe before. This paper examines the leadership of Major General Alan Stretton AO, CBE in the aftermath of Cyclone Tracy in 1974. Alan Stretton's personal accounts and archival interviews with other leaders were reviewed as source material. These showed that he demonstrated decisiveness and courage and 'over-responded' if necessary. He worked collaboratively with community leaders and acted in a confident, empathetic and reassuring manner. He led with agility and with a focus on an overarching plan. He prioritised communication with the community and negotiated political challenges. Lessons from this experience can help to guide leaders who may be called on to lead during times of future disaster events.

Leading through crisis: the leadership experience of Major General Alan Stretton

Peer Reviewed

Andrew Gissing^{1,2,3}

1. Risk Frontiers, Sydney, New South Wales.
2. Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales.
3. Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne, Victoria.

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Introduction

Disasters pose unique challenges to leaders. t'Hart (2014, p.172) describes the decision-making pressures:

Leaders need to take highly consequential decisions in a context in which they can't get the experts to study it for a few months. They have to act much faster than governments normally act. And often that acting involves doing quite unpleasant things, or disappointing a lot of people, or making tough decisions about the allocation of scarce resources.

To identify these pressures, a review of literature in respect of emergency management was conducted to examine the experiences of Major General Alan Stretton in directing the initial response to Cyclone Tracy landfall in Darwin in 1974. This case study outlines decision-making in extremis.

Literature review

Comfort and Kapucu (2006) argue that successful management of catastrophe requires an ability to rapidly assess and adapt and to use open-minded decision-making, rather than relying on bureaucratic systems and procedures. Good management must allow for innovation, collaboration, trusting relationships and the suspension of rules, where necessary (Kapucu & Van Wart 2006). In Australia, and across the globe, few emergency managers will have had experience of facing a truly catastrophic disaster. Yet, emergency managers rely on their previous experience and training and may fail to adapt their methods of managing (Comfort & Kapucu 2006).

Gissing (2016) indicates that ways of responding to emergencies that routinely work for business-as-usual events will be quickly overwhelmed and rendered ineffective during catastrophic events. Community members often take on roles as first-responders and, commonly, groups like service

provider personnel, media and volunteers will converge into the affected area. Often the success of the response is reliant on the capacities already present in communities (Tierney 1993).

No single organisation is capable of responding to all aspects of a catastrophe. Boin & Bynander (2015) state that there is a need to integrate and coordinate operations of large numbers of disparate organisations. A collaborative model of interacting organisations may be able to adapt more appropriately to threats than individual organisations acting alone (Comfort & Kapucu 2006, Waugh & Streib 2006). Integration also needs to happen quickly, as contemporaneous and conflicting demands for services add further pressures (Comfort & Kapucu 2006).

However, efficient cooperation between organisations cannot always be guaranteed. In 1919, during the Spanish Flu pandemic, the Australian experience was that jurisdictions cooperated on border security and quarantine, but, following disputes, cooperation was abandoned with each state imposing its own policies (Curson & McCracken 2006).

It is argued that plans should allow for decentralised decision-making (Kapucu & Van Wart 2006, Boin & McConnell 2007) that allows for flexible, improvised and networked responses that the centralisation of decision-making inhibits (Boin & t'Hart 2010, Tierney 1993). Decentralised models recognise emergent group behaviours and local response capacity. Thus, preparedness is built on existing social structures and support networks (Dynes 1990, Howitt & Leonard 2006). According to these authors, excessive reliance on rigid, centralised and top-down decision-making in times of disaster response is liable to be fraught as centralised decision-makers are unlikely to hold sufficient knowledge that is available at the local level. This is especially so in the early phases when information maybe scare or unreliable (Kapucu & Van Wart 2006, Boin & t'Hart 2010). Leaders may be unavailable or uncontactable (Comfort & Kapucu 2006) and decision-makers may become overwhelmed by competing priorities and the complexity of the event.

There is tremendous challenge in building leadership skills and experience in the context of catastrophic events. Therefore, reflection on how previous leaders have coped when faced with complex and overwhelming circumstances is helpful (Ellis & MacCarter 2016, Stack 2017). Such reflection can assist emergency managers to move beyond their previous experiences and habits (Stack 2017). This is a critical component of lessons management. With this in mind, we re-examine the challenges, leadership and organising methods adopted in the immediate response to Cyclone Tracy in 1974. This paper includes discussion of leadership and strategic elements that were demonstrated.

Methods

This research used autobiographical accounts from Major General Alan Stretton to construct the events he was involved in following the landfall of Cyclone Tracy; primarily his book, *The Furious Days* (Stretton 1976). Other descriptions of the event were sourced from published literature and archival material to cross reference facts and add to the case study. Oral history

transcripts from the Northern Territory Library and Archives were accessed about other individuals involved in the immediate relief efforts.

Cyclone Tracy, 1974

Cyclone Tracy, arguably one of Australia's most severe and challenging natural hazard events, destroyed the Northern Territory capital of Darwin on Christmas day in 1974. The cyclone was first observed on 20 December 1974 and, at times, seemed unlikely to reach Darwin. However, on Christmas eve, the cyclone shifted course directly for Darwin and struck just after midnight on Christmas day (Vardanega 1984). Sixty-five people were killed and 140 were admitted to hospital with injuries (Stretton 1975b).

Darwin is a remote city located at the top of the Northern Territory. In 1974, the Northern Territory was administered by a commonwealth department and was under direct legislative control of the Australian Government (McNamara 2012). There was no territory-level bureaucracy that could have assumed control as though the disaster had occurred in a different jurisdiction (Britton & Wettenhal 1990) and disaster management arrangements were being developed (Vardanega 1984). Darwin's population was approximately 45,000 people and few had previously experienced a cyclone.

At that time, Alan Stretton was the head of a newly formed National Disaster Organisation (the equivalent of today's Emergency Management Australia). He had wide military experience having served in World War II, Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam. He was described by a Darwin local as being an imposing figure, being physically tall and having an 'air' about him (Wilson 1979).

The National Disaster Organisation was formed in August 1974 with only a small staff of 15 (Stretton 1975a) and had little experience dealing with large-scale disasters (Britton & Wettenhal 1990) and was still exploring its mandate (Emergency Management Australia 2005). Cyclone Tracy was the organisation's 'baptism of fire' (Jones 2019). The organisation's role was to coordinate national efforts with other state-based and voluntary agencies during major natural disasters or other civil emergencies (Jones 2019). The National Emergency Operations Centre was opened and exercised for the first time in October 1974 (Jones 2010).

Initial decision-making

Warnings of Cyclone Tracy issued on 24 December by the Bureau of Meteorology warned that the cyclone was imminent and advised residents about preparedness measures to be taken. Given it was Christmas eve, many families were attending religious ceremonies or family events. At this time, the National Disaster Organisation was also providing support to the NSW Government that was fighting large-scale bushfires occurring in western parts of NSW (Thorogood 1990, Stretton 1975b).

Cyclone Tracy struck Darwin in the early hours of Christmas day with wind gusts estimated at 250 km/hour. In the hours following, communication between Darwin and the outside

world was intermittent. Initial reports were that 90% of the city and suburbs had been destroyed.

Alan Stretton was advised of the disaster at 6:20 am at his home in Canberra (Stretton 1975b). The National Disaster Organisation duty officer phoned him to relay a message from the Bureau of Meteorology Perth office that Darwin had been hit. No further details were known at the time. As detailed by Stretton (1975b), his immediate thoughts were about what might have taken place during the evening and what still might be unfolding. His questions included: were there casualties? If so, how many? What was the damage? Could local emergency services cope? Was the airfield serviceable? What was he supposed to do?

His initial decision was to seek further information about reports from Darwin. He called the police station in Darwin and was connected even though most communications were hampered. He gained a small amount of information about damage to the police station and hospital before his phone call dropped out. Stretton and his staff continued to try to contact Darwin but it was not until midday that direct communications were successful (Stretton 1975b, Vardanega 1984). Even then, situational awareness was poor and some information was conflicting, for example, some reports described immense impacts while, initially, media reports indicated no casualties.

Despite this uncertainty, Stretton immediately initiated actions to commence a large-scale relief effort. He activated the National Emergency Operations Centre, ordered aircraft to be ready and requested medical supplies, stretchers, cooking equipment and food. Later in the day, he made arrangements for the Australian Navy fleet to assist and head to Darwin. He communicated with internal and external groups, including staff from his team and sections within the Department of Defence to pass on information and also seek information.

Stretton acted decisively and in a proactive fashion in an environment of huge uncertainty. He did not hesitate. He showed a willingness to over-respond, in recognition that a proactive response was vital to achieving on-the-ground initiative and effect in Darwin. Stretton reflected on this decision-making, saying:

Certainly, the failure of communications from a number of different agencies confirmed that the damage was widespread and extensive, but wouldn't it have been prudent to wait until communications had been re-established and a proper damage assessment had been received? If the early reports were exaggerated, as often they are in the early stages of a disaster, I had over-reacted and had spoilt Christmas Day for hundreds of people who had been called back from leave. But if my assessment was right and Cyclone Tracy had caused a major disaster, I had probably saved the best part of a day in valuable time and more importantly, saved valuable lives. (Stretton 1976, p.27)

He also had to brief politicians. This was initially problematic and wasted precious time as the then Prime Minister was on

leave and Stretton did not have the private contact details of the Deputy Prime Minister. Stretton could only communicate with his own minister, the Minister for Defence, through a private secretary. Initially he had no ministerial backing for the decisions he was making, although this was granted several hours later. It was decided that Stretton would travel to Darwin to gain a better appreciation of the scale of the disaster. It is only on the flight to Darwin that Stretton learnt of the government's plans to place him in charge. It was not the responsibility that he had originally foreseen, especially as he did not have a lot of prior knowledge of Darwin. He recognised that he had no legislated mandate to take control.

Arrival in Darwin

Stretton arrived in darkness and rain at 10:20 pm. He travelled into Darwin to find the Police Commissioner and the Secretary of the Northern Territory. On his trip through what was described as the 'unrecognisable city' (Thorogood 1990), he again asked himself: where were all the people? Where to start? How to get water and food distributed to so many? How many casualties were there?

He considered whether the best way to deal with the situation would be to call in the Australian Army but then rejected this idea. He knew that every additional person brought into Darwin would be another mouth to feed and it would take several days until the armed forces could be mobilised and arrive on-mass.

Stretton arrived at the police station to find parts of it already turned into a temporary mortuary and many shocked and crying people gathering. Many of the officers on duty had been badly affected by the cyclone. From his discussions with the Police Commissioner and the Secretary of the Department of the Northern Territory, Stretton pieced together that most people were probably homeless, some had moved to schools seeking shelter, the hospital was full, all essential services and utilities were down and a meeting of local officials had occurred. There had been some progress throughout the day in locating bodies and attending to injured people, but much work was still to be done (McLaren 1979).

There is some debate as to who made the decision to evacuate but there was an agreement that a major evacuation was required (Thorogood 1990, Cunningham 2014, McHenry 1979), although its extent would need to be evaluated in daylight after further reconnaissance. The evacuation decision received criticism in later years (Britton & Wettenhall 1990) but senior officials defended the decision (McLaren 1979, McHenry 1979).

Stretton's main concern was the shock felt within the community. He decided that Darwin would need to be restored by the local community using local capabilities (Thorogood 1990). After the initial meeting at the police station, he reflected:

I thought if I allowed the people of Darwin to remain in the rubble for several days that serious morale problems would develop. The whole city had to be given the challenge. I decided, therefore that if the 45,000 people of Darwin were to be saved, they would have to do it

themselves. This would give them a challenge worth fighting for. If troops were called in, I felt the population would remain where it was, despondent, with little hope for the future, and that this would lead to a drop in morale with resultant health and administrative problems that could lead to further loss of life. My decision was that the Armed Forces would be confined to a supporting role by helping with the fly-in and provision of essential stores and a few key personnel, but that responsibility for the organisation and handling of the enormous local problems would rest with the people of Darwin, under my leadership. (Stretton 1975b, p.49)

Stretton establishes control and rallies the community

At 9:00am the next morning, a day after landfall, Stretton attended his first coordinating conference. His first task was to gain the acceptance and confidence of local officials. This was aided by strong support given by local senior Australian Government bureaucrats who chaired this initial meeting (Thorogood 1990). Stretton also repeated that his position was that of ‘supreme commander’ reporting directly to the Prime Minister. He later claimed that some people only followed his instructions because they thought such powers were legitimate (Truth Staff Reporter 1975).

Stretton presented himself not as a Major General in military uniform but an experienced leader, dressed in casual clothing, looking similar to many others on the committee. He announced that he did not intend to take over from local authorities and would stay only until satisfied that a local coordination structure was functioning (Thorogood 1990). At this first meeting, a coordinating structure of different committees was expanded using a strengths-based approach. For example, Stretton understood that people most likely in need of evacuation were at local schools and that schools had become important coordination points. Based on this, the Education Department was appointed to lead the evacuation committee.

The management style used was collaborative, not one of command-and-control. Decision-making was described as a ‘consensus of opinion’ (McLaren 1979). Stretton was said to have been clear and concise and knew what he wanted (Wilson 1979). The Australian Broadcasting Commission manager described that Stretton acted with great respect and was never shy to ask questions (Sanders 1979). Coordinating conferences were depicted as:

The meetings never went long enough for there to be minutes. They were very good meetings; they were functional meetings; people came in – few could sit because there wasn’t room – we simply quickly took reports (Thorogood 1990, p.16).

Initial actions commenced for the evacuation. Priorities were established and sick and injured people and pregnant women

were evacuated first. Receiving centres were established in other capital cities in Australia. Decisions were also required regarding the donation of goods and how to respond to international offers for assistance.

The local radio broadcast capability had been damaged and Stretton put a high priority on re-establishing communications. He stated:

If morale was to be restored, it was imperative that the population be kept informed as to the measures being taken (Stretton 1976, p.56).

Media conferences were held twice a day. Stretton (Stretton 1976, p.91) reflected on his initial advice to media when establishing the rules of engagement:

For my part I would give them an undertaking that I would keep them informed of events as they happened; I would not conceal anything from them and I would always be available to give them an honest answer to any rumour they might pick up.

With the consent of the relevant Australian Government ministers, normal regulations and purchasing procedures were suspended, to streamline the buying and delivery of resources (Stretton 1975b).

The politics

All disasters have a political interface and Stretton had to manage this as well as the relief operations. This was particularly important given that his role had no legal standing. He was very much reliant on the backing of the then acting Prime Minister. On occasions, Stretton unknowingly came between political opponents, for example, the Minister for Defence and the acting Prime Minister.

Political interference annoyed him. He described an angry exchange with a visiting Queensland Senator whom Stretton threatened to remove from Darwin. Various cabinet ministers were travelling to Darwin and Stretton hoped they would not issue conflicting directions to that of their departments. He stated:

They had no idea of the local situation and being ministers, some of them acted characteristically by starting to give instructions that ran contrary to what I was trying to achieve. (Stretton 1976, p.102)

Stretton raised the issue of political interference with the then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam when he visited Darwin to view the damage:

I informed him that I was concerned because I found it necessary to countermand the orders of some of his Ministers. His reply was sympathetic. With a knowing smile, he said ‘Don’t worry Alan, you have my support – I have to work with them all the time’. (Stretton 1976, p.125)

However, Stretton did, opportunistically, take advantage of the presence of cabinet ministers by deliberately pressing them for Australian Government commitment regarding the reluctance of families to leave Darwin unless their return airfares were government-funded as well.

Stretton placed significant focus on keeping influential politicians in the loop. At the local level, Stretton worked with local political leaders to ensure they presented a consistent message to the community. He developed an excellent relationship with the acting Prime Minister and was said to report to him several times a day (Thorogood 1990). The irony was that cabinet ministers, if providing directions, were acting within their legal authority whereas Stretton did not have that authority. The political difficulties could be blamed somewhat on the political leadership for not establishing arrangements with relevant ministers and managing their movements (Robertson 1999).

Politics also existed between Stretton and the armed forces (Robertson 1999). The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Base Commander refused Stretton's orders stating that he would only 'seek to cooperate'. On one occasion, the Commander refused to deploy RAAF personnel to erect tents, stating that his staff were required to establish the functioning of the airfield and that local community members could set-up tents. However, it was later reported that local military personnel were disappointed that their services were not given a greater role (Hitchins 1979, Robertson 1999).

A test of personal resilience

Stretton's leadership was not without test to his own personal resilience. There were very long days with little rest, little food and a lot of stress. His staff officer described the circumstances:

We were tired, very, very tired, because we had been on the go since – in Alan Stretton's case – the wee hours of Christmas day; less so for me. But we'd had a very long flight, a lot of stress, going into the unknown (Thorogood 1990, p.12).

Stretton received an injury to his buttocks on the first night when he sat on shards of glass and the car he travelled in got a puncture after running over glass. The same night, he slept for only a few hours on the uncomfortable floor of a damaged RAAF building (Thorogood 1990). At one point, Stretton broke his glasses.

The stress levels were such that Stretton shed tears during several media interviews (Cunningham 2014, Robertson 1999) and was referred to as the 'weeping dictator' (Truth Staff Reporter 1975). These displays of emotion received criticism from the media, the military and local officials (Truth Staff Reporter 1975). At the time of his departure, the RAAF Commander described Stretton as being under great emotional stress. He considered Stretton was a man of compassion and the circumstances of Darwin and its population distressed him (Hitchins 1979). Stretton claimed that he needed to show compassion (Robertson 1999).

Stretton admitted that he had personal doubts but that he needed to display confidence to maintain morale. He feared that government politicians in Canberra would see him as weak and remove him. His staff officer noted that Stretton was harassed by senior officers and public servants who may have been jealous of the successful profile Stretton was developing (Thorogood 1990).

Stretton admitted to and regretted one significant action. He attempted to advocate on behalf of a man who was convicted of an offence shortly after the cyclone. The media reported that Stretton stormed the courthouse as the supreme commander of Darwin. The incident resulted in resentment and criticism (Robertson 1999). Stretton had to explain his actions to the Prime Minister and the media reported he was in tears as he apologised (Truth Staff Reporter 1975).

Discussion

By the time Stretton left Darwin on 31 December, the restoration of Darwin was well underway with many essential services operating once again. Some 35,000 people had been evacuated, local coordinating structures were functioning and the Australian Navy had begun to arrive. These achievements had been made without further loss of life (Stretton 1975b).

Stretton was applauded for his leadership and, in 1975, was awarded Australian of the Year in recognition of his role in Darwin. He would be described as a national hero.

Local officials in Darwin had accepted the role that he played alongside community members in resurrecting Darwin (McLaren 1979) and they thought he had performed successfully (Hitchins 1979, Robertson 1999, Truth Staff Reporter 1975). Despite his lack of legislative authority, only 2 of Stretton's orders were countermanded (Truth Staff Reporter 1975), which might attest to the trust he established with local officials who could have challenged his legal standing if they had needed.

There were other criticisms of his leadership style. Some thought Stretton was arrogant and did not fully appreciate the role of local authorities or the civilian way of doing things (Wilson 1979, McLaren 1979, McHenry 1979, Vardanega 1984). Some were frustrated that Stretton did not recognise the achievements of local officials made before his arrival (McHenry 1979).

It is questionable whether the National Disasters Organisation should have been operating at a heightened state of readiness prior to the cyclone, reflecting a possible lack of foresight. The organisation had not liaised with Darwin authorities to avoid giving the impression of a lack of confidence in their capabilities (Vardanega 1984). Stretton had checked the duty officer arrangements over the Christmas period before leaving Canberra in the belief he would enjoy a few day's rest (Stretton 1978). The National Emergency Operations Centre was not manned until receiving word of the cyclone's destruction and struggled to achieve adequate resourcing in the first days of the response (Jones 2010). Such a procedure may have been influenced by previous disasters that did not require a national-level response (Dwyer 2006). Cyclone Tracy was like nothing the new agency

had ever seen before. Vardanega, the Deputy Head of the National Disasters Organisation, later wrote:

Certainly at the NDO we did no more and no less than seemed proper at that early stage of our existence (Vardanega 1984).

In fact, the Australian Government appeared unprepared, with key ministers uncontactable. Stretton (1976, p.26) stated:

Valuable time had been wasted in trying to contact the acting Prime Minister and other ministers, and again I wondered what would happen in the event of an outbreak of war. Surely a better system of contacting ministers in a crisis needs to be instituted.

Perhaps medical teams, ration packs and aircraft could have been pre-positioned inland at the township of Katherine to rapidly assist. In the early phases of the response, when information was scarce, the pre-positioning of reconnaissance assets could have been very helpful. Perhaps the National Disasters Organisation was waiting on a request from Northern Territory authorities. It was still early days for the Natural Disasters Organisation (Emergency Management Australia 2005).

However, with the organisation's role as coordinator of national support, more could have been done before the cyclone. In the aftermath of the 2019–20 bushfires in Australia, a key theme from the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements was the need for the Australian Government to coordinate arrangements to facilitate proactive support to states and territories including the pre-deployment of resources where they may be required.

The decision to place Stretton in control of the Darwin response operation without legal authority demonstrated the need for crisis arrangements to be flexible and underscored the importance of relationships and goodwill in achieving objectives under immense uncertainty.

There were mixed views about bringing in an outsider to lead at the local level. An advantage was that Stretton had not been personally affected by the disaster and could focus his attention on the response for the community. However, some people believed that local authorities had the capacity to lead and Stretton's role should have been an advisory one only (Wilson 1979, Vardanega 1984).

Leadership reflections

Stretton displayed leadership attributes that were effective:

- He was decisive in an environment of huge uncertainty.
- He showed courage to over-respond, where necessary, to achieve an on-the-ground effect. If he had waited for more information and make critical decisions later, the initiative may have been lost; he would not have made it to Darwin until Boxing Day and there may have been further suffering. Overall, he was willing to take risks – not involving consequences to the community, but to himself.
- He was empathetic and reassuring; a quality other crisis leaders view as essential (Cantwell 2015).
- He acted with agility. He did not have a set step-by-step plan established in advance but reassessed the situation and acted accordingly.
- He acted in a strategic manner, focusing on the bigger picture and on achieving an holistic plan.
- He was politically aware, although he unknowingly stepped into political wars. He acted in a way that realised the political component of the disaster. He maintained the trust of key elected officials and of the community, which assisted him to win support and backing for decisions such as the evacuation of Darwin.
- He was described as having immense skill with the media and worked to ensure transparency of information regarding the relief operation.

Importantly, Stretton was able to quickly assess the strengths within the local community and the importance of working with and motivating the community in an empathetic fashion. Instead of assuming all accountability and bringing in resources on-mass, he used existing local capacities (e.g. the committee structure) as he understood that recovery is best led locally with some outside coordination assistance (Stretton 1975a). Stretton was able to quickly collaborate with organisations, some of which had not previously been involved in emergency situations. This could have been challenging given his lack of local knowledge and established relationships.

One can draw parallels with many contemporary disaster events where leaders are faced with complex and uncertain environments with associated time pressures and stresses. Collaborative leadership is critical as many and diverse organisations emerge to contribute, and a national response is required necessitating interoperability and decentralisation. Flexibility and improvisation are required as extreme events do not run in accordance to plans. Political and community expectations are higher, and disasters are more complex with associated cascading consequences and global media attention. The ability of a leader to build and maintain public trust and confidence, as Stretton did, remains paramount.

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About the author

Andrew Gissing is a nationally recognised risk and resilience expert with Risk Frontiers. He has 20 years emergency management experience having held positions of Deputy Chief Officer / Director Emergency Management and Communication with the Victoria State Emergency Service and Director Enterprise Risk Management at the Department of Family and Community Services.