The Tragic Story of HMAS Arrow: Courage and Sacrifice

On Christmas Eve, 1974, as Darwin prepared for the festive season, a storm unlike any other loomed on the horizon. Cyclone Tracy, a Category 4 cyclone with winds exceeding 240 km/h, bore down on the city with devastating force.

In Darwin Harbour, the HMAS Arrow, an Attack-class patrol boat from the Royal Australian Navy, was moored alongside its sister vessels. The events that unfolded that night would transform the Arrow's crew into both victims and heroes, leaving a legacy of bravery and sacrifice.

Preparing for the Storm

The HMAS Arrow, under the command of Lieutenant Robert Dagworthy, was secured to a cyclone buoy in the harbour, approximately one kilometre offshore from Stokes Hill Wharf. The crew of 19 was confident the sturdy vessel, a mainstay of the Navy's patrol fleet, could ride out the storm.

As the cyclone approached, the crew worked tirelessly to secure the ship and prepare for the onslaught. By nightfall, they took shelter in the wheelhouse as the winds intensified. For hours, the Arrow held its position, but Cyclone Tracy's relentless force overwhelmed even the most robust precautions.

Disaster Strikes

In the early hours of Christmas morning, the Arrow's mooring gypsy failed under the immense strain, and the vessel was torn from its moorings. Buffeted by towering waves and violent gusts, the ship drifted dangerously. Despite starting the engines to regain control, the storm made steering nearly impossible.

HMAS Arrow

Realising the dire situation, Lieutenant Dagworthy ordered the crew to navigate toward Frances Bay in a desperate bid to beach the ship and save lives. However, the conditions deteriorated further, and the Arrow collided with Stokes Hill Wharf. The impact crushed the ship's bow, leaving it broken and sinking. Dagworthy made the critical decision to abandon ship.

Acts of Heroism Amid Chaos

The escape was fraught with danger. As the crew scrambled to leave the wreck, Able Seaman Ian Rennie fell between the ship and the wharf and was crushed in the chaos. Despite the worsening conditions, Petty Officer Leslie Catton stayed behind to help others, including Able Seaman Kevin Rainbow, who had suffered two broken legs during the collision.

Catton encouraged Rainbow to abandon the ship, saying, “You’re better off in the water than on this bloody thing.” Rainbow followed his advice and survived the ordeal, but Catton was struck by debris or swept away in the raging waters. Tragically, both Catton and Rennie perished, their bodies later recovered.

Miraculous Survival

Lieutenant Dagworthy, swept into the water during the evacuation, was carried beneath the wharf by the storm surge. Miraculously, he survived the night, clinging to life amidst the chaos, and was found the next day on the nearby mudflats. Meanwhile, Kevin Rainbow endured the night on two broken legs and was rescued at dawn, standing against all odds.

Legacy of HMAS Arrow

The HMAS Arrow was destroyed, its wreckage resting beneath Stokes Hill Wharf as a stark reminder of the storm’s ferocity. The loss of two sailors, Petty Officer Leslie Catton and Able Seaman Ian Rennie, marked one of the darkest moments of Cyclone Tracy’s impact on the Navy.

To honour their sacrifice:

- A plaque and stained glass window at HMAS Coonawarra’s chapel commemorate Catton and Rennie.
- Streets in Darwin—Arrow Drive, Catton Court, and Rennie Road—carry their names.
- The Arrow Bar at HMAS Coonawarra serves as a tribute to the vessel and its crew.

The Arrow’s story also lives on as part of Darwin’s maritime heritage, with the wreck declared a heritage site in 2005. The wreck has since become a thriving marine habitat and a protected area, offering a unique blend of historical and ecological significance.

Reflections on Courage and Loss

The loss of HMAS Arrow and the heroism of its crew remain enduring symbols of Cyclone Tracy's impact. It is a story of extraordinary courage in the face of disaster, from Lieutenant Dagworthy's steadfast leadership to the selfless actions of Petty Officer Catton and the resilience of survivors like Kevin Rainbow.

This tale of survival, sacrifice, and remembrance ensures the legacy of the HMAS Arrow and its crew will never be forgotten, serving as a testament to the strength and determination of those who serve at sea.

The Fate of HMAS Arrow

After Cyclone Tracy, the HMAS Arrow was deemed beyond repair and was sold off to be refurbished. However, despite initial plans to restore the vessel, it ultimately met a much less glorious end. The Arrow was dismantled and sold as scrap metal, marking the end of its storied life in the Royal Australian Navy. Its legacy, however, lives on in the memorials and the heroic story of its crew, reminding us of the bravery and sacrifice during the storm that claimed so much.