

# The Coen Cyclone 1943

In the early morning of 16 December 1943 a cyclone visited the township of Coen, in the Cairns Police District. The severe weather front blew with such force that tree branches, iron sheeting and lengths of timber were strewn about causing injury to persons and damage to buildings. Torrents of rain pelted the town and surrounding areas, flooding buildings and streets. Residents were terrified, and reported being stranded in their shuddering homes whilst roofs were torn away. As rain poured in to drench the interior of their houses, they took refuge under furniture.

During the cyclone Constable Daniel Duncan McNaught with little regard for himself, visited every home in the township of Coen to check the safety of residents and ensure they had sufficient food and necessary supplies to keep them during the 6 hour storm. The Constable successfully moved two families from their destroyed homes to places of safety, and his actions saved them from certain injury or possibly death. Constable McNaught also attended the battered Police Station and nailed a table to the windows in an attempt to protect it from further damage. Two days after the storm, with persistent rain falling and roads impassable, the Constable rode by horseback to Ebagoolah, south of Coen, to examine the overland telegraph lines, and to ensure the safety of residents in out-lying areas.

Sergeant Austin Murray Cooper was also personally affected by the cyclone at Coen, with his home almost demolished during the night. Early the next morning the Sergeant, concerned with the welfare of older residents he knew camped on the riverbank, mustered helpers to search for the two men. One of the elderly men was found in a semi-conscious condition, trapped under a large timber girder. With assistance to remove the massive lump of wood, Sergeant Cooper dragged the stockman from the pile of twisted timber and metal, and brought him to safety. Sergeant Cooper continued his good work by coordinating a clean-up crew, and personally assisting in the job of cleaning up Coen, its aerodrome and telegraph lines.

Statements were taken from Coen residents at the time, and furnished to the Police Commissioner Cecil Carroll. Maurice Shephard a general carrier and Coroner of Coen wrote "...I think very highly of the actions of Constable McNaught and I am of the opinion he should be suitably rewarded for his many acts of unselfish conduct and bravery on the night and morning of the cyclone." Margaret Armbust, a grazier, provided by statement "...Constable McNaught should be rewarded for acts of bravery, initiative and work during the cyclone." Robert Ray, the Coen Postmaster wrote "...I have heard most of the people of Coen commenting on the manner and conduct of Constable McNaught, and the way in which he visited every home in order to render moral or physical assistance..."

Robert Kraemer, the thankful injured pensioner, wrote "...I am very grateful to [Sergeant Cooper] and the people who rescued me, and I am quite sure that had I not been rescued I would have died there..." Frederick Heinemann, head

***Information from the resources of the Queensland Police Museum***

stockman, provided a statement including "...I think it was due to the initiative of Sergeant Cooper that [Coen resident Robert] Kraemer was found so soon...and was particularly helpful in making native labour available for the needy and organising a working unit to clear the road and aerodrome..."

On 3 March 1944 Commissioner Carroll wrote a memorandum to the Inspector in Cairns commending the good work of Sergeant Cooper and Constable McNaught in connection with the Coen Cyclone of 16 December 1943.

