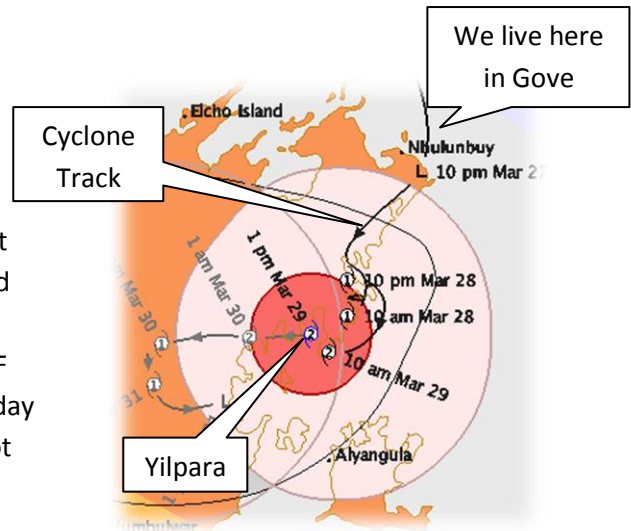




Cyclone Paul

On Saturday, 27th March 2010, the weather forecast predicted Cyclone Paul would hit Elcho Island around 10pm. MAF pilots on Elcho evacuated and flew their aircraft 90 miles to the new MAF hanger at Gove. At 11pm Saturday night, Cyclone Paul hit Gove, not Elcho Island.



Two days ahead of forecast and missing Elcho completely, the category one Cyclone passed overhead sending debris everywhere. Windows rattled, trees came down, and anything loose became an airborne projectile, but no real damage thankfully. The next day, Sunday 28th March, Cyclone Paul continued to develop into a category 2, hugging the southerly coastline, and eventually settling for two days over Yilpara, a homeland of 150 Yolŋu people, 80 miles south of Gove.

The previous Wednesday, 24th March, was a big day for Yilpara. Yilpara launched the *Garrangali* band (<http://garrangali.bandcamp.com/>) a Yolŋu band, playing to raise money for the homeland. It was to be a big day; Yolŋu came from everywhere. We were to fly in

everyone important, and 'not so' important, for this big event. The Cyclone however built up near Darwin and despite being over 300 miles away at sea, the *Yindi Waltjan* – big winds - and rain



was building up. At 10am and half way to Yilpara, I turned the plane around and headed back to Gove. The rest of the fleet did likewise, there was too much rain.

The leader from the Yilpara homeland, oblivious to the bad weather conditions in Gove, called the office and said, *"Send all the planes down now. We are waiting for you. I'm in my long trousers and it is getting hot."*

At 11am, two planes set off again: Brett Nel and me. We were off to Yilpara with full passenger loads. At the halfway point, where just an hour ago we turned



Cyclone Paul

around, there was enough visibility to pass through and onto Yilpara. That was to be the last opportunity for the day; the rain came in over Gove closing the airport all day. Brett and I were to enjoy the *Garrangali* band, so we thought.



The atmosphere at Yilpara was electric. The band was tuning up their Didgeridoos; people huddled together with excitement, speakers getting ready, leaders dressed in traditional clothes rushed around. Then the rains came, followed by the winds. A desperate attempt to save the band's gear stopped all festivities.

Temporary shelters built as a sunshade bulged with rainwater to near collapse. Our passengers were ready

to go home. Two hours later a speck of blue sunlight gave brief hope of getting back to Gove.

I was first off the chocks in the Airvan followed by Brett in the Cessna 206. However, ruin was in store for Brett. Water had crept into the tubes which measure airspeed, forcing him back to Yilpara to make repairs. I made steady progress until reaching Garthlala homeland, where rain and cloud forced us to land. We enjoyed mixing with the local Yolŋu,



sharing stories and predicting if we would make Gove that day.



God opened up clear skies once more, giving us one opportunity to get into Gove. Sadly, for Brett, the storms south of Garthlala forced him back to Yilpara where he was to spend the next few days. We squeezed into Gove at low level, giving all passengers great material for a good yarn.

The weather the next day, 25th March, did not improve. I had two tries at getting off to Yilpara before success, but yet again, the remainder of the fleet could not get out of Gove due to weather. I met up with Brett, who seemed to have survived an overnight with the weather; he flew to Groote Island for more fuel and to drop off passengers. I flew people to places nearer Gove. The cloud was very high and very low at the same time, creating a clear middle corridor. We were flying at 6,500 feet to drop passengers just 20 miles away. Usually we stay at about 2,500 maximum for these short journeys. Again, I could not immediately get back to Gove and once again stayed at Garthlala before a late dash home. Yet again, Brett could not get out of Yilpara after his flight to Groote Island, so he remained a second night at Yilpara.



Cyclone Paul

The next day, Friday 26th March, the weather worsened, but Brett did get back from Yilpara, the only flight he made that day. As the Cyclone approached on Saturday, flying became impossible as was for Sunday, Monday and Tuesday. By Wednesday 31st March, Yilpara was devastated by two days of whipping by the category-two Cyclone, which had remained overhead. Over forty trees came down over the access track; the local billabong overflowed creating a lake. The once vegetable garden



became a vast water feature. Sewerage had mixed in with drinking water, and the diesel generator's electrics had blown on the Sunday leaving them without power for four days.

Wednesday morning, 31st March, I headed off towards Yilpara flying a GA8 Airvan. I had no idea what to expect or what the weather would be like. Everything on the aircraft was at maximum; I had full fuel, four emergency engineers: a diesel engineer, a water engineer, an electrician

and another 'all sorts of job' man. With every spare cavity stacked with emergency food for the Yolŋu, the plane was heavy. The government had yet to respond. The food had been purchased by local Laynhapuy Homeland Staff, frantically pushing shopping trolleys around the local Woolworths store in Gove. Once loaded and airborne for the 75 mile trip to Yilpara, we went out of our way to fly low-level passes over other homeland airstrips to assess their condition. We inspected vehicle tracks for flooding and fallen trees. We needed to close several airstrips and impose restrictions on others. We found many roads blocked. At Yilpara, the airstrip looked half-underwater, but on closer



inspection, much of the water was in the turning area, leaving three quarters of the runway available. At the other end was a washout, where water had eroded the runway. This was also full with water, reducing the runway length to just over half- enough.

People lined the centre of the airstrip as we came in on final approach. The Cyclone had moved on just a few miles, and the rain had stopped for the moment.

However, the wind was still creating problems. As we flew over the 'new water park', turbulence and

windshear made a landing difficult. The increase in speed for these conditions meant a longer airstrip was required, and with the aircraft at maximum weight and the airstrip much shortened and uncertainty about the actual surface condition for landing, I chose to go-around and have another go.

With full power at low level, the noise would have been deafening on the ground. We could see the anxious Yolŋu panicking at the thought of the aircraft not able to land, meaning no water, no food, and no electricity. I felt for them. I could imagine the



Cyclone Paul

disappointment and was pleased to give it another go.

This time the wheels touched down. The crowd surrounding the plane wanting food and news was extraordinary. Our immediate task was to unload the food and provide some protection for the consignment until local leadership could organise an orderly distribution. My first reaction when looking at the homeland was, 'that's new', pointing to an enormous lake which once had been a field with a flagged lined path through it for the *Garrangali* band visitors. I remembered a drop-dunny toilet around here too – I did find it later. It had been blown away to the other side of the homeland.



Before Cyclone Paul

A house/shack had blown down. People were milling everywhere, fixing things, moving trees, tending children and searching for the next thing to do. It seemed to me that at times like this the Yolju people really do work well together for a common good, in what is usually a dry hot

shanty style township, with not a lot going on.

The engineer worked on the generator without much success. An electrical circuit had blown and a new one from Darwin would be required. We would fly this new part in the next day. Nevertheless, they managed to fix the water supply. We could see Yolju scurrying away from the distribution point with food and water, and the people felt more confident after the plane had arrived. More MAF planes now came in, more food on its way. Medical supplies arrived, as did doctors and nurses. We now started evacuating the sick and the elderly back to Gove.



After Cyclone Paul

The devastation caused by Cyclone Paul continues three months later. More rain has come with tracks getting worse rather than better. Transport vehicles attempting access to the homelands have ripped up the otherwise good roads into boggy swamps. Once the rains stop, there will be much needed repair work done before the tracks are back to normal. Damaged airstrips keep several homelands closed. MAF continue to provide essential service flights, reaching out to the remote people of East Arnhem Land, humbly serving God's people.



Paul Woodington, Pilot, 20th June 2010

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Please pray for these amazingly resilient isolated people.