

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In March, 1988, Cyclone **Bola** devastated the East Cape hill country and brought widespread flooding and wind damage over much of the North Island. The name **Bola** entered New Zealand folklore; hardly a week goes by without some mention of the storm in newspaper, radio, or television news items or features.

Where did the name **Bola** come from? The short answer is that **Bola** was the next name on the predetermined alphabetical list currently used by the Tropical Cyclone Warning Centre at Nadi, Fiji, for naming cyclones which form in their area of responsibility. Other Tropical Cyclone Warning Centres at Noumea and Brisbane also have similar, but different, lists of names.

The story behind these lists is, I think, an interesting one.

The practice of naming cyclones using personal names goes back many years. It is a useful system, providing positive identification of severe weather systems in a brief form, readily understood and recognised by the public. The risk of confusion between cyclones occurring about the same time is minimised and the name provides a useful reference point for news stories or weather bulletins.

Credit for the first use of personal names for weather systems is generally given to Clement ('Wet') Wragge, Queensland Government Meteorologist from 1887 until 1907. Wragge himself claimed that distinction. On July 24, 1902, he wrote in his new weekly journal, 'Wragge', that 'The Weather Bureau, Brisbane, was the first meteorological organisation in the world to adopt the method of naming storms'.

Support for his claim comes from an historical note of the Australian Bureau of Meteorology. 'To him (Wragge) must go the credit of being one of the first meteorologists to give names to cyclones. He began by using letters of the Greek alphabet, then drew from

Greek and Roman mythology and progressed to the use of feminine names. Finally he used the names of politicians, many of whom, being unpopular with Wragge, would find their names attributed to a cyclone which 'did not know what to do next' or which was 'whooping around and making a nuisance of itself as usual'.

Wragge used names for all weather systems, not just tropical cyclones.

In his 'Special Forecasts for Australasia' for the week ending 9 October 1902 Wragge wrote, in his usual hyperbolic style, 'the Antarctic disturbance Melba, named after the divine songster, will be the ruling factor over the southeastern quadrant of Australasia generally. Vessels bound west through Bass Straits from eastern ports will surely meet Melba and some persons will not only have reason to remember the superb singing of the original but also recollect the howling and the whistling of the winds of her cognomen . . . The Antarctic disturbance, James, now south of Wellington, will soon have passed into west longitudes.'

The forecast for New Zealand and the Chatham Islands for that week was 'squally and wet in the south under edge of James, then temporarily finer. Thereafter comes the divine Melba: shipping look out for her!'

A manuscript comment on this forecast reads 'James was up to time in feeble form but Melba did not come in time to embrace him.'

After Wragge the naming practice appears to have fallen into disuse for many years only to be revived again in the latter part of the Pacific War about 1944 in an informal way. At the time there were many forecast centres with probably their own practices. Some United States' Air Force lists allocated female names to North Pacific cyclones and male names in the South. There is some belief that the practice was revived following the publication of R G Stewart's novel 'Storm' in 1942.

The forecaster-hero of this book shared the lead role with a tropical cyclone.

After the war the practice fell into disuse again in the Southern hemisphere although it continued in the North Pacific. The French in New Caledonia were the first to revive it yet again from about the 1959/60 season. Australia followed in the 1963/64 season but New Zealand, then responsible for Fiji, did not adopt the practice until the 1969/70 season. The first name used by Fiji was *Alice*, 4 January 1970.

At that time only feminine names were used. I have not been able to find any particular reason for this and would not want to perpetuate the myth that feminine names were used because tropical cyclones, like women, are fickle, wayward, and unpredictable.

However, International Women's Year in 1975 saw an end to this sexist naming. In April that year the Australian Science Minister ordered that cyclones should now carry both men's and women's names. 'I think that both sexes should bear the odium of the devastation caused by cyclones', he said. New Zealand had already taken a similar step in February that year in response to a request from the Fiji National Council of Women who considered the use of only female names discriminatory. It was decided not to change the list in current use that season but to incorporate men's names for the 1975/76 season. The first three names for that season were *Kim*, *Laurie*, and *Marion*, all names which can be used by men or women and it was not until *Norman*, the fourth on the list, that the nettle was firmly grasped. Incidentally, 1975 was the year when the Fiji Meteorological Service was established (on 1 July) so that the charge of sexism in naming cannot be levelled against that Service.

Male names did not make the North Pacific lists until 1978 and the North Atlantic lists until 1979.

By then, New Zealand, which was still preparing the lists for use by Fiji, was considering the use of ethnic Pacific names rather than just European names. There was considerable discussion on this matter because of the difficulties which were anticipated in view of the many languages and cultures in the Pacific. One proposal was that cyclones should be named from the country nearest to

which they formed but this proposal was abandoned when it was realised that in its formative stages the cyclone may be less destructive than later in its development and this could mean that Tonga, for example, might always suffer from storms with Fijian names, hardly good for international relations!

In the end it was decided to throw names from all over the South Pacific into a melting pot and see what we could do. In 1979, as Superintendent Training, I was asked to produce four lists, three for routine serial use and one as a replacement list for when names were withdrawn from the main lists because of the severity of particular storms.

At the time we had a Pacific Islands' Advanced Course in residence and Daphne Watts and I collected lists of suitable names from each Course member. The names had to be short, easily pronounced, culturally acceptable throughout the Pacific, and not contain any idiosyncrasies such as the Fijian 'c', pronounced 'th'. The lists were edited for suitability then cross checked with the group for acceptability. This proved to be an hilarious task. The name *Baba*, perfectly acceptable to some, meant variously a baby, an old man, crazy, or the cry used to call the pigs home. *Oni*, a nice short name meeting nearly all requirements had to be dropped because in one language it meant the end of the world! Hardly a name to be used in a warning message!

Some names were dropped on religious grounds. Some names were dropped for reasons which were never made clear to us but it was obvious from the laughter and embarrassment that there were some rude words indeed in our lists.

It was intended that the lists should be alphabetical with alternately male and female names but it was not always possible to find a suitable name beginning with the appropriate letter nor, indeed, was it possible to complete the lists using only ethnic names. There is therefore a scattering of European names.

Acceptable lists were finally prepared and have been in use in Fiji since the 1980/81 season.

A few ethnic names actually preceded these; the first, I believe, was *Meli* in March 1979.

The last updating of the lists was done at the Tropical Cyclone Committee Meeting at Brisbane in July 1988.

Finally, will we have another **Bola**? No, the name has been retired permanently because of the severity of the storm, both in Vanuatu and New Zealand.

Ray Smith.