

## **HUNDREDS OF ABORIGINAL GRAVES IN DANGER ON THE KULALUK LEASE IN DARWIN, NORTHERN TERRITORY.**

On 1<sup>st</sup> July 1972 the Northern Territory News published a story headed 'Rubbish Dumping on Burial Ground'. The story continued, 'Members of the Larrakia tribe acted yesterday to stop rubbish being dumped on an old Aboriginal burial ground off Totem Road in Nightcliff. One grave was marked with a white cross and the inscription, 'In memory of Munpu of Elcho Island 22-2-1957'. Further in the jungle were old burial posts marking Tiwi graves, from which Totem Road got its name. The cemetery had been located on Bagot Reserve, before the reserve was cut back from 300 hectares to 23 hectares in 1964.

In 1973 Gough Whitlam established the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission to investigate how land could be returned to Aboriginal people. Although there was a strong case for the return of the old Bagot cemetery and the surrounding old reserve land, the Council representing the Bagot Community did not ask Commissioner Woodward for the return of the land that had been revoked from their reserve. Unfortunately the Bagot Council did not invite the whole community to meet Judge Woodward. However, the Gwalwa Daraniki Association organised a big meeting between Judge Woodward and all the camps around Darwin to make claims for Kulaluk, Knuckeyes Lagoon, Railway Dam and all the vacant land inside the old Bagot boundaries, as well as other places important to the Larrakia people (in Cheryl Buchanan's book, *The Kulaluk Story*, 1974).

By mid-1973 the Kulaluk claim was a political 'hot potato', causing the Whitlam Government to seek more information about the Bagot cemetery and other matters. Following a request from Canberra, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Darwin chose a Senior Welfare Officer named Jack Doolan to locate the boundaries of the burial ground which was by then covered with thick scrub. Jack was well-known to Aboriginal elders across the Top End. He asked for advice from a knowledgeable Larrakia elder named Victor Williams, who assisted him to identify the graveyard so that the whole area could be fenced. On 8<sup>th</sup> October 1973, Jack Doolan wrote to the Director of DAA (73/6578):

During his recent visit to Darwin, Mr Gareth Evans requested that I provide him with a rough map of the area near Bagot settlement which was at one time used as an Aboriginal cemetery ... Mr Victor Williams accompanied me and pointed out the area which has been drawn on the attached map. Mr Williams believes that there could be as many as two hundred people buried there. He also advised that there may be as many as ten or a dozen other graves between the area shown on the map and Bagot Reserve [i.e. from the old cemetery down from Totem Road to Fitzer Drive – my emphasis].

... although the Palmerston Freeway will not cross the cemetery, it would be quite likely that earth-moving equipment or trucks used in building the road may disturb part of it. It was suggested that we enclose it with a fence and this suggestion was endorsed by the people from Works who feel that this would at least give some indication to people employed on the road making project. Nothing elaborate is envisaged, and Mr Williams believes that a rough barbed – wire fence could be run around the area in half a day ... There is sufficient barbed wire and pickets available at Bagot to perform this work.

The Palmerston Freeway was never built, but in 1981 and 1984 the burial ground was again threatened by planned works. Firstly from the Redco proposal for canal housing in Ludmilla Creek and secondly by the plans to drain and fill the old Bagot area to prevent mosquito breeding. At that time, the editor of the land rights newsletter, *Bunji*, received a letter from a concerned reader. The letter stated:

Dear Mr Day,

I want you to know they are going to sell that land where the totem poles always were and the graves down Totem Road. This is not white man land but belong to us. My brother is buried there and if the man what says he is going to buy it gets it he will build on the graves and totem poles. I hear this at Bagot. My girl she right this for me. Please tell them it cant be sold to build on graves.

Yours truly

Rosie Bishop

We owe it to these old people to stop the plans in 2009 to dig up the old Bagot area and mangroves for rich people to build houses and keep their boats.