

The Death of a Long Grass Hero: Lucky Balarka

By Bill Day

Lucky Balarka died of throat cancer last September. He had been living in the long grass around Darwin for many years. Lucky was one of the original ‘Tiwi Warriors’ immortalised in the Letterstick song of the same name. The lyrics reflect the resistance of homeless Aboriginal people who camp in bush locations around the Darwin suburb of Tiwi. On September 17th, Lucky’s friends and relatives held a smoking ceremony at the Tiwi Shopping Centre. Traditional songs were sung to the accompaniment of didgeridoo and clap sticks while smoke swirled amongst the mourners. Earlier in the year, the public toilets adjoining the shops had been locked and barred by the authorities to deter the campers.

Lucky was not easily deterred. Although he and his fellow campers were called ‘itinerants,’ Darwin had been his home since he arrived from Maningrida, in Arnhem Land, over ten years earlier. In camps between Dripstone and Buffalo Creek, Lucky used his bush skills to make fish spears bound with copper wire to a shaft of the native hibiscus, straightened over the fire. He speared stingrays in the shallow water and caught fish in his cast net, which he cooked beside the beach to share with his ‘long grass’ mates. In 1997 he joined a protest at Parliament House in Darwin to present a petition demanding serviced town camps. When the doors of Parliament House were locked them, Lucky sang a traditional song to a didgeridoo pressed to the external intercom.



Above: Lucky with clap sticks at the Parliament House Protest 1997

When the Darwin City Council introduced a harassment campaign against the campers, Lucky and his friends just disappeared into more secluded camps. The Aboriginal and Islander Medical Service (AIMS) 'yellow top' night patrols made life harder for him but also failed to close the camps. A night in the 'Spin Dry' was a chance for a hot shower and breakfast. Then the new Government sponsored Mission Australia's Day and Night Patrols, with a more reconciliatory approach. It was these officers who encouraged Lucky to enter rehab, where his cancer was detected. At least Lucky did not die in the long grass of an undiagnosed illness like so many of his friends. Thanks to the Day Patrols, he received medical attention until the end.

Lucky was diagnosed with throat cancer and was flown to Adelaide for treatment. He was pictured in the *NT News* on July 10th, 2005, giving a warning of the health hazards of cigarettes. Lucky died two months later. Lucky Balarka is survived by his brothers Kurt and Tim and sister Molly, who is a well-respected health worker at Maningrida.



Lucky