

The Northern Advocate



WRECKAGE: The mast of the Three Amigos remains above the water with debris floating on to nearby rocks.

NIGHT RESCUE AT SEA

30.04.2009

Kristin Edge

A Northland couple's "dream of a lifetime" sailing trip has been shattered in the Bay of Islands after their yacht sank and they were left clinging to rocks in the dark.

Sailors Merv Smith and Gaylene Ellis struck rocks sailing near Tapeka Point, 3km north of Russell, about 7pm on Tuesday.

The 17m ferro cement ketch, Three Amigos, quickly took on water, leaving the couple little time to abandon the yacht.

Mr Smith, 66, knocked his head during the emergency but Ms Ellis, 48, was able to put his lifejacket on and tether both of them to the liferaft.

Unfortunately a wave tore them apart and they were washed into the darkness and 1.5m swell.

They were able to activate the emergency beacon before the yacht slipped beneath the waves.

The pair managed to clamber on to rocks about 30m apart from each other and waited to be rescued.

The surge and number of rocks prevented local boaties and the Bay of Islands Coastguard from rescuing the stricken yachties.

Instead a team on the Northland Electricity rescue helicopter carried out two winch operations to pluck the couple from the rocks.

They were flown to Whangarei Hospital to be treated for scratches and cuts.

Yesterday, Mr Smith remained in the surgical ward while Ms Ellis returned to the emergency department again after leaving earlier.

The couple left Marsden Cove residential marina on Tuesday heading for Opuia where they were to clear customs, pick up three crew members on Thursday and then sail to Tonga on their first blue water sailing adventure.

Cove marina worker Karen Wyatt said the couple had spent many years sailing around the New Zealand coastline but "this was their dream".

"It's absolutely devastating. Their whole life was on board that yacht ... it was their home," Ms Wyatt said.

The couple's trip was to take in Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu and New Caledonia before they returned in November.

Yesterday, harbour master Jim Lyle was out on the water where the yacht had sunk. About 4m of the mast was above the water line at high tide and there were plenty of items floating in the water. Mr Lyle said boaties and locals on the beach had collected some of the gear, which they would return to the owners.

He said the boat was not recoverable.

"Environmentally it's good but the main thing is they have lost their boat and their worldly possessions have gone."

The yacht was insured. Mr Lyle said the EPIRB - Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon - was still floating in the water somewhere emitting an emergency signal and he urged boaties or people who found the bright yellow or orange beacon, about the size of a rugby ball, to contact police or the Northland Regional Council hotline.

Rescue helicopter chief pilot Peter Turnbull described the night-time rescue as text book with excellent co-ordination between local boaties, Russell radio, police, coastguard and the helicopter.

"It all jelled together and the rescue worked like it should do."

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