



# Mayday! We are going down - East Coaster vanishes after call for help

Kristin Edge | 16th August 2009

The wind was screaming. We were in 5m swells ... it was real

bloody nasty. Dave Gray Coastguard skipper Mystery surrounds a mayday call that sparked a major air and sea search off Northland's coast.

Police are investigating if the call received about 1am yesterday was a hoax following an extensive search involving Whangarei Coastguard, police, Northland Electricity rescue helicopter, Navy ship Pukaki, a fixed-wing aeroplane and the Rescue Co-ordination Centre NZ (RCCNZ) in Wellington.



The Navy vessel, HMNZS Pukaki. Picture/Northland Emergency Services Trust

The search was mounted after a man who said he was on a boat named East Coaster, put out a mayday call indicating four people were on board and that the vessel was in trouble and taking on water.

A recording of the distress call was released in which the man said their blue-and-white boat was in trouble between the Hen and Chicken Islands, 15km southeast of Bream Head.

"We are going down ... people are getting distressed on board. I'm having a bit of trouble here mate."

After scouring 280sq km the search was suspended about 2pm yesterday.

RCCNZ mission co-ordinator Neville Blakemore said calls from concerned members of the public to the centre regarding the incident had been checked out and eliminated.

However, police were continuing to investigate the incident, including the possibility that the call may have been a hoax.

"The search vessels and aircraft involved have also carried out an extensive search, so if there was any trace of the vessel, wreckage, or anyone in the water, then we are extremely confident they would have been found by now," Mr Blakemore said.

Experienced rescuer Whangarei Coastguard skipper Dave Gray said it was some of the worst sea conditions he had searched in during his nine years' service.

After 12 hours at sea, he and the three crew were feeling "absolutely stuffed".

"The wind was screaming. We were in 5-metre swells ... it was real bloody nasty," Mr Gray said. "It was rugged stuff and I was hoping we would make it home. We did our fair share of surfing down the swells and it's not too often you do that at sea."

He said if the call-out was a hoax he would be annoyed.

"People don't realise just in my boat there are four people putting their lives at risk."

The 6.8m Coastguard boat launched about 2.30am and took 45 minutes battling huge seas to reach the islands.

They were directed by Navy vessel HMNZS Pukaki, which was diverted while on its way to Devonport,

to do a search of the shoreline on the south side of the Chicken chain of islands.

Mr Gray said he was wary of crashing into rocks despite having GPS on board and a depth-finder.

"I kept further out than normal but I didn't want to jeopardise my boys."

About 4am, the Coastguard vessel anchored in a sheltered cove until daybreak when they began their search again near the Hen Island but, by 10am, the sea conditions had worsened.

"The weather was deteriorating in front of my eyes," Mr Gray said.

The navy vessel shadowed the Coastguard boat back to the harbour entrance.

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Searchers scoured the area by air with a fixed-wing aircraft with heat detection equipment from Taupo and the Whangarei-based Northland Electricity rescue helicopter.

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Helicopter chief pilot Peter Turnbull and a crew were dispatched about 2am.

The team flew to the search scene about 10am and circled the islands but saw nothing.

"There was no debris and the shorelines were amazingly clear," Mr Turnbull said.

He estimated the wind reached speeds of up to 35 knots and was blowing north-east.

Whangarei police searched boat ramps along Whangarei Heads and in the Ruakaka and Waipu areas for any clues of who the stricken boaties might be.

The Northern  
**Advocate**

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Boaties at Tutukaka were alerted to see if anyone knew of the East Coaster or her crew but none of the locals had any knowledge of the boat.

Police still have concerns for the missing boat and its occupants and would like to hear from anyone who may know the boat or the crew.

Anyone with information can contact the Whangarei police on 09 430 4500.

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