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Coastguard rescued after boat hits rocks

Kristin Edge | 5th March 2009

Five coastguard volunteers have been plucked to safety after their boat was smashed on rocks in high seas during an emergency off Northland's coast.

Two of the men remain in Middlemore Hospital today in a stable condition with serious facial injuries, with one scheduled to have surgery. The three other volunteers were released from Whangarei Hospital yesterday.



The Dive! Tutukaka Rescue boat was smashed on rocks during a callout. Picture/Michael Cunningham

Ironically, the two young sailors who sparked the rescue managed to reach shore unscathed. The rigid-hulled Dive! Tutukaka Rescue boat was on the way to a callout after 7m-long yacht, Indian Summer, radioed for help about 6am.

But before the sailors were spotted, the coastguard vessel hit rocks about 300m offshore at the Taiharuru River mouth near Pataua South, in gusting 40-knot winds and 4m swells.

The impact sent the five crew members sprawling.

The 9.5m coastguard boat anchored and the crew was lifted off by the Northland Electricity Rescue Helicopter.

The three most seriously injured were taken first to Whangarei, with two of the men later being flown to Auckland.

Chief pilot Pete Turnbull said night-vision goggles were used to spot the stricken boat. It was when the final two crew members were lifted out that the helicopter team was alerted to Indian Summer which was reported to be in immediate danger.

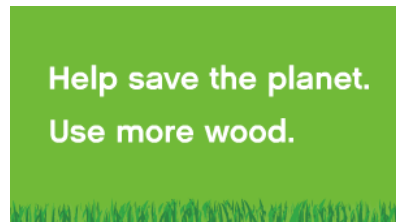
Mr Turnbull said the yacht was spotted near Ngunguru River entrance and another privately owned rescue boat from Tutukaka helped guide the Indian Summer into the estuary.

The coastguard boat was towed back to Tutukaka marina.

It was left with a rock, about the size of a rugby ball, embedded in the mangled bow of the vessel which was docked on a floating pontoon.

One of the men off the Indian Summer, who did not want to be named, was so traumatised by the rough seas experience he doubted he would sail again.

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The two men in their early 20s had left Bay of Islands a few days earlier on a trip down the coast to Auckland.

They had anchored near Taiharuru on Tuesday night after sailing from Bland Bay.

"In the middle of the night, the boat was rocking. The wind and waves just kept escalating, it got really bad. A wave hit the boat side on and was just washing over the top.

"It freaked us out. We used the outboard to position the boat into the waves but they just kept getting bigger so we cut the anchor rope and tried to motor towards Tutukaka."

But the motor cut out and the duo tried to sail. They became so scared they called for help.

"I thought we were going to get smashed on the rocks. It was really scary."

The pair had life jackets on board and had cellphones, a VHF radio and an Epirb - Emergency Position-Indicating Radio Beacon.

The men bought a new anchor in Whangarei yesterday and were waiting for calmer weather before sailing south.

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Coastguard Northern Region chief Dean Lawrence travelled from Auckland to Tutukaka yesterday to meet the crew members released from hospital.

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"Our main focus is the wellbeing of the crew members and their families and the unit as a whole. Then we will look at getting the vessel back on the water."

Maritime New Zealand and Coastguard were both conducting separate investigations into the incident.

The Northern Advocate

The Dive! Tutukaka Rescue, a quick-response vessel worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, was launched last September.

The Lotto Grants Board and the ASB Community Trust helped fund the boat, as well as local sponsor Dive! Tutukaka.

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