



RESCUE OF THE MONTH



CLUB: Taranaki Search and Rescue Squad
SURF LIFEGUARDS: Adam Fraser, Andy Cronin, David Bentley

Soon after 3pm on Sunday the 27th June 2021, the Taranaki Search and Rescue Squad were alerted by Police to reports of windsurfers in difficulty offshore from the Waitara river mouth.

After being notified by the Police, Team coordinator Dave Bentley alerted the squad. Initial reports were that two people had been windsurfing, were now in difficulty, and were being swept out to sea. The large seas, an outgoing tide, and the Waitara River high flow made it difficult to keep those in the water in sight.

Fraser and Cronin were briefed by Bentley as they prepared to depart. The Taranaki Community Rescue Helicopter had arrived on the scene and landed to disembark their medic, who would remain close to Bentley onshore to provide a communication link with the helicopter. From his position, Bentley remained in radio contact with the IRB and provided regular updates to Police.

With Cronin driving, the IRB was launched and continued downstream, paying close attention to the conditions on the bar. With only two hours until low tide and sunset, a 2-3m swell, and the river in flood, conditions were very challenging. The IRB navigated the bar and rocks, then observed the helicopter hovering in a location around 1km north of their position, proceeded in that direction.

The IRB encountered the first of the two patients paddling his windsurf board. The man had abandoned his gear attempting to swim back to shore. The second windsurfer was close by with his gear but unable to make any progress. Both men were pulled into the IRB with their equipment.

Now close to 2km from shore and with four people on board, the IRB team continued risk assessments on the way in with consideration as to the safest return point. With the IRB carrying the additional weight of two more people and their windsurfing gear, good coordination and communication were essential to safely navigate the bar and return to the boat ramp.

Recent heavy rain was causing the Waitara river to run at 10 times its normal flow adding to the challenge of safely returning to shore. After successfully crossing the bar and returning, the patients were met by the Police and all assets were stood down.

This operation was a strong example of multi-agency coordination and teamwork to safely effect a rescue in particularly challenging winter conditions. Following a debrief with the Helicopter and Police it was clear that had not all the pieces of the puzzle come together a certain double fatality would have occurred.

In it for life