

[HOME](#)[Back to "Features"](#)

Latitude 38

Nightmare Off New Zealand

Four cruisers lost their lives, at least four cruising boats were lost or destroyed, and a number of other vessels were significantly damaged during periods of ferocious weather off New Zealand between November 10 and November 30. The weather was caused by a series of low pressure systems which had been forecast several days in advance. Nobody anticipated how severe they would be, however. The last low featured 70-knot winds and 30-foot breaking seas.

Two of the victims were part of a mostly West Coast-based group of cruisers on the South Pacific 'Milk Run', the members of which annually migrate to New Zealand in November to avoid the South Pacific tropical cyclone season. The other two victims were aboard a Kiwi boat returning from a cruise to Australia.

There are a number of similarities in the victims in the South Pacific group. Both were middle-aged women who were half the crew of boats being doublehanded down from Tonga. Both were aboard boats that suffered steering and engine problems, which may have contributed to their being exposed to severe weather they otherwise might have missed. At the time of the tragedies, both women were in weakened physical condition. Finally, after more than 1,000-mile passages, both women died just before dawn and only miles from their destination.

The first of the two female victims was Anita Dean, 52, of Hull, England, who had been cruising with her husband, Roger, 53. Anita drowned in the early morning hours of November 17 after being swept from the cockpit of the couple's 52-foot ketch *Woody Goose*. At the time, huge surf was driving the boat ashore on Great Exhibition Beach on the northeast tip of New Zealand.

The couple was totally exhausted from four days of battling gale conditions and steering problems, and had anchored several miles off the lee shore in a desperate attempt to catch just an hour's rest. The anchor quickly dragged, however, and familiar engine and steering problems combined to make it impossible for them to keep the boat off the shore. Despite the darkness and 10-foot surf, Roger somehow managed to swim to shore. Anita, his sweetheart from childhood and wife of 29 years, disappeared.

Twelve days later, in the predawn darkness of November 29, and in even more severe weather, Julie-Ann Black, 42, of San Carlos, California, was somehow lost on, near, or from Michael Fritz's San Diego-based Tayana 37 *Salacia*. Ironically, the tragedy may have been caused in part by the fact that *Salacia* didn't have a functioning radio that would have enabled them to rescind the Mayday that had come from the vessel 18 hours before. In such severe weather conditions, it's not uncommon for boat's radios — or entire electrical systems — to fail.

Some cruisers in New Zealand have understood Fritz to claim that he never sent a Mayday. Whether he means that he personally didn't send it or that Black had sent it without his knowledge, is a source of ongoing confusion. If Fritz wasn't aware that a Mayday had been sent from his boat, he was about the only cruiser in the vicinity of the Bay of Islands that didn't.

In any event, Fritz has told cruisers in New Zealand that *Salacia* was just a few miles from shelter when the container ship *Direct Kookaburra* — which had been diverted and searched for *Salacia* for six hours — unexpectedly pulled alongside in a rescue attempt. Fritz contends that he and Black didn't need to be rescued until a collision between the two vessels in mountainous seas destroyed the sailboat's rig.

Fritz reportedly then put Black, supposedly wearing both a survival suit and a PFD, into one of the life-rings lowered from the ship. After seeing that she was ready to be lifted, he went forward in the incredible chaos to grab a second life-ring for himself. Between the darkness, the 30-foot seas, and the boat and ship colliding, he ended up in the water. Miraculously, he was able to find another life-ring, which allowed himself to be pulled 30 feet up the side of the ship, bouncing off the hull as he went.

Once aboard, the French captain and crew told him that Black's life-ring had come up without her. Fritz, who reported Black had been first stage hypothermic and panicky, says he doesn't know what happened to her. It's been theorized that in her weakened condition, she might have fallen or been knocked out of the life-ring, or may have even deliberately gotten out of the ring to stay with the boat. Given the terrible conditions, it's unlikely that anybody will really ever know.

In any event, *Direct Kookaburra* battled the conditions to come around for another pass — but *Salacia* was nowhere to be seen. It's almost certain that the *Tayana 37* had gone to the bottom as a result of being holed or crushed by the ship. Despite air and sea searches starting shortly thereafter, no trace of Black was found. Very small pieces of debris believed to have come from *Salacia*, however, and the life-ring thrown to Black were reportedly found floating on the surface.

In a third incident, two men were lost during the night of November 20 while crewing aboard a boat returning to New Zealand from Australia. David Anderson of Whangaparaoa, New Zealand, and Mark Mart, of Queensland, Australia, disappeared from the 41-foot Kiwi ketch *Janamarie II* after she rolled 360° and was dismasted. One of the two was reportedly sucked out of a broken pilothouse window, while the other was lost when the section of boat his harness was tethered to broke away. Although badly injured, the boat's owners, Richard and Jan Lay of New Zealand, managed to hang on and were later rescued by a helicopter from the U.S. Navy vessel *Shiloh*. Richard says the only reason they survived was his wife's refusal to give up.

There was also one West Coast family who perhaps cheated death. On November 28, the Burmans — Bruce, 45, Marianne, 43, and Heath, 13 — aboard *Freya*, a Bellingham, Washington-based Explorer 45, were saved after they'd been rolled five times, dismasted, lost their sea anchor, and had their liferaft blown away. Their saviors were the incredibly

courageous volunteer crew aboard a Northland Electricity Sikorsky S76 helicopter. *Freya* is presumed to have sunk almost immediately after their rescue.

In addition, many of the perhaps 100 boats that made the crossing from the South Pacific to New Zealand in November suffered some kind of significant damage. The English sailboat *Energetic*, for example, was also dismasted on the way down from Vanuatu. Motor surfing down the face of enormous seas, she was able to find shelter at Lord Howe Island.

In the midst of all this, the United Nations' weather agency predicted that the La Niña weather pattern — a cooling of the Pacific Ocean and therefore the opposite of an El Niño — might cause freak weather conditions in northeast Australia, the southwestern Pacific Islands, and possibly New Zealand.

Of the world's major ocean sailing routes, a number are known for being difficult or even dangerous. These would include crossing the Bay of Biscay, offshore in the Pacific Northwest, from Panama to Aruba, in the gulfs of Tehuantepec and Papagayo, up the Red Sea, across the Tasman Sea, along the east coast of South Africa — and between the South Pacific and New Zealand.

While the east coast of South Africa is perhaps the single most dangerous area because of the fearsome seas, at least ports of refuge aren't too far apart. What makes the passage between the South Pacific and New Zealand so dangerous is not the frequency of horrific weather — which we're classifying as including breaking seas of over 25 feet — but the fact that there's nowhere along the more than 1,000-mile course to hide if such weather does come up.

Cruisers were made aware of just how dangerous the passage between New Zealand and the South Pacific can be in late May of '94 during the Queen's Birthday Storm. A large group of cruising boats had taken off from Auckland at the start of the summer cruising season in the tropics when they were hit by an enduring storm with 80 knot winds and seas estimated as high as 40 feet. Three lives and eight sailboats were lost. Since then, few people have underestimated the dangers of crossings between the South Pacific and New Zealand.

Andy and Jill Rothman of the Tiburon-based J/44 *First Light*, who had enjoyed six months of excellent cruising in Fiji, describe the situation that everyone who wants to sail from the South Pacific to New Zealand faces:

"Conventional wisdom has it that the best weather window for the passage from the South Pacific tropical islands to subtropical New Zealand is early to mid-November, the southern hemisphere spring. In theory, it's late enough in the season to miss the winter gales that sweep across the Tasman Sea, and early enough to miss the tropical cyclone season in the South Pacific. However, those who've made the run say that it's always a crapshoot, and that you must expect at least some rough weather."

Carol Noel and Bob Ely of the Seattle-based Westsail 43 *Elyxir*, who would be part of the same Fiji to New Zealand group as *First Light*, explain how they approached the 1,050-mile crossing:

"Although many old hands prefer to make the trip between the South Pacific and New Zealand in December when the spastic spring weather has mellowed and summer is more in bloom, November is normally a good month. However, with the advent of a strong La Niña year — suggesting early and extra powerful cyclones in the South Pacific and increased activity in the South Pacific Convergence Zone — we decided to look for a weather window in early November. Therefore we watched the traditional indicators: cycles of lows and highs crossing the Tasman Sea from Australia to New Zealand, the intensity of highs, and latitudes of frontal pressures. We also listened to yachts reporting in to Des of Russell Radio to try to identify any weather trends, and talked to experts such as John Anderson on Norfolk Island and Bob McDavitt of New Zealand MetService.

"What we noticed was that highs and lows seemed to be rolling along in their usual winter weekly cycle. So we decided on a strategy of leaving Fiji on a high in order to catch the front preceding the next high north of 30°S — where fronts tend to pack less punch. Then we'd travel as fast as we could on the next high hoping to make New Zealand before getting caught by the next front. If this required motoring through the high, we weren't going to hesitate, because the longer you're out there, the greater your chances of being caught when the shit hits the fan.

"The one condition we knew we had to avoid was getting caught between a high and an approaching low — especially a low coming down from the north.

"With all the long range predictions calling for light southeasterlies and eastsoutheasterlies, we departed Suva on November 7 with three other boats: *Wings*, the Serendipity 43 from Seattle with Fred Roswold and Judy Jensen; *Argonauta* from New Zealand; *First Light* with Andy and Jill Rothman from Tiburon; and *Scoots* from the Bahamas. In the preceding days, four other boats had left Fiji for New Zealand: *Woody Goose* with Roger and Anita from England, *Pelagic II* from Everett, Washington; *Caledonia* from Port Townsend; and *Aka* from Hawaii. Our group of eight kept in contact twice a day on SSB to compare weather conditions and other information."

On or about the same day, a fleet of about 11 yachts left Tonga for New Zealand, which is also about a 1,000-mile passage. Among these vessels were *Go West*, an Island Packet 38 with Jim and Helen Boswell of Mill Valley; *Annapurna*, a Hans Christian 48 with Buddy and Ruth Ellison of Sausalito; *Aquahabi*, a 45-foot steel boat with Bruce and Pam of Washington; *Max Grody II*, a Tayana 55 with Peter and his family; and *Salacia*, Mike Fritz's Tayana 37 from San Diego with Julie-Ann Black. Other boats included three boats in the 28 to 33-foot range known as 'the three m's' — *Mangoe*, *Megot*, and *Manina*.

"Not everybody in our group of eight from Fiji," resumes Noel, "sailed the same course. Some headed for a waypoint northwest of the Bay of Islands, a strategy that is recommended in Jimmy Cornell's book and by others. It proved to be a very successful tactic last year when, because of El Niño, westerlies were more prevalent. But we felt this year's strong La Niña indicated a more easterly flow, so we chose to sail a rhumbline course toward the Bay of Islands until about 29°S. At that point we'd reassess our course with regard to the weather. We were fortunate, as our plan left us in a good position when the bad weather hit.

"On November 11, about four days into our passage, we noticed a small dip in the isobar just to the north of us. The next day — we were at 28°S178°E by this time — there was a pronounced dip and a weak trough running through it. Twelve hours later, Taupo Radio was calling it a "tropical disturbance" and reporting clockwise winds of 25 knots within 260 miles of the center in the southern semi-circle. We weren't particularly alarmed as far as cyclone development was concerned, as this thing was too far south and, we hoped at least, the water too cold to fuel it.

"By November 14, however, we were in a 'nowhere to run, nowhere to hide' situation. By this time the weather was no longer being called a tropical disturbance, but rather a "deepening low" at about 27°S179°E — and it was stalled against a high pressure system over New Zealand. This is exactly the situation we'd hoped to avoid, as it left us in the 'squash zone' — which is where the compressed isobars increase the gradient between the high and the low. In other words, we were in the middle of a wide band of southeasterly gale force winds that stretched from the center of the low all the way down to New Zealand. The accompanying four weather fax segments show how rapidly the situation developed.

"For the boats ahead of us who had continued on to their waypoints well to the northwest of the Bay of Islands, it was bad news. They'd eventually have to tack back towards the east — right into gale force winds and 20 to 30 foot seas. As for us, we knew we had a good strong boat that could take it, and we didn't want to lose the easting we'd managed to save. With the weather not expected to get any worse, we decided we'd continue to slog it out for two or three more days. If it did get worse, we'd heave to.

"While the weather didn't get any worse — and it certainly wasn't as bad as the weather of the second low that would later catch *Salacia* and *Freya* — it was not pleasant. Our heavy Westsail 43 flew off the waves and landed with bone-jarring shudders. And with spray and boarding seas, she seemed more like a submarine than a sailboat. Soon we discovered leaks that we didn't know existed. The galley lockers, for instance, had inches of water slopping around, the bilge had to be pumped hourly because of a leaking bobstay fitting, and all the hatch gaskets had to be stuffed with dirty clothes.

"Even going to the head required a major feat of strength, balance, and determination. And geysers of seawater — laced with nasty black bits from the water hoses — shot up from the sink drain whenever we pounded in a certain way. I know we should have closed the seacock, but in conditions like that you tend to do only what needs to be done to conserve your strength. As for cleaning up — out of the question!

"Bob, having sailed 78,000 ocean miles, including a singlehanded circumnavigation and cruising with me from Kodiak to the Patagonian Channels of Chile, had never encountered such bad weather before."

The Rothmans found themselves in the same situation. "Our plan had been to sail close hauled and make the rhumbline," says Andy, "as we didn't want to have to tack to make the Bay of Islands. When the wind continued to blow at 40 knots, creating breaking 25-foot seas, we deliberately slowed our boat down for comfort and safety. As a result, after more

than eight days we only beat the Westsail by nine hours. Had the conditions gotten any worse, we would have run with it."

Perhaps the slowest boat in this Fiji to New Zealand group was the Deans' 54-foot *Woody Goose*. The lovely cold molded ketch had left Fiji two days earlier than *First Light* but didn't arrive in New Zealand waters until two days later. The ketch wasn't at sea for 12 days because she was inherently slow, but rather because she had problems.

Woody Goose suffered from reoccurring linkage problems that affected her steering. During the early part of the passage when it was still calm, the Hawaii-based *Aka* had apparently come alongside and fabricated some parts to try to keep the system functional. The makeshift parts reportedly enabled the system to work for a while in lighter weather, but not in the heavy stuff. During the last four days of their passage, during which time the Deans experienced nothing but gale conditions, *Woody Goose's* steering repeatedly failed, requiring Roger to devote much time and energy trying to make repairs under dreadful circumstances.

Woody Goose had other problems, too. As a result of bad fuel or clogged filters, the Deans couldn't rely on their engine, and were apparently unable to effectively motor when it would have been most advantageous. The autopilot didn't work either, so when the steering system was functional, either Roger or Anita would have to hand-steer. The rudder was suspect, too, as they'd bashed it on a reef in the South Pacific. One of their reasons for heading toward Whangarei was to get the rudder fixed or replaced.

Anita wasn't in perfect health herself. Indeed, the reason the Deans were sailing around the world was because she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. The two wanted to share the experience while she was healthy enough to enjoy it. We don't know to what extent, if any, Anita was incapacitated by the disease.

Twelve long days after departing Fiji, *Woody Goose* closed on the New Zealand coast at night. She hadn't been able to lay Whangarei or the Bay of Islands, and was indeed almost all the way up to the North Cape where almost everything is a lee shore. It was unthinkable for the exhausted couple to tack back into the gale, so they almost had no choice but to try to anchor several miles offshore. They hoped it would give them a chance to catch a short rest and perhaps a break in the weather.

This move would be akin to anchoring several miles off Ocean Beach at night in a westerly gale with large seas running. It might not be something you'd want to do, but in a certain set of circumstances it might be your best or only hope. Despite the conditions, Roger was confident they'd be all right.

Tragically, the anchor dragged and the boat rapidly approached the surfline. Someone ashore spotted their distress flares at 0500 and called the police. Roger desperately tried the engine, but it wouldn't start. When he hoisted the main, the boat rotated on her axis, but didn't answer the helm.

As a result, *Woody Goose* was driven onto the beach in the predawn darkness by relentless 10-foot seas. Roger managed to swim ashore, but Anita disappeared. Locals,

who arrived a short time later, had seen other boats blown ashore in similar conditions, and seemed to know just where to look for the missing Anita. Her body was found 800 meters north of where the ketch had gone aground.

Senior Constable Shane Godient found Roger devastated by the loss of the woman he'd loved for most of his life, and took a personal interest in protecting him from outsiders. After hearing of the tragedy, many cruisers travelled up from the Bay of Islands to console Roger and help him salvage valuables from the boat. As for *Woody Goose*, her keel had broken off after coming ashore, and she was destroyed after a long crack was discovered in her hull.

Anita was buried after a memorial service in the nearby town of Houhora. Her son was in attendance. Later there was a wake at the constable's house, with many cruisers participating. A *tapu* has been placed at the site where Anita died.

While the Fiji group was battling the winds and seas of the first low and eventually making it to their New Zealand destinations, most of the Tonga group stopped at Minerva Reef, 825 miles from New Zealand. Minerva is an unusual place: a partially submerged reef that forms several lagoons out in the middle of nowhere. Although the reef is mostly awash, it provides decent protection from the seas in all but the highest tides.

So far the trip down from Tonga had been uneventful, and now everyone had a chance to get some rest and check the latest weather. Jim and Hellen Boswell, who arrived at Minerva on Tuesday November 10 aboard their Island Packet 38 *Go West*, didn't like the sound of Bob McDavitt's five-day forecast for the next leg of the passage. It called for a low to form on the 12th and intensify. And that's exactly what happened.

"So we stayed put at Minerva, and watched on Friday as the low went south and the weather — particularly the seas — turned nasty. This was the low that hammered *First Light*, *Elyxir*, *Woody Goose*, and the rest of the Fiji to New Zealand fleet. We also got a report from the Florida-based Out-Island 33 *Never Monday*, which was already several hundred miles south of Minerva on their way to New Zealand. They reported they were riding to a sea anchor — which they didn't like at all — in 45 knots of wind and 15-foot breaking seas. So we and most of the other boats stayed put at Minerva for a total of five days.

"When most of the Minerva fleet left for New Zealand, the weather was still very bad on the southern part of the course," continue the Boswells. "But the idea was that the gale would blow itself out by the time we got down there, then we could dash down to New Zealand in relatively mild conditions before the next low formed. This strategy worked out perfectly, as it turned out to be the best crossing we've had to date. Way better than Mexico to the Marquesas, and way better than most of our passages in the South Pacific — although we've now learned that a high in the South Pacific doesn't mean lighter winds, but rather reinforced trades.

"Just about everybody in our group did really well — even the little 'three M's' — because everybody moved along pretty much as fast as they could. The most wind we had was 25 to 30 knots for a short time, which wasn't bad, because we need a lot of wind to move.

Best of all, we were able to sail straight for our destination. When the wind did calm down, we immediately fired up the engine and motored as quickly as we could. As a result of averaging 140 miles a day, we and most of the boats in our group were able to sneak down to New Zealand between the low which clobbered the Fiji fleet, and the much stronger second low which caught *Salacia* and *Freya*, two boats at the tail end of our group."

Exactly where *Freya* came into the picture is not clear to us. We do know that the family — Bruce, a contractor, Marianne, a school counselor, and their son — had sailed down the coast of Mexico, across to French Polynesia, then to Tonga, on the early legs of what was to be a four-year cruise. We don't know when they left Tonga and/or Minerva Reef, although it was almost certainly after *Salacia*. In any event, both boats arrived off New Zealand a day too late to avoid being caught in 60 to 70-knot winds and 30 to 40-foot breaking seas — the kind of weather that can spell tragedy for even the best of boats and crews.

Mike Fritz and *Salacia* sailed from Mexico to French Polynesia in the spring of '98. While in Moorea, he met Julie-Ann Black, who was on vacation. The two hit it off, so Black returned home to sell her car and take care of other business, then rejoined Mike and *Salacia* in Bora Bora. Black was not an experienced ocean sailor.

People who know Fritz describe him as a nice guy, a reasonably good sailor, and typical of scores of folks who cruise on a budget. *Salacia*, was not, for example, equipped with a liferaft or SSB radio. There are conflicting reports about an EPIRB. Some say the boat didn't have one, others say it had one that didn't work. In any event, Fritz never claims to have set one off. Incidentally, none of these three items are required by law, and more than a few cruisers don't have them.

Fritz and Black had enough sailing problems in the South Pacific to make Black wonder if the boat didn't like her. They'd gone aground in Moorea, although not too badly. But after heaving to off Tonga, a shift in the wind resulted in *Salacia* going up hard on Hunga Reef. One observer described the incident as "a testament to the strength of the boat, as the hull was deflected so far inward that the cabinetry holding the galley sink was raised two inches." In addition, the rudder was so badly damaged that it had to be repaired or replaced.

When *Salacia* left Tonga, she had one or more engine problems. One of the mounts was broken, which meant it would be risky to motor at high speed or in rough conditions. There was apparently further propulsion problems, for *Salacia* stayed at Minerva long after the rest of the Tonga fleet had departed, apparently concerned about being able to get out the pass while there was still high surf near the entrance.

Salacia is also reported to have been becalmed for four days between the two lows, during which time Fritz either couldn't or didn't want to motor. We've also been told that *Freya*, which was behind *Salacia*, had arranged to give her a tow — until the wind came up first.

Both *Salacia* and *Freya* were doing fine until the night of Friday November 26, at which time they were 75 to 100 miles from the northeast coast of New Zealand. The Burmans

were getting twice-a-day weather reports from Des, and knew the weather was turning — but not so bad that ships would eventually be advised to take shelter behind islands.

With the weather becoming so bad, a concerned Des offered to keep a schedule with the Burmans throughout the night, but Marianne declined. She did agree, however, to Des' suggestion that he check in on them at 0630.

When Des tried to call *Freya* the next morning there was no answer — and for good reason. At about 0430, *Freya* was rolled for the first of about five times. When closing on the coast from offshore, it's very common for big seas to become even more treacherous. The Burman's described the 360s as "like being inside a clothes dryer". At some point the boat was dismasted, and the 3/4-inch nylon line holding the sea anchor off the transom broke.

After the boat — a heavy displacement boat built in Taiwan — rolled the first time, Bruce set off the EPIRB while his wife and son put out Maydays over the radio for the next five hours. That they continued to put out Maydays over the VHF probably saved their lives.

When *Freya* failed to come up for their 0630 sked, Des, fearing trouble, called Northland Maritime Radio, a quasi-coast guard communications system, to put them on the alert. Then at 0750, the National Rescue Coordination Center in Wellington received notice that *Freya's* EPIRB had been activated, and their relatives in Washington confirmed they were believed to be somewhere off the New Zealand coast. The EPIRB indicated *Freya* was 75 miles northeast of Whangarei, so a helicopter and P3 Orion fixed-wing aircraft were dispatched. The helicopter, however, almost immediately had to return to Kerikeri for fuel.

At about 1000, *Salacia* — also a heavy displacement boat built in Taiwan — in the vicinity of *Freya*, took a severe knockdown, and at least temporarily lost part or all of her steering. About this time, somebody from *Salacia* issued a Mayday over the VHF. The distress call was picked up by one of the search aircraft, and for many hours after that Northland Maritime Radio regularly requested vessels in the area to be on the lookout for the vessel and try to assist. Before long, most of the cruisers in the region — and there were lots of them — were hunkered down in their boats following the dramas of *Freya* and *Salacia* over the VHF. From the way they were being buffeted aboard their own boats in slips or at anchor in sheltered harbors, no one doubted that things were serious.

Because of conflicting reports, there are two theories of what happened next. One is that Fritz was able to repair the steering and resume progress toward shore, but that a broken radio meant he couldn't rescind the Mayday. The other version is that he never knew a Mayday had been issued. Whatever the case, for the next 18 hours officials had no reason to believe *Salacia* was anything but a vessel "in grave and imminent danger, and therefore requiring immediate assistance."

For whatever reason, *Freya's* EPIRB quit broadcasting its signal while the Orion was searching for her. With visibility down to as little as 300 feet, the air crew wasn't having much luck. Fortunately, Marianne had continued to broadcast the Mayday over the radio, for it was faintly picked up by the aircraft. With Marianne counting down numbers, the

aircraft was able to home in on the signal, eventually spotting the distressed *Freya* about noon.

An hour later, the refueled Northland Electric helicopter was back on the scene with the nearly impossible mission of trying to find *Salacia*, position unknown, in near zero visibility. But with *Freya's* salon knee-deep in water and taking more on faster than it could be pumped out, the Burman family was in immediate peril. So the helicopter crew was instructed to terminate the search for *Salacia* and devote their efforts to rescuing the Burmans.

The four volunteers flying the Northland Electricity Rescue Sikorsky S76 arrived to find *Freya* pitching wildly in the 30-foot seas and 70-knot winds. They decided to lower 50-year-old Trevor Tuckey into the water and drag him toward the boat. The result was that Tuckey banged his head against the boat, and was brought back aboard the chopper in a dazed condition. So the winch man lowered a line to *Freya*, and after collecting his senses, Tuckey went down again, this time onto the deck of the boat. How they managed this in such conditions is hard to believe, but with water pouring into the cabin, Bruce and Heath were lifted up to the helicopter. A short time later, Tucker and Marianne, after getting drenched a couple of times, were brought up.

The Burmans were suffering from bruises and mild hypothermia, but were otherwise in good shape physically. They're still in New Zealand, sorting it all out, trying to decide if they want to continue cruising.

In typical Kiwi fashion, Tuckey shrugged off risking his life to save the lives of folks he didn't even know. Tuckey explained that he had total confidence in his pilot and his winchman, and was too busy doing his job to worry about his own safety. We don't know about the rest of you, but we wish we had half this man's courage.

With the Burmans rescued, all efforts turned to *Salacia*. But without a position or an EPIRB signal, and with darkness having fallen, it was like trying to find a needle in a haystack while blindfolded. And if Fritz had indeed managed to fix the steering and didn't want to be rescued, there was no way for anybody to know about it.

Twelve hours after the Mayday had been broadcast, *Salacia* still hadn't been heard from. At the request of authorities, *Direct Kookaburra*, the only ship large enough to be able to search in such terrible conditions, began to look for *Salacia* at midnight. Amazingly, it took them only an hour to find the *Tayana 37*. Pulling alongside them proved to be a much more difficult task; it took three hours during which time the container ship made five passes.

Fritz has told others that he and Black saw *Direct Kookaburra* when it was about five miles away, but went back belowdecks. Because *Salacia* had no functioning radio, there could be no communication between the vessels. Fritz has said the next thing he knew, the container ship was banging up against *Salacia*, dismasting her.

According to the *Direct Kookaburra* crew, life-rings were lowered at the end of ropes, and Black and Fritz each got into one. Fritz came up on one, but Black didn't come up with

hers. They don't know what happened to her. Given the total chaos of the situation, this is completely believable.

Once Fritz was aboard the ship, cruisers who had only been able to monitor Northland Maritime's end of the drama, could now hear both sides. "When Mike's voice came on over the ship's radio," remembers Andy Rothman, "he was very rational and lucid. He also sounded a little excited and very concerned. It was very haunting."

Fritz remained aboard the ship for a full day, during which time he was treated by a team from a trauma center. He stayed aboard friend's boats in Auckland for a while, and most recently has been boat-sitting in Whangarei.

Direct Kookaburra's rescue attempt is currently under investigation by the Kiwi Maritime Safety Authority.

As soon as the weather began to calm down the next day, the speculation and second-guessing among cruisers and others began.

Why hadn't helicopters been sent out instead of a ship? Two helicopter operators and the military had declined, saying conditions were too dangerous. Yet the same Northland Electricity helicopter that had rescued the Burmans was on the *Salacia* site shortly after Black had disappeared. Co-pilot Steve Simpson was quoted as saying, "We could have winched them off with no trouble. But the seas were quite bad and maybe they felt they had to get them off right away."

Some seemed to want to blame the ship's captain — which struck some other cruisers as outrageous. "He put his ship, crew and self at risk in terrible conditions to save the crew of *Salacia*, and obviously did the best he could in awful conditions. Having had to make repeated passes, he surely would have gladly backed off if he knew they didn't need to be rescued immediately."

There was irony, too. After several years in the courts, the Kiwi's controversial 'Section 21', which required yachts to pass basic safety inspections prior to leaving New Zealand, had been thrown out. Surely there will be calls for something similar to be put back on the books. Indeed, some cruisers voiced the opinion that if you can't afford an EPIRB, a liferaft, and an SSB radio, you can't afford to go cruising.

On the other hand, few cruisers were eager to assign actual blame. With almost all having been through at least some nasty weather, the general feeling was "There but for the grace of God go we." Every ocean sailor knows that neither they nor their boats can withstand the full fury of nature. They also appreciate the effect extreme fatigue can have on the body and the mind — particularly in such awful conditions.

There is only one good thing that can come out of the November cruising tragedies off New Zealand: that once all the facts possible become known, the knowledge be used to try to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

WARNING!

While we have tried to make this article as accurate as possible, we caution everyone that there are likely to be some mistakes. The problem is that much of the information came from a number of second and third-hand sources, as well as not-always-accurate newspaper and news service articles.

Our primary information on *Salacia* came from individuals who spoke to — but did not formally interview — Mike Fritz. Our attempts to get Fritz to contact us were unsuccessful. Our primary information on *Woody Goose* came from a frequent *Latitude* contributor who spent time with Roger Dean after the tragedy and attended the memorial service for Anita Dean. Much of our information on *Freya* came from a story in the *Bellingham (Washington) Herald*, a story that was based on conversations relatives had with the Burman family.

Because so much of the information isn't first-hand, we urge readers not to draw anything but the most general conclusions from the information presented. If anyone has information to correct this story, we urge you to contact us. Even if you weren't part of any of the tragedies, but just have lessons to share from your experience, we and future cruisers would love to hear from you.

◆ 1999 Latitude 38