

Last frontier of personal freedom – and risk

A lot of consideration needs to be given to the state of mind of the Waitara fisherman who perished at sea last week when causes of the tragedy are analysed. He had a head injury that changed him, some people have said.

I've seen that in a couple of cases, and it's baffling. Someone you've known a while, been friends with, suddenly becoming a different person, and not necessarily one you want to continue to know, despite feelings of sympathy and your best attempts to comprehend.

That kind of empathy was all too apparent in publicity surrounding the tragedy, with half the media coverage devoted to giving the casualty's family and admirers a chance to appraise us of his good qualities, and the other half pointing out the unpleasant suggestion he appears to have gone to sea with disregard for safety. It's heartbreaking for those who know him, frustrating for marine experts and experienced boaties.

Not much is heard about the effects of brain injury until an accident like this happens. Those who follow Coronation Street on telly may be better informed than most, since the long-running soap for a year or more has been portraying a head injury aftermath scenario with one of its main characters.

When the Waitara man was first involved in a fatal accident in a boat on the Waitara River bar in 2015 – a capsized that resulted in the death of his fishing companion – I later interviewed the brave surfer who went out and climbed aboard the unmanned and circling boat.

He got the skipper (the man who has just died) aboard and they went to the aid of the second man, but too late to revive him. The skipper then insisted on taking the helm again as they headed over the bar, but the surfer was so alarmed at the risk of another capsized, he grabbed the wheel back. He was less than impressed with the man's behaviour.

It's interesting, isn't it, that we have strict but not necessarily effective regulations about what we can put to sea in, but nothing that prevents anyone going out into such a dangerous and unpredictable environment.

My wife and I were yachties in Auckland for a decade or so, and one of the impressions that still sits with me is the extraordinary casualness with which New Zealanders regard the sea. Many see it as the last great frontier of personal freedom.

Before we bought our own yacht, I was as sanguine about the marine environment as most people. I'd been out on Auckland harbour a few times, mostly on my uncles' bridge-decker launches. We were vaguely aware of danger. One uncle lost a fiancée when a stove blew up in someone's launch and she was killed. There was also a lot of drinking out there. The inlet beside Rangitoto Island wasn't called Drunk's Bay for nothing; they reckoned you couldn't get an anchor to hold in parts of Mansion House Bay because of the broken beer bottle glass on the bottom.

Fortunately, just before we committed to buying an old H28 sloop - as safe a cruising yacht as any inexperienced idiot like me could buy - I got a salutary lesson when I went on a week-long jaunt with a friend on his small yacht, a trip that took us around the Hauraki Gulf.

It began well enough, a pleasant sail in fair winds. But we ran out of water after a day, then parked in the path of an incoming blow that necessitated wild evacuation in gale-force winds. I was delegated to helm the boat up the gulf as the freezing storm hounded us, finally collapsing with near exposure.

I awoke below to the news the dinghy we were towing was now headed towards Chile. We battled through a hundred tacks to enter Kawau Island's shelter, at one stage with me in charge when the skipper fell on a winch and appeared to break his back (just a bad bruise, thank goodness). After a

JT column for Saturday, December 2, 2017 – the last frontier

couple of celebratory beers to herald our survival, I succeeded in blocking the head with too much toilet paper.

I kissed the ground when we got home, swearing never to go to sea again. We did, but not before formal training and the gaining of boat and yacht master certificates. Even then, sailing was ever eventful, always risky. And that was without the added hazard of a brain injury.