

All at sea in small boats

I've been trying to work out which part of New Zealand is farthest from the sea and at first I thought it must be in the middle of the North Island, Waiouru perhaps.

But no, there it is, in the ever-helpful web of all stuff – Cromwell in the South Island is the longest distance from big water, about 120km.

With that in mind I'm making an absurd assumption that one of its offspring may be responsible for what competes for the title of New Zealand's biggest maritime screwup in modern times.

That's a deliberately vague label, because our early history is littered with shipwreck and fishing mortalities.

The contender I'm thinking about is the genius responsible for buying navy in-shore patrol boats about 15 years ago that turned out to be unusable in our coastal seas. They've been sitting idle at the Devonport naval base for more than a decade.

Only someone ignorant of maritime matters could have suggested we buy such white elephants, surely, so I'm guessing they were bred well inland, moved directly to a cellar in a Wellington government building, and never ventured out beyond the capital's harbour.

I'd still like to think Waiouru was in the mix somewhere, because that's where the Army hangs out. If our ship buyer came from there, the irony would be exquisite. (The Army has its own problems with vehicles whose guns can't fire into mountains).

But I'm being unfair. From what I can see, the balls-up is a political one that's generated a slanging match between the anti-defence spending zealots of the last fully Labour government and the social wreckers who followed for three terms.

This is where the comments section of an online news story can be helpful. When news broke last month that some outfit based in Australia has been advertising two of the \$36 million vessels for a bargain \$10 million each (engines scarcely run in, guns removed) the dozens of comments included some from those at the gun-barrel end of this scandal.

They put up a good case for not blaming the Navy, which they say needs a third off-shore capable patrol boat, not several with what is called in-shore capability (read: lake, estuary, harbour).

The offshore ones are more expensive, naturally; so someone without sea legs working further up the chain – a Ministry of Defence wallah (perhaps from inland) – seems to have mentioned the cheaper option to his or her political mistress/master.

If the politicians – in this case, then Minister of Defence Phil Goff was holding the mooring line – had done homework they'd have found the technical reason why the candidate vessels would induce sea-sickness even among seasoned sailors (not to mention the possibility of foundering).

One of the news story commenters who knows his maritime onions said the problem lay with the vessels' length, which is unsuited to the typical distance between waves in a good Tasman blow.

A previous example was there for anyone to find. Wartime minesweeper vessels called Fairmiles were converted into patrol boats after WWII, but at 112 feet long were found to be hell in an offshore Kiwi seaway.

I recall being on one used during the early days of Taranaki's offshore oil industry and joining a long line of others being sick over the rail.

One of the current written-off Navy boats did a voyage to Fiji, so some are saying they're fine offshore. However, another commenter in the know says that journey could only be undertaken when the long-range weather forecast guaranteed a calm pond.

Three things sicken me about this little affair. First – the politics. Each main party blames the other. Labour says the boats couldn't be used because there aren't enough trained staff; National says they should never have been bought in the first place.

There may be truth in both claims, but let's not blame the seafarers, whose advice was ignored, nor the bureaucrat from Cromwell or Waiouru or somewhere very dry who was caught in the middle.

The second thing is the sneaky way Government problem-solvers are trying to get rid of the boats without anyone noticing (an online advertisement vanished after media inquiries, and probably not because the boats had sold).

The third is that this should happen in a country famous for holding the America's Cup, winning most of its sporting gold medals sitting in boats, and having a disproportionately large number of people familiar with the saying "no red port left".