

River Miracle

Fear gripped Brett and his stomach heaved as he realised this could be the end. For ninety minutes he had endured seasickness, fear and abandonment in the mountainous seas. All attempts to re-enter the kayak were stymied by the turbulent waters, so he clung desperately to the swamped vessel. He was being swept into the ink black night with no sign of rescue despite his distress calls, and despair began to rear its ugly head. Utterly exhausted and in shock, only a glimmer of hope remained. How could he possibly be found miles out to sea on such a dark night in this maelstrom?



The same day at Dee Why, not far from Barrenjoey before it got rough.

Brett a former water policeman and now a paramedic, had arranged with his friend Ian to paddle into the lee of Barrenjoey headland to experience the mountainous seas being swept up the coast by 30-knot winds. He was well prepared with a lifejacket, a bailing bucket, two floating torches and a mobile phone waterproofed inside two zip lock plastic bags. The tide would be coming in, so any difficulties would be ameliorated by the incoming tide. They anticipated that if swamped the tide would sweep them into the safer and calmer waters of Pittwater. However unbeknownst to them, a freshwater flood from weeks of heavy rain had led to the opening of the floodgates of Warragamba dam. The lighter freshwater ignored the sea and continued to flow over the incoming tide. This was the miscalculation that had placed Brett's life in jeopardy.

They had arranged to meet on the beach behind Barrenjoey headland at 4:30 pm but Ian had not been able to rendezvous till six. When Brett objected that it was too late, Ian responded that it was Daylight saving time with plenty of light left and persuaded Brett to join him. So they ventured out, Brett in his river kayak and Ian in his 5.5 m touring kayak. They paddled past a couple of fishermen anchored in calm water on the inner end of Barrenjoey and headed for the excitement of the monstrous waves.



Barrenjoey headland

As they paddled seawards, the seas began to stand up steeply and close together. The strong outgoing water flow was causing the incoming seas to stand up while the crests were being compressed together. This type of sea is very dangerous. It was not long before Ian, oblivious to the strong current, was swept beyond the headland into dangerous water where he was capsized. Brett, better prepared and carrying a bailer, paddled to his stricken friend and helped him bail the canoe. Ian re-entered and began to paddle to safety. With each steep wave the kayak accelerated and the nose bit into the water and tried to turn and capsize the kayak (broaching). Desperate to avoid another capsize Ian paddled with great care and anxiety while attempting to keep an eye on Brett. But looking behind when Brett was hidden from view by the gigantic waves most of the time, made this difficult. When Ian had made it to the calm end of Barrenjoey, he stood on submerged rocks and lifted the kayak above his head to empty it.

Shortly after helping Ian, Brett had turned his canoe into the wind and capsized as he was turning in. Now it was his turn to recover. However his attempts to re-enter the canoe were constantly frustrated by swamping in the steep seas. After half an hour of failed attempts but without too much concern he decided to contact rescue authorities. He had been a member of the water police, is a volunteer member of the Marine Rescue, and a paramedic. The police and the ambulance service had helicopters, and, the police and marine rescue had seaworthy rescue craft. Rescue, he assumed, should not be too far away.

So it was that on Saturday second of March 2013 at 7:30 in the evening, while there was still light, Brett phoned his wife. He asked her to phone Emergency on triple zero and inform them of his predicament. She contacted Emergency as well as a friend who put out a Mayday call on his boat radio. Desperate, seasick and tired, Brett again called his wife at five past eight as it was getting dark, to explain his precarious situation.

The night had blackened with unusually low dark cloud making it too dangerous for the police helicopter to venture out. To add to the dilemma the police boat crew found themselves on a land job in Gosford, miles away, and unavailable to man the rescue boat. The Marine Rescue boat was not alerted till later. So Brett continued to drift out to sea with no immediate hope of rescue.

Ian standing on the submerged rock at Barrenjoey searched for his friend. He could just see him in the distance swamped and struggling to get into his kayak. Now he realised that the situation was desperate. Not confident that he could survive the sea conditions and aware that to rescue Brett would be impossible, he paddled over to the fishermen, Peter Stofka and John Rule and asked them if they could rescue his friend.

It was getting dark as Peter and John pulled up anchor and headed out. The seas were rougher than anticipated so Peter took special care negotiating them. Even so, at one stage the boat breasted a wave and fell off the other side. Without the stability of the sea the boat landed on its side. After some time looking back and forth, and a near broach on an outside wave John told Peter; “The boat is not handling these condiditons, there’s no point in three being lost out here let’s go back.” They called emergency three times on triple-0 but in the confusion were asked each time for the nearest street corner* to the position of the distressed person. This was not encouraging so John was relieved when he noticed a boat approaching and assumed it was Marine Rescue. Peter corrected him; “No, I think it is Mitchell.”



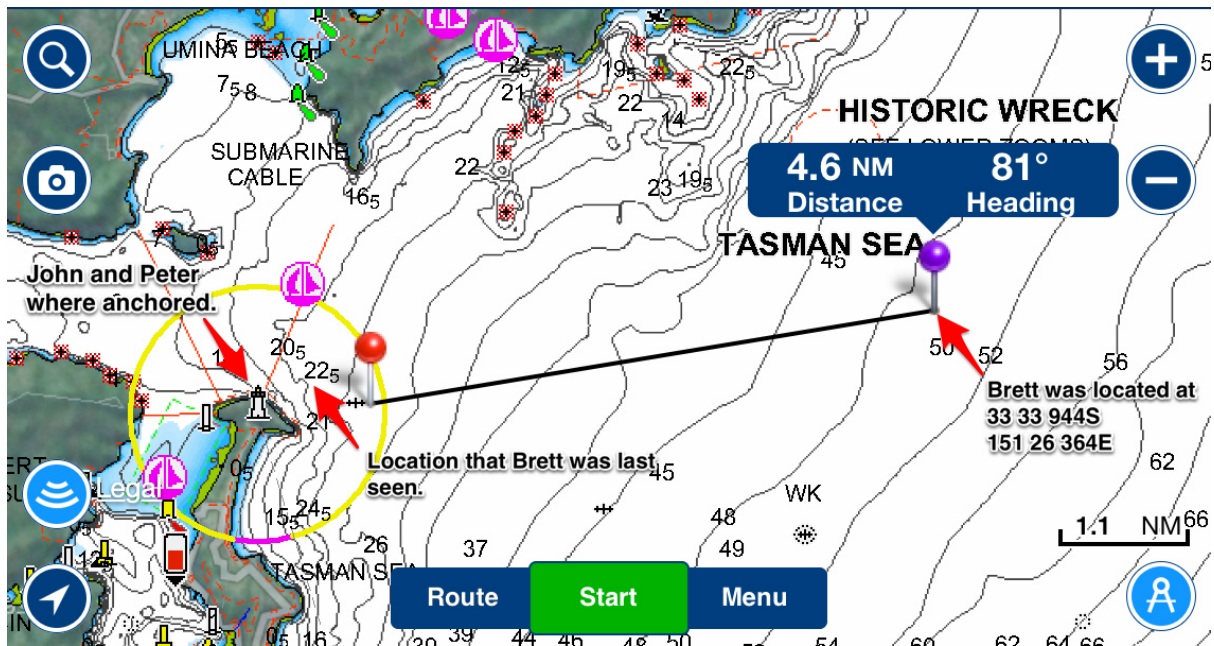
Mitchell’s boat Chilin. Mitchell’s airconditioning company is “Licenced to Chill”. Its seakeeping ability is no accident, he spent some time choosing the hullform.

Twenty nine year old Mitchell Burge in his 5.5 m deep vee launch belonged to the same fishing club (Hornsby-Kuringai) as Peter and John. Mitchell was fishing for Whiting in Smiths creek about 15 km upriver. Intrigued by the clutter on the marine radio he worried that a member of his club may have struck trouble. He upped anchor and motored to the mouth of the river and talked to Peter and John. John was able to report the missing kayak and that he thought he had seen a light near a well known under water shipwreck. A challenge such as this excited Mitchell who decided to attempt a rescue. He warned his friend Mark Barnes of the peril they might be in and offered him the opportunity to leave the boat, as he had a wife and child to look after. Mark declined the offer so they carefully planned the rescue. Mitchell’s boat was larger and heavier with a more seakindly shape and they thought it might be able to handle the conditions. Peter had confidence in Mitchell and told him: “Mitchell, this bloke’s life depends on you.”



The low stern of the boat helps land more than game fish.
Mitchell is standing.

Brett had now been missing for over an hour and it was necessary to estimate where he might be. How fast was the current flowing and in which direction. So they removed the side covers to reduce the wind effect and allow the current to hold most sway. Then they motored to the area of the shipwreck and cut the motor. Mitchell's boat was a deep vee craft and so was deep enough in the water to be influenced by the current more than the wind. As well, when between the 6metre crests the wind became almost dead. Without a usable timing device, Mitchell turned on his sound system and listened to "November Rain" by Guns and Roses. He knew this song lasted about seven and a half minutes, so he plotted his speed and direction of drift for the duration of the song. From this he was able to make an estimate of Brett's position, about four and a half nautical miles ENE of his starting point. This position he plotted on the chart and began to motor to it while the morale boosting sound of Guns and Roses blasted in competition with the crashing seas. Slowed by the seas, they advanced realising their method of estimating Brett's position was "far fetched" but it was the only hope.



Mitchell's "far fetched" estimation of Brett's position.

Seas coming aboard overwhelmed the boat's pump so Mark took to the bailing bucket as they motored on. Mitchell intermittently did a complete circle with the searchlight on, so that Brett would be made aware of his approach. The searchlight had a blinding effect so it was turned off in the hope of seeing Brett in the deep gloom.

Brett vomited copiously as he drifted out to sea clinging to his swamped craft. Each time he reached the top of a swell he flashed his torch around. At last, after one and a half hours, he saw the lights of Mitchell's boat and directed his torch at it. He waited in hope for some time, could they see the torch? Finally Mitchell stopped the boat in the plotted position with all lights off for a determined look. After some minutes and by a miracle they spotted the tiny flash of Brett's torch about 500 metres distant. They thanked the very dark night for highlighting this miserable beacon. "That must be him." Said Mitchell, so they motored in the direction of the light. As they, at last, sighted the lost soul, a feeling of triumph embraced Mitchell and Mark. Brett on the other hand was engulfed with feelings of relief, hope and gratitude as the boat closed.

But now it seemed after all their effort their troubles had just begun. The boat bucked and reared and crashed down in the turbulent seas. For one instant the boat was above Brett by several metres and in the next it was below him by the same amount. In another instant the boat alongside Brett would be swept forty feet away by an unseen wave. Without due care or by accident the boat could crash down on Brett and kill him. Mitchell joked; "Mark, if we kill him we might as well say we couldn't find him." A problem arose when one of his manoeuvres happened to bring the bow in close proximity to Brett.

Life is never so sweet as when you are about to lose it. When the bow sunk into an oncoming wave Brett wrapped his arms around the pulpit and clung on fiercely. Now Mitchell had a problem, he could not land Brett from the bow and Brett's weight created a safety problem, as the bow could not rise readily to the waves they could not see approaching. Now all Mitchell's assertiveness and persuasion was needed to overcome Brett's deep-seated survival instinct. Mitchell pleaded for Brett to let go. After promising to stay till Brett was recovered, Brett let go.

What to do next? Motoring up to Brett posed the danger of crashing down on him or running over him with the propeller. Throwing a rope to him also posed the danger of immobilising the propeller by tangling it in rope. They eventually decided to tie a lifejacket onto a rope and to get the lifejacket to him. Mitchell trailed this device from the boat as he ran in circles around Brett till he was able to seize the lifejacket. Now the boat lay at peril while the motor was put into neutral. This was done to avoid fouling the propeller with the rope, or cutting Brett to pieces. The boat lay at the mercy of wind and wave while Mitchell and Mark hauled Brett in. The low boat and the wave action helped as they dragged Brett bit by bit over the stern and into the boat. There he lay, motionless but still able to think of his canoe. But it was left to drift off into the Tasman as Mitchell motored to safety.

Brett lay on the floorboards vomiting seawater while Mitchell tried to radio in confirmation of the rescue, but, there was no response from Marine Rescue or the Coast Guard. For some reason, Marine Rescue had already recalled the boat it had sent out. Mitchell now carefully motored the boat at nine knots through the swells to safety behind Barrenjoey headland. The danger and challenge of saving Brett from certain death exhilarated him. He reflected that it had been an “awesome” experience unlikely to be repeated in his lifetime.

Mitchell motored into sheltered waters behind Barrenjoey sometime before midnight. The beach was swarming with emergency services and friends. Mitchell’s friends helped unload Brett from the boat some distance from the shore because of the shallow water. His subsequent attempts to contact emergency services to check on Brett’s welfare failed even though his radio worked perfectly. He was being cut out of the loop. Oh! well the job was done, and without further ado, he returned to the original task of competitive fishing.

All credit must be given to the quality of equipment used. The navigation and electronic equipment (installed by Mitchell) continued to work reliably to survive the continual dousing and violent motion of the boat. The motor (with 1000 hours on it) and the thirty- year old boat, had given Mitchell sufficient confidence to undertake the life-threatening task. When Mitchell finally assessed his boat, he found damage costing thousands of dollars to fix. Brett contacted him the following week to thank him and asked if his boat was damaged. Mitch advised Brett that only his navigation lights were damaged. Brett replaced them with new top of the line LED lights which Mitchell thought “was the action of a gentleman”. He could not bring himself to tell him the extent of the damage. Brett’s touching tribute to Mitch was to thank him for enabling him to attend his daughter’s wedding the following week.

It was with some amusement that on the following day Mitchell watched the Coast Guard at practice recovering transmitter equipped dummies from the sea with a helicopter. Mitchell continued in the fishing competition and came a close second for the weekend. To date Mitchell has had no official recognition for his efforts and no emergency authority has bothered to debrief him.

Mitchell’s seamanship skills are no accident. He has been a keen fisherman from an early age. His single mum would take him to his favourite fishing spot at Bobbin head where he was noticed, then adopted and nurtured by members of the Hornsby-Kuringai fishing club. In a way they have become like a surrogate father to the young man who from the age of 12 has been a regular attendee at their meetings. It has been a symbiotic relationship with the support and guidance of the members being repaid by Mitchell’s energetic contributions to the club. Over the years he has accumulated considerable fishing and seamanship skills. So it was, that on the evening of March the second 2013, Mitchell did his extended family proud.

- *In 2006 a similar response was given to a walker lost in bush in the Blue Mountains. In searing heat he phoned emergency services but could not, of course, provide the street he was on, nor the nearest street corner. Thirst finally overtook him and he died a painful desperate death. One lesson to be learned from this, is to turn your mobile off till an emergency occurs, in order to preserve the batteries. Another is to take advantage of the emergency beacons available at the nearest police station.*
- The coroner found that:

“105. It was apparent that in the five calls made by David Iredale to the Ambulance Service that the call takers, perhaps because of the pre-occupation in ascertaining a street address and possibly due to inadequate training, did not identify that the calls were coming from a remote location.”

He made recommendations in regard to this problem that have obviously not been universally acknowledged.

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Postscript:

At no stage during the rescue, nor subsequent, has Mitchell and Mark been recognised officially. By contrast Terry Reynolds and Dennis Byrne have been given bravery awards for a rescue*, in a Marine Rescue craft, of a yacht inside Broken bay near Lion Island. It had been disabled during a South East gale in January 2010. Then why have Mitchell and Mark been so ignored?

Mitchell's rescue efforts reflect no glory on established organisations. It was done in his boat under his own volition with outstanding qualities of seamanship and bravery, or was it derring-do? In fact to recognise Mitchell and Mark would be to recognise the failure of the organisations that would normally be expected to effect the rescue. The talent and ability of individuals such as these two must be submerged, to avoid showing up the mediocrity of the rest. Nonetheless Mitchell has exploited his talent and initiative to establish a profitable and growing air conditioning company. There is nobody to hold him back.

Mitchell in his early youth admits to foolishly committing a victimless crime and now has a criminal record that he regrets, and does not want to advertise. He has been led to believe that a bravery award may erase this black mark. He has heard that his story has been mentioned in the NSW parliament, but is not holding his breath till some recognition is bestowed on him and Mark.

** Terry and Dennis had been the duty boat crew (for Marine Rescue) on Central Coast 20 when police tasked the unit to assist a yacht that was stranded east of Lion Island and had made a Pan Pan call (one level below a Mayday).*

With only a skipper aboard, the yachts roller-reefing gear had jammed with the foresail about two thirds reefed, its rudder was jammed and its engine would not start.

As darkness set in, Terry and Dennis crossed the ocean bar (in their new 6.8m Ocean Cylinder rescue craft) at Little Box Head in poor visibility, with heavy rain, southeast winds gusting to 40 Knots and three to four metre rising seas.

“We could see the yacht in the distance,” Terry said. “It looked about a mile away and was close to Lion Island. When we reached the yacht it was only 50 to 75 metres from Lion Island. The noise was so loud that communication was not possible other than by using hand signals.”

The towline was passed with some difficulty and the heavy yacht was towed to a lee shore to enable the sails to be furled, then to safety on a mooring in refuge bay.

(From “Soundings”, Journal of Marine Rescue, Issue 21, Summer 2014)