"Our phone rang one early morning in the 1970's and there was a certain amount of urgency in the callers voice 'Rutherford', the 'Matai' is aground in Port Hardy, get your gear together, I have a chopper standing by at Omaka get here as quick as you can.

The caller was Bill Rutherford, marine assessor, I had done a lot of salvage work and repairs with Bill, and I knew the Matai and Gerry Fissenden her then owner-skipper.

Maitai is a carvel built launch designed and built by Peter 'Pop' Jorgensen at his Waikawa Bay boatyard for Ray Roach in 1967. Ray was a well known and very experienced commercial launch man in the Marlborough Sounds, and with a majority of properties in the Sounds having no road access at this time, tow boats with a punt astern or alongside were a common sight, often loaded with building materials and machinery, or farm stock.

Pop Jorgensen's brief was to design and build a manoeuvrable, strong tow boat with a good towing post, to handle a sixty foot punt, she was powered by a 4-71. N series G.M. with a 3:1 reduction with a four blade Nalder propeller, and launched in 1967.

I arrived at Omaka airdrome as the helicopter was being made ready, a quick loading of my tools including dive gear, tanks and air lift bags. We didn't know at this stage if Matai would be above or below water, there was one possible complication. It is very rare to see fog in Blenheim, but this day was one of those rare days, thick fog not ideal for flying in such restricted visibility. With a heavily loaded helicopter with three of us aboard the pilot's option was to fly just above the main highway and follow it to Havelock, I was relieved to see the fog was clearing as we flew out over the water at Havelock, it was here that the pilot thrust a lands and survey map into my hand, saying you know the way guide me in the right direction.

I was a bit concerned at this low altitude flying it takes a bit of getting used to, but one thing we wouldn't have far to go before a splash, and it was a bit of a relief for me, as we just cleared the hills at Port Ligar to fly across Admiralty Bay to Port Hardy, d'Urville island. As we flew over we could now see the predicament that Matai was in.

There was a gale of N.W. in Tasman Bay and the Cook Strait, and Gerry had left the punt anchored with a load of sheep aboard in Wells Arm, and was then making his way in East Arm towards Allman Bay when right on H.W. Matai went up on an off lying rocky point, it was about a 3.2 m.tide that was falling and we could see the urgency of the situation.

A great thing about a chopper is that a quick fly around gave us a good look and we could see that some props were needed and fast before she healed over much more, there were some sizeable Manuka trees further up the hill but nowhere to land nearby on the flat at hight tide. As the pilot brought one skid to rest on a rocky outcrop on the side of the hill, I was given instructions to keep my head down when I got out with sharp saw in hand, he didn't have to emphasise these instructions. In quick time I was up the hill to cut three good size Manuka and then slide these down to the waiting dinghy, it was a wet job but we had these in place with not too much time to spare and Matai was made secure as she continued to dry out.

Bill put a call out and the Trawler 'Marina May' left Motueka to make her way to d'Urville Island in heavy seas, she had a rough passage but arrived before high water in the late afternoon and a tow line was made ready. Her skipper Robie Bloomfield positioned her just right and with a gentle hand on the power, eased 'Marina May' ahead quietly and with her own engine assisting Matai cleared the rocks and was afloat and away from the point.

It was three days before the sea subsided enough for us to leave and see Matai on her way, but she had comfortable accomodation and Bill and I were still on the payroll until we left Port Hardy. I think the Insurance company was well pleased with only a slipping and a small section of keel batten to be replaced".

John Gander Northland 2021

Images follow