



# Teenager 'was only seconds from death'

Rescuers' quick response saves life of 15-year-old

By SEAN FORD

IF BRETT and Ben Norton-Smith arrived 20 seconds later, Sunday night's drowning at the Bluff would have been a double fatality.

It took the father and son just 170 seconds to get from Brett Norton-Smith's front gate onto the water in a Devonport Surf Life Saving Club inflatable craft with the engine running.

Even so, the veteran surf lifesaver recalled yesterday, it was too late for a 27-year-old man who drowned.

His name has not yet been released.

"He was three foot under when I spotted him," club assistant coach Brett Norton-Smith said.

They were just in time for a 15-year-old boy, Zachary Verhoeven.

"He was 20 seconds from going under.

"As soon as we touched him, he

started dropping to the bottom.

"I couldn't believe how lucky he is."

The fact Mr Norton-Smith lives nearby and the speed of the rescue were factors in saving the teenager.

"I'm so thankful the council and the builders allowed us access to the new club and the ducky was here.

"All those things combined made for the rescue of the 15-year-old."

The boy was unconscious, not breathing and had a slight pulse when they got him into the rubber ducky.

"When we got the 15-year-old on board ... Ben got him on his side and cleared his airways, he vomited all through the ducky and started breathing."

The Norton-Smiths may be experienced surf lifesavers, but such incidents still hit hard.

"It's not my first," Brett Norton-Smith said.

"I worked as a lifeguard in Queensland for 10 years.

"What happens is I like to have peer counselling.

"I had a couple of really big decisions to make.

"Do we leave the body and take the guy in because he won't be there when we go back?

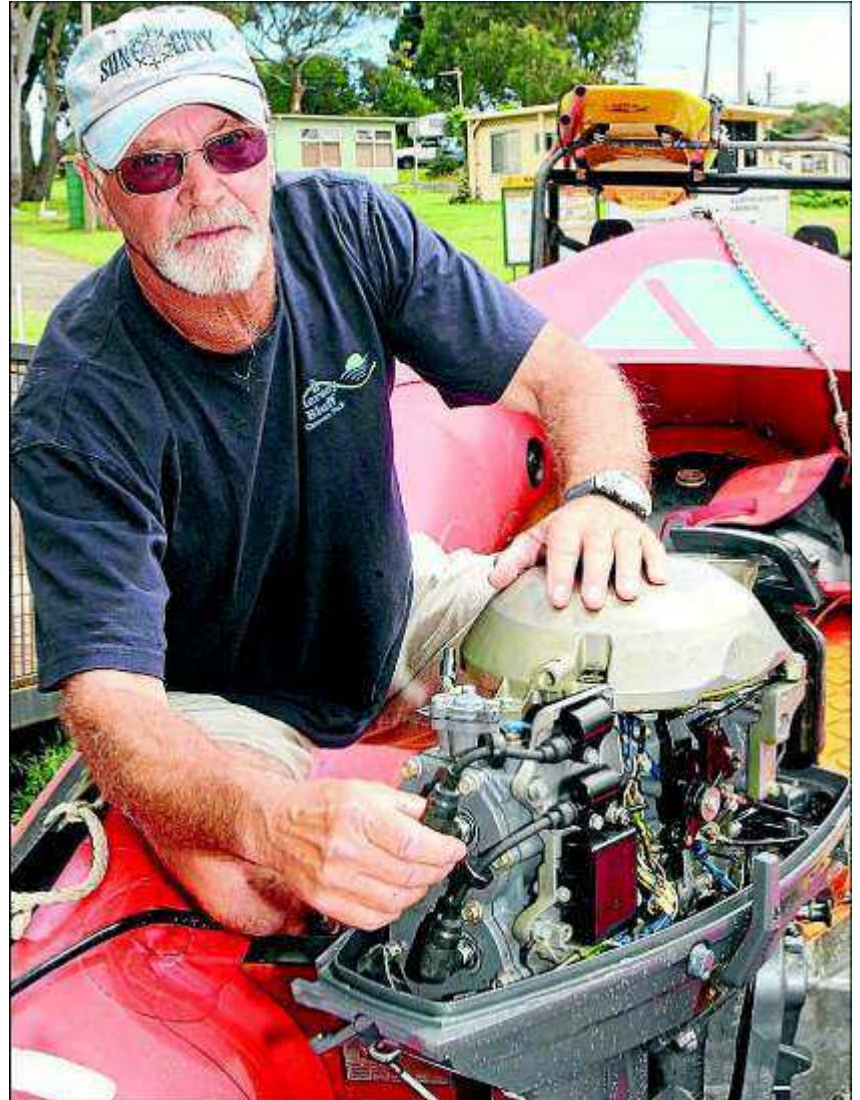
"He was three foot under when I spotted him and nobody would have found him.

"They are the sort of decisions I had to make."

**Police originally said the person who drowned was 17 and later amended that to 27.**

**Zachary was in a stable condition in the North West Regional Hospital last night.**

  
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**LIGHTNING QUICK:** Devonport Surf Club member Brett Norton-Smith, who performed a rescue and recovery on Sunday night with his son, Ben. Pictures: Jason Hollister.



**DARK HISTORY:** The plaque in memorial of a drowning at the Mersey Bluff in 1929.



**DANGEROUS AREA:** The rock known as the Hat pictured from the Mersey Bluff lookout.