

## THE *DORIS* – *TU ATU* DISASTER: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

*Geoff Mentzer*

### INTRODUCTION

It began with the local paper. In December 2015, *Hawke's Bay Today* ran a subjective, error-laden, half-broadsheet piece entitled "'Doris disaster' shattered families' lives." The disaster was the collision of the launch *Doris* and coastal lighter *Tu Atu* in December 1932, at the entrance to the Inner Harbour at Port Ahuriri, Napier. It took three people – Messrs Moroney, Turnbull and Geddis – to compile this sorry excuse for journalism. Their piece, devoid of even a single instance of original research, was simply copy and paste, a cribbing of others' mistakes, a reiteration of earlier errors compounded with their own. And the compilers were blind to a fundamental potential source of information, the telephone book.

The *Doris* – *Tu Atu* collision ranks as one of New Zealand's worst harbour tragedies, and my grandfather Eric Mentzer was one of the survivors from the *Doris*. I'd researched the collision in the 1990s, collected newspaper articles, copies of both Inquiry transcripts and of all relevant Napier Harbour Board archives, along with notes of interviews with numerous folk, some of whom remembered the collision first-hand (and many of whom were traced via the phone book.) And there the matter was shelved, since there was nothing further to be gained.

*Hawke's Bay Today* subsequently published three further pieces covering the *Doris* tragedy, none of which was devoid of errors. Even one as simple as a reporter not knowing the difference between ancestors and descendants.

There is, then, a need for a re-examination of the tragedy.

Geoff Mentzer  
Hastings  
December 2020

### PRELUDE

Wednesday 28 December 1932

About 11pm, the launch *Doris* under control of launchman Eric Mentzer, collected from the cargo ship *Port Brisbane* 15 waterside workers and their employer, stevedore company owner JT 'Jack' Fenwick. Immediately prior, *Doris* had collected 13 men and their supervisor NW Low from the nearby *Port Hunter*. Both ships were anchored in the roadstead off Napier, but whereas the *Port Hunter* men had handled the wool cargo in their usual working clothes and boots, the *Port Brisbane* men who'd worked in the freezer holds were clad in double layers of clothing and coats.

Mentzer, rated an AB, had made four or five trips in the launch that day, taking messages from the port and crew members out to both ships in the roadstead.

*Doris* owner Fenwick had, along with other men, noted from *Port Brisbane* that the single 12 volt electric lamp with three sectors – red port, green starboard and white masthead – on a 2 foot 9 inch [850mm] standard on the launch foredeck were quite clear. The short standard along with the lamp tricolour construction did, however, make the separation between the white and the coloureds less than the recommended 3 ft [900mm.] Nonetheless, the launch had passed its official survey the previous October. And now she was headed for home.

At the same time, the little twin-screw coastal lighter *Tu Atu* cast off in the Iron Pot at Port Ahuriri and motored out into the channel, headed on her regular cargo run for Wairoa. Engineer David Jones had her at half speed with the usual single engine, lookout Arne Angen was on deck but not fully forrad, and Captain Billy Martin was at the wheel but not in front of

it. Instead, he was standing on a grating outside the wheelhouse on the port side of the vessel, leaning in to hold a wheelspoke.

There was an ebb tide for *Doris*' estimated 12 to 13 minute voyage to the Iron Pot, and the moonless night was fine and clear, visibility was good with a light breeze, and there was a slight sea and swell. And while there was the usual banter amongst men all seated and homeward bound from their shift, a few remained silent, watching the approaching channel entrance to Port Ahuriri.

The entrance, approximately 100 metres wide, was bordered by the West Pier with a blinking white beacon at its seaward end, and the East Pier with fixed lamps in sectors of red, green and white to aid navigation, all mounted on a timber beacon slightly inland from the Pier end. In order to open the channel, *Doris* initially headed more west, with the blinking light on her port bow and the Eastern white light in view. Once the Eastern green lamp came in view, it would be safe to enter the channel. But before then, there was laughter at a joke about being taken to the cabaret at Westshore to finish the night. The cabaret lights could be seen, and the implication was that perhaps *Doris* was headed just a little too far west.

About six minutes into the voyage, Mentzer saw at about one point on his starboard side the masthead and starboard green lights of a very slow moving vessel in the fairway, and altered his course a little for the midchannel, ie to the east. He was still outside the channel proper, and kept the other vessel's lights slightly on his starboard bow for another three or four minutes. He'd reduced *Doris*' speed by 2 or 2½ knots down from eight, when someone called out, "Look out *Tu Atu*," which vessel was then about 20 to 25 ft [6 to 7.6 metres] away, her green and white lights still visible. *Tu Atu* was then suddenly upon them, her red port lamp briefly visible. The vessels collided, but only a mere brushing of *Tu Atu*'s stempost against *Doris*' starboard side amidships, a little below the gunwale.

## THE VESSELS

*Doris* was built in 1901 by Chas Bailey, well-regarded boat-builder of Auckland, for JT Fenwick of Napier. Constructed of kauri on the diagonal principle for added strength, she was 30 ft x 7 ft x 3 ft draft forward, 4 ft aft [9.1m x 2.1m x 0.9m forward 1.2m aft.] Launched in January 1902, she was fitted with a 4hp Union Oil engine in a small engine house amidships which gave her 7 to 8 knots; side-benches that ran fore and aft both sides and across the aft end; thwarts either end of the engine house and another up forward; and a spar that ran centered and almost the length of the vessel, supported by a short post at each end. Furled over the spar was a canvas awning that when spread would cover the boat gunwale to gunwale, a wet weather tent tied down the length of each side and from under which an urgent escape by men forced to stoop would be challenging. The tiller was replaced by a wheel in the 1920s and although surveyed to carry 36 passengers, even just 30 would be obliged to sit in an intimate situation. Devoid of watertight compartments, she did carry two life buoys and 22 life belts.

*o.e.v. Tu Atu*, O.N. 37121, 65 x 15 x 6.3 ft [19.8 x 4.6 x 1.8m]

She was built in 1903 in Totara North by Thos Lane & Sons for use at Wairoa and across Hawke Bay to Napier. Acquired by Richardson & Co of Napier in 1913, she was a scow-built wooden vessel, little more than a motorised barge, a flat-bottomed lighter to allow passage over the Wairoa river bar and use on the river, and was said to be difficult to steer. Her handling abilities were exposed early on; her maiden voyage from Whangaroa to Wairoa took over a week, her passage being delayed by contrary winds.

Certified for extended river use, her original twin oil engines were replaced by 1910 but gave trouble over the years. Finally, in an overhaul in November 1932, the port engine was replaced with one taken from another Richardson vessel. Although of a lesser power than the starboard, the vessel speed was slightly improved.

Devoid of a poop, she was originally steered at deck level and out in the open. The wheelhouse added sometime after 1926 did raise the wheel a little, but was so constructed with minimal glass as to limit or restrict the view of the man at the wheel. Further, this man

had his view obscured by the high prow by some 40 or 50 feet [12 to 15m] immediately in front of the vessel. And worse still, over the cut away portion of her bulwark and with her on an even keel, 700ft [213m] of water forward was invisible from the wheelhouse. And she had a toilet built on deck, before the mast and close to the bow, whose roof was higher than that of the wheelhouse.

Thus it was essential that when transiting any harbour or channel, a lookout was posted at the bows, in front of the loo.

## THE PROTAGONISTS

Swedish-born Eric Mentzer was no scholastic slouch. He'd regularly topped or near-topped his class in various school academic subjects and handicraft, but the lure of the sea was too strong. In early 1898, aged 14, it's believed he ran off to sail the Baltic in firewood schooners. Officially recorded as a seaman in 1900, he sailed on Swedish vessels as far as South America and South Africa but in 1905, he was struck from the Göteborg seamen's register and recorded as sailing on foreign ships. These took him round Cape Horn in the phosphate trade, to India for jute, Australia for wool, perhaps also Japan and the Pacific North American coast. In this time he served as sail-maker and, it's said, as bosun. Along the way he became fluent in Norwegian, German, English, French and Finnish, and could understand Japanese if spoken slowly.

His roving ceased in August 1910 when he arrived in New Zealand on the maiden voyage of a collier, and simply stayed on. He sailed for the next two decades or so on coasters – largely for Richardsons – became a New Zealand citizen, settled in Port Ahuriri and eventually worked harbour-side there. By 1932 he'd had seventeen years experience using the channel into the Inner Harbour, ten or eleven of those in charge of a launch running people and chores.

With so many years at sea interspersed by brief spells on shore, it's no surprise that alcohol became a companion. He was a binge drinker, keeping mostly dry for extended periods, then disappearing for a time while on a spree. He did not like, it was said, his children to see him drunk, hence his absenteeisms. His wife, whose own father and grandfather were alcoholic, would not allow drink in her house, although there would be a beer or two stashed in the garage rafters.

Robert William Martin was born in Christchurch in 1887 and by 1911, was married and a fisherman in Napier. In 1913 he was certified as a river steamer master, and worked from then for various employers as both a trawler and launch captain, as far north as Gisborne and Tolaga Bay. But from mid 1919, he was a master of Richardson & Co lighters at Napier, and had been *Tu Atu's* master for the majority of years since 1919. Known as One Engine Billy for his predilection to use only one of *Tu Atu's* twin engines, he was apparently not held in high esteem by watersiders, who were not happy to sail or work with him. No reasons were given, but it may have been in relation to his eyesight, which was said to have been not good. He himself admitted that in order to obtain good visibility on *Tu Atu*, it was at times necessary to change his position in the wheelhouse.

John Thomas Fenwick, born in 1885 in Napier, spent his entire life devoted to the interests of shipping. Certified by age 26 as both a River Trade Oil Engineer and Master of a Motor Vessel of less than 6 tons register, he eventually came to own and manage the stevedore business established in Napier by his father. His profound knowledge of shipping and his judgement were frequently called upon in connection with both shipping and industrial matters, in Napier and elsewhere. And for many years from 1914, he served as an employers' representative on the Napier Disputes Committee dealing with waterside activities. Described as a man of "sterling quality," he was well known for a cheerful and good-natured personality, albeit one of a quiet, unassuming nature.

## THE WHIMSICAL DAILY

### Thursday 29 December 1932

Napier's *Daily Telegraph* in that day's edition was the first to proclaim that the sound of the collision was heard as far away as Hospital Hill, a distance of perhaps two kilometres. Since the two vessels had merely touched at very low speed and the only damage was to paintwork, the sole possible cause for this ludicrous claim had to be *Tu Atu's* whistle, blown post-collision. Hardly anything out of the ordinary; since the '31 quake, vessels regularly grounded in the channel, when they would blow the whistle repeatedly to report their situation. Just the previous night ss *Tangaroa* had stuck in the channel, while *Tu Atu* had also grounded in trying to pass her. And *Tu Atu's* whistle now was ignored; Captain Blundell aboard the Richardson tug *Kuri* moored nearby heard only the whistle, decided she was aground and said to his deckhand, "We will finish our supper. She can wait."

In addition, the Port night-watchman on duty nearby also heard only the whistle, not the imaginary long distance sound of the crash. Other papers around the country simply echoed this non-existent sound of the crash.

And again, it was the peripatetic *Telegraph* – along with Napier's *Hawke's Bay Herald* – that was first to state how fortunate it was that the tug *Coralie* had been following close in the wake of *Doris*, and was able to rescue eleven men. In fact, there was no other vessel following *Doris*. Period. *Coralie* was tied up at her berth, where she remained throughout. The rescued men had been picked up by the *Kuri*; she'd eventually cast off and gone to the scene only when it was realised that there'd been a collision. How the two papers determined *Coralie's* role can only be guessed at. The *Coralie* error, repeated nation-wide – although not by every paper – persists (beyond logic) decades later; in SD Waters' book *Richardsons of Napier*, in all four of *Hawke's Bay Today's* articles and in various printed and online articles. The simple fact is, not a single occupant of *Tu Atu* and *Doris* ever mentioned a third vessel following the latter closely or otherwise, because there wasn't one.

## THE SECONDARY COLLISION

### Friday 30 December 1932

The preliminary inquiry into the collision was conducted in the Port Ahuriri Customs House by Napier Collector of Customs, HWS Ruffell. Of whom it was later said, by the Acting Secretary of the Marine Department, BW Millier, to the Hon. Minister of Marine, "The Collector of Customs at Napier is an inexperienced man in the matter of inquiries."

Ruffell in perhaps a prescient move had earlier suggested to Millier that a magisterial inquiry be held, that the preliminary be dispensed with, but he was overruled. In the event Captain Martin, Mentzer and a number of witnesses gave sworn depositions before not just Ruffell, but also Counsel and members of the press. The latter immediately published selective extracts of these testimonies, which included a crucial piece by Mentzer that he later recanted. And he was not the only witness who later contradicted portions of his deposition.

The problem was twofold – the preliminary inquiry had not allowed for the state of mind of the collision participants, who may well have been still in some state of shock. Secondly, at least one witness did not have his statement read over to him but nonetheless signed it two days later, only to subsequently dispute some of what he'd said. Worse, Mentzer read his own statement but his request for an alteration to be made was ignored, and he signed the statement unwillingly.

Beyond this, Richardsons were given permission by the Marine Department to obtain from the Collector of Customs a copy of the preliminary inquiry depositions. And meanwhile, planning was underway for a full Marine Court of Inquiry.

These preliminary legal proceedings were summed up by Crown Solicitor J Prendeville in a letter to the Secretary of Marine in February 1933:

"A definite rule should be made with regard to preliminary inquiries. In the present case, the inquiry was open to the Press and Counsel attended. As a consequence there was

considerable reference to the evidence given on that occasion. This inquiry was held two days after the accident when (it was alleged) both Capt Martin and Mentzer were still suffering from the shock of the collision. Under such conditions, there were sure to be variations in the evidence when taken in the formal investigation. I think that the preliminary inquiry should not be open to the public and that Counsel should not be present."

There is a press report that in the morning after the collision, Detective Sergeant J Bickerdike and Detective HF Coddington took statements at the Ahuriri Police Station from all survivors from the *Doris*, as well as from all those on *Tu Atu*. But according to Archives New Zealand, Port Ahuriri Police records no longer exist.

### THE PRIMARY COLLISION 11.10pm, Wednesday 28 December 1932

*"We have collisions on land every week and the stories there never agree."*

Such was the comment by presiding magistrate AM Mowlem midway through the Marine Court of Inquiry in Napier in January 1933. Succinct and a perfect summation.

The following then is a distillation, a synopsis of the Court of Inquiry transcripts – which record does not include all of the dialogue – press reports, Richardson's and other archives, and personal interviews. Unfortunately, the Court transcripts have only the answers given; questions – where they exist – that led to those come from the press. There is a degree of interpretation, since some middle ground had to be sought between conflicting testimonies.

When *Tu Atu* had slipped her moorings on December 28, she'd motored out of the Iron Pot harbour, swung starboard 90° into the western side of the fairway, then bumped a number of times on the seabed. The '31 quake had raised the land and seafloor some 2.1 metres and with the channel being the sole outlet for the vast tidal lagoon, a river and various streams, siltation was a constant problem. Dredging up the sand and mud was only a temporary solution, and just the previous week, ss *Waiapu* had lost her rudder when she'd grounded at the Inner Harbour entrance. And tonight, due to most of her cargo being stored aft, *Tu Atu* was down at the stern, further reducing the view from the wheelhouse.

Arne Angen, employed solely as *Tu Atu* lookout, first sighted the launch white light when it was a long way out and to starboard. He went aft and told Martin – who confirmed he'd also seen the light – that the labour launch was coming in, directly towards them and fast. He then went amidships port side and stood on a benzine drum, from which, he testified, he had about 20 ft [6 metres] of dead water. *Tu Atu* was running at 3 or 4 knots once in the fairway and, so Angen said, was dragging her bottom all along. She was sheering slightly and had, he told the Court, sheered dozens of times at sea and in the channel. He picked up both the launch sidelights when about 150 yards [137m] away and thought she was then on his port bow, which he would, since he was beside the port railing, not at the bow where he should have been. As he said in Court, "Anything dead ahead when I was on the benzine drum would appear on the port bow. It may be 2 or 3 points."

Martin had first seen the launch white lamp when she was about 2800ft [852m] distant; maybe more, he thought. He also thought she was moving pretty fast, about 8 knots. He saw her outside of his rigging, he said. She was on his port bow and never once, he testified, did he see either of her coloured lights. But crucially, once he'd entered the fairway, he was steering from outside the wheelhouse, stood on a grating on the deck, port side. In other words, he had the same perspective of *Doris* as did Angen. *Doris*, he said, was on his port bow from the time he first saw her.

In the fairway, he continued, *Tu Atu* was dragging on the mud and her speed was down to 2 knots or less. Crucially again, he had his wheel hard over to starboard to keep his ship as far

east in the fairway as possible, and did not alter his helm at all before the collision. And as he declared, "If my vessel slipped over one of the bumps with helm to starboard, she would go to the east. She may have gone to east but it would be hardly noticeable.... If we had sheered we would have gone ashore." In answer to the question, Did your vessel slew to the east-ward at all while she was going down the channel? he replied, "She may have done, a little."

*Doris*, he suggested in Court, changed her course when she was about 30-40 yards [27-36m] away from him. Angen had shouted, "Look out for the launch" but Martin lost sight of her and saw only her light flash across his bow, from port to starboard. In that moment before he touched her, he said, he stopped his engines then blew her whistle. But up until that moment, he had been gathering way, ie accelerating and was perhaps again at 2 knots.

David Jones down below did not know the vessel speed when they entered the fairway, just that she was running on one engine at half speed, ie at half throttle. Then he felt her bump three times. From the rather confusing Court transcription, it seems that after the first bump, he was ordered to run the other engine as well, also at half throttle. Then after another bump, in his own words, "Using my own judgement," he set both engines on full speed. The vessel's telegraph, he said, showed only "ahead," "stop" and "astern." And as he continued, "When the ship is on the bottom, the skipper likes me to go ahead. There is only the bell. I use my own judgement."

In other words, he acted autonomously, and blind. And he now kept at full throttle for, he thought, about two minutes. Until a third bump, at which point he thought she may have stopped, but he did not feel any other impact. It was about then, it appears, that he got the order to stop, go full astern, and the whistle was blown two or three times, then continuously. He took it that there was trouble, that they may have stuck in the mud, and climbed the ladder and poked his head out up top to look at Angen.

Mentzer standing at the *Doris* wheel amidships port side had taken the white masthead light and starboard green to be a lighter, coming down the channel very slowly. The lights when he first saw them were about one point on his starboard bow, and he was adamant that at no point did he see them over his port bow. The normal course is for opposing vessels to pass port to port, but with an uneven channel depth, rocks both sides (and now almost low tide) it was always a discretionary tactic in the fairway; vessels passed whichever side was deemed to be safest at the time. In this instance, because he saw the other's green lamp, he assumed her master saw his. In other words, both vessels were safe to pass, albeit starboard to starboard. And by the other's position in the fairway, he considered it would be unsafe for him to pass her on the western side, ie to her port, which is where the channel was shallower.

Closer in, the lights were getting slightly more on his starboard. He decided the lighter was aground in the channel, altered his course slightly to port, ie to east. Then all of a sudden, he said, the lighter swung around and he saw her red light. He did not know her speed, but he thought it more than 2 knots. And here he disputed his preliminary deposition: "It is not true," he told the Court, "that I saw the red lights about 3 or 4 minutes before the accident. I was not in a fit state to make statements."

In fact, he saw the red light just a second before the accident. He was of the opinion that Martin had grounded, and having his helm hard over, *Tu Atu* had slewed across. And at the moment he saw the red light, when he thought there might be an accident, he opened his throttle, put his helm to starboard.

Frederick Oemcke was one of the more credible and convincing waterside witnesses. Whereas most of the other men were talking in groups, he'd sat alone in silence up forrad, on the starboard bow. He saw a lighter on the western side of the channel when about 100 yards [91m] off, and they were on the starboard side of her. He saw only her white and green lamps, he testified, and they were never at any time on her port side. He also refuted a portion of his December preliminary deposition, which had not been read over to him and which he'd signed two days afterwards. He knew the channel quite well, he said, and *Tu Atu* appeared to him to be stationary, to be aground. He saw her green light all the time. He thought that she had swung in, ie towards him, when her deckhand called out, "Look out for the labour launch."

*Doris* just heeled over, he said. He'd seen what was about to happen and had got up off his seat and was thrown over the awning rail into the water. Not thrown like "a shot out of a gun," he said. "It was a gentle kind of a push." He then got away from the crowd, and the man with whom he swam to the eastern pier had his watch stopped at ten past eleven.

The time was confirmed in Court by Harbour night-watchman William Bunce, who noted *Tu Atu's* whistle began about ten past eleven.

Two further watersiders testified that they also saw a vessel in the channel that appeared to be aground, another that the *Doris* was never on the western side of *Tu Atu*. And there any unison ceased. Some men claimed that there'd been no warning, that they'd been suddenly thrown into the water. Others stated they'd heard someone call out, "*Tu Atu*," or "Look out for *Tu Atu*." And while some said they'd simply been thrown into the water by the impact, others said they'd had time to jump away from *Tu Atu*, from *Doris's* starboard side to port, thence into the water.

The last word, however, belongs to a law of physics – close to 31 men thrown or jumped at about the same time to one side of an open 30ft whaleboat will indeed rock that boat. Severely.

### ROCK OR ROLL

Messrs Moroney, Turnbull and Geddis and other sources variously claimed that *Doris* turned turtle, or sank, or that both vessels sank. Neither did either of these. Opinion, however, was about evenly split amongst the participants as to whether *Doris* merely rocked violently, or turned completely over and somehow righted herself. Men were variously described as clinging to the upturned hull – in which case, just how and when did the launch right itself? – clinging to the upright waterlogged hull or had clambered back on board, or both latter.

Fenwick gave the Court perhaps the most plausible account. The collision, he said, appeared to him to be more of a shelving blow, *Tu Atu* merely brushing the launch. *Doris* had heeled over from a combination of the men shifting and the blow. He recalled standing on the seat and seeing water pouring in over the combing of the launch, and quite a number of men were out before he actually went into the water. When he did he went under, struck the bottom of the launch twice before coming to the surface. Upon his resurfacing, the launch was on an even keel; awash yes but afloat. He then got aboard her, hung onto the engine-house door. To his knowledge, *Doris* did not turn turtle, although he did concede that being a whaleboat, it was not impossible for her to turn completely and right herself. But when the launch was pumped out the next day, he concluded, all the gear was still in it.

Mentzer corroborated. All the gear, he testified, was still loose in the launch the next day. He was adamant, the launch did not turn turtle. *Doris* just heeled over, about halfway, and quite a few of the passengers had moved before the actual collision.

### WEATHER OR NOT

One survivor who claimed that there'd been no warning, and that he'd felt the launch turning over on top of him, and that he'd seen it floating upside down, also claimed that there'd been a light blanket of misty rain and poor visibility. His weather observation was widely reported, and persists even now. Other opinions varied from fine and clear to hazy and overcast to good visibility. Harbour Master H White Parsons, who was at the accident scene within about 20 minutes, gave the definitive description in Court: The night was dark, clear, smooth sea, perfect visibility.

### ALL AT SEA

No doubt there were injuries sustained in the transit from boat to water. The only reports, however, were a vague assertion by one survivor, and one unattributed and rather speculative press article that claimed many victims were bruised and probably stunned. What was prevalent was confusion: men floundering in the dark; removing clothing; a few who could

swim with some beginning to make for one pier or the other; some returning to cling onto *Doris* or clamber aboard. *Tu Atu* continued seawards for some 500 feet [152m] before slowly returning, to the accompaniment of – as one witness stated in Court – men in the water calling to her in "Australian Latin." He did not, he said, like to express their actual words in Court.

Blundell and his deckhand Henry Baldwin stated that they reached the scene in *Kuri* about 11.15, within three to five minutes of the alarm being given and just as *Tu Atu* was about to reach the launch. Fenwick, they said, was standing in the launch holding onto the awning rail, and they took him and the others aboard the tug. It was about 11.20, Blundell said, when he had the survivors from the launch aboard together with at least one man taken directly from the water.

Fenwick, however, disputed their time taken in reaching the scene; he did not think they could have got there in the time Blundell said. His contention was supported by Angen, who said he took about ten minutes to unlash and launch *Tu Atu's* dinghy while his ship stopped, turned around and returned to near *Doris*, plus another couple of minutes to row to *Doris*. In the process, Angen said, he helped save several men in the water, who he told to hang onto the lifelines of his dinghy.

What is unclear is just how many men returned aboard *Doris* (Fenwick thought it was nine) how many were plucked from the water, and how many made it directly to shore. In the event, it's said that eleven men were transferred from *Kuri* to the Westshore ferry *Naomi*, which took them to the Iron Pot jetty.

*Naomi* had been commandeered by Sergeant Walter Claasen of the Port Ahuriri police. He'd heard of the tragedy at 11.25pm, presumably from James Josephs who'd been thrown from *Doris* into the water, swum first away from her, then returned, then swum to the pier-head. He'd been first ashore, and had run to the Police Station to summon assistance.

## INTO THE DARK

Assuming *Doris* possessed her full complement of twenty-four life buoys and belts as surveyed in October, it's a mystery why they were not all deployed. Apparently they were stored under the benches, used as cushions when those benches were wet. Fenwick when he reboarded the launch found four or five lifebelts, but he didn't say if he handed them out. *Kuri* also had lifebuoys, that also weren't used. The only other reference to them was by Mentzer who, as with so many sailors, could not swim. It's not known if he jumped or was thrown but in the water, he said, a lifebuoy was given to either Medcalf or Wilson, both of whom he thought he recognised in the water. And here, the Court transcript is ambiguous; Mentzer, in response to an unknown question, said, "I am not sure of any of the others." Was he referring to the lifebelts and buoys, or men in the water?

While in the water, he spoke with Norman Low. About what is unknown, but Low, he told the Court, was a fairly good swimmer who just a few days before the collision, had saved a man from drowning. On the day of the collision, he'd supervised work on the *Port Hunter*, so was not dressed in extra clothing. Why he drowned is a conundrum, as is why his body was found close to the scene of the tragedy, but not until four days later.

Jethro Medcalf helped an unnamed man to shore and may have been returning to sea to assist someone else, but he had spent time in hospital with a heart condition. His body was the first recovered, by Sergeant Claasen on *Naomi*, at 12.25am about a quarter mile (400m) outside the entrance to sea. He was afloat, suspended in the water and although prolonged resuscitation attempts were made on the ferry and land, he could not be revived.

The *Doris* victims were:

Walter Andrews, 39, married  
 Robert Kintore Aplin, 57, married  
 Alexander Moncrieff Boyd, 51, married  
 Eddie Cecil Brown Cooper, 29, married  
 Harold Johnson, 40, married



Thomas Ridley Kitt, 42, married  
 Norman Walles Low, 38, married  
 Jethro Henry Emson Medcalf, 50, married  
 John Hopper Wilson, 67, widower  
 James Woods, 60, married

Eight bodies were recovered throughout the following day, four of which were found some distance out from the pier-heads.

There was a rumour at the time that Blundell in *Kuri* that night had "mowed down" some of the men in the water. No injuries, however, were officially noted; the verdict of the coroner for all ten men was, Death by drowning as the result of a collision.

Mentzer is said to have floundered in the water, returned to *Doris* and stood on her rudder, then left again and walked ashore to the Eastern Pier. He was examined at the Port Police Station by Dr WD Fitzgerald, who saw him again at four o'clock in the morning, standing on his own on the launch steps at the jetty, overwhelmed by shock.

### MUD STICKS

Jim Blundell, son of Captain Blundell of Richardson's *Kuri*, was eight years old at the time of the *Doris* collision, and remembered it. Interviewed in August 1996, sixty-three years after the collision, his first comment regarding it was, "Your grandfather was drunk."

The Court of Inquiry was told different. The most reliable account was that of Fenwick. When he'd climbed down the rope ladder from *Port Brisbane* into the launch that night, he testified, he'd put his hand on Mentzer's shoulder to steady himself.

"In my opinion," he said, "Mentzer was perfectly sober and in a fit and proper condition for his duties on the launch. There was nothing to make me think otherwise." He had never to his knowledge seen him the worse for liquor. And yes, he did know that Mentzer had stated in Court that he'd had a few glasses of beer during the day of the collision.

He and *Doris'* usual master Norman Low were seated close to Mentzer for the voyage, during which no concern was expressed by either man as to Mentzer's conduct. Another witness – perhaps not the ideal man – was a local barman. He'd seen Mentzer in his bar between twelve noon and one, and at the Iron Pot about 9.30pm, when he was "perfectly sober." A further witness stated that he'd spoken with Mentzer about three hours before the collision, at which time he'd thought that he'd been sober and had "looked quite alright."

The accusation of insobriety was made in Court first by Captain Blundell, who said that he knew Mentzer very well. He'd seen him about 8 the night of the collision the worse for drink, albeit from 50 or 60 yards (45 – 54m) distance. He had not spoken with him, but based his opinion on the way Mentzer had been walking, the way he'd been carrying a tin of benzine. He had not been altogether staggering, he said, but he was not sober.

The second was made by Baldwin, Blundell's deckhand on *Kuri*. He also had seen Mentzer about 8pm at the jetty and while he said he was walking all right, he thought he was talking too loud with another man, louder than he usually talked, and thought he was talking fight. Then agreed that loud-voiced joking arguments were common on the waterfront. He'd spoken with Blundell soon after, told him he thought Mentzer was drunk. John Neilson, the other man at the jetty, also testified. He and Mentzer had been discussing the sale of a boat, and Mentzer he said had been sober.

Napier Harbourmaster Horace White Parsons gave evidence, said he'd known Mentzer six or seven years and had never seen him the worse for liquor. He'd seen Mentzer taking *Doris* in and out of the harbour many times and was satisfied he could handle the boat. Which he had to be, since he issued the annual Harbour Board licence allowing Mentzer to run the launch. A further condition for a licence was that the applicant should be of temperate habits.

Could it be just coincidence that the only two allegations regarding Mentzer's sobriety came from Richardson & Co employees? In response to an unknown question from the

magistrate, Mentzer related some gossip, that Richardson's manager Kenneth McLeay did not like him, had no time for him, and had told Blundell and Baldwin to think of Captain Martin and his family, coupled with a vague threat of people having to be replaced. Blundell and Baldwin, he concluded, were not telling the truth.

Nothing further was said in Court regarding this hearsay, and it was not reported in the press.

Blundell's evidence showed some bias against – and a remarkable lack of empathy with – Mentzer. Whether it was common knowledge or not is unknown, but in October 1907 as a nineteen year old, Blundell was at the helm of a launch that took a party of eleven fishing off the Whangape bar in Northland. The sea was high at what was regarded by some as the most treacherous bar in New Zealand, and although there was some opposition to making for land, the majority decided otherwise. In so doing, the launch was engulfed by two successive waves, the occupants thrown overboard. Seven drowned, including a ten year old boy who'd been fearful and in tears throughout the voyage, and whose body was never found. Blundell had clung to a kerosene case and was on the point of death when he was rescued closer in shore by another boat.

Blundell had lived all his life in the district and would have known of the bar's reputation. Although unqualified, he'd been in charge of the launch. As such, it was his decision whether to head for shore, or wait longer for the sea to settle more.

#### THE FINAL ADDRESS

*Daily Telegraph* Tuesday 31 January 1933

The Inquiry transcript does not include the addresses made by counsel to the Court. The following, from the *Telegraph*, are extracts of the final address, made by AE Lawry, counsel for Fenwick and Mentzer:

"Some allegations had been made that Mentzer was intoxicated at the time of the accident. Mr Lawry submitted that no court would hesitate to dismiss the flimsy evidence of intoxication which had been given."

"Sweeping and far-reaching allegations of negligence had been made against Mentzer himself. A number of witnesses had said, however, that the launch approached the entrance in the usual way. The evidence of those on the Tu Atu was uncontradicted, and the same could be said for those on the Doris. It was necessary to look for a third party. He submitted that the greatest importance should be attached to the evidence of Oemcke, who was sitting alone in the vessel, and was talking to no one. He saw a green light, even as Mentzer had said he had done. The evidence was definite that both vessels held their courses until within 30 or 40 feet of one another. Mentzer had lost sight of the Tu Atu, and had thrown his helm over to avoid a collision. The watersiders, however, were all of the opinion that the Tu Atu had appeared to have swung into the Doris. He submitted that as the Tu Atu went down the channel, she struck three bumps, and, after getting over the third, swerved round to starboard. There was also the fact that the Tu Atu, as stated by the captain in his evidence, went on not less than 500 feet.

In a case of emergency, Mr Lawry continued, a man was entitled to use his own judgment. He submitted that the change of course on the part of the Doris – and there was a change of course – was to avoid an accident. Also, communication between the master and the look-out on the Tu Atu was non-existent, and when the look-out went back to the wheel-house to tell the captain of the light ahead, he was not fulfilling his job as look-out."

The Court finding, returned on 1 February by Mowlem and the nautical assessors, Captains LCH Worrall and JW Holmes was, in the words of Jim Blundell, a foregone conclusion. He'd gone with his mother each day when she took lunch to the Court for his father when he was giving evidence. Blundell jnr remembered the general talk regarding the tragedy. The outcome, he recalled, had been pre-judged; Mentzer had been drunk.

The conclusion, however, was more mundane. The Court decided that the launch came in on the western white sector of the east pier light, ie she was too far west, on the port side of *Tu Atu*. By attempting to cross over, Mentzer caused the collision. The disaster was "due directly to his act, default and negligence" in attempting to cross *Tu Atu*'s bows from port to starboard.

Fenwick's testimony was clearly ignored; it was the word of a certified sea captain against the word of common watersiders. Martin was cleared, Mentzer found guilty. He was stripped of his Harbour Board licence and ordered to pay £10 10s (\$1332 in 2020) towards the cost of the inquiry; not £30 as Moroney et al and others claim.

Crown Solicitor Prendeville, who attended the Inquiry as representative of the Crown, encapsulated it in a letter to the Marine Department Secretary, "I think it was well that Counsel from outside Napier represented the Department as I found that there were conflicting interests involved and considerable local feeling with the usual crop of gossip."

## POSTSCRIPT

The tragedy caused friction in the local community; the participants and victims were friends, relatives, workmates and neighbours variously of each other, and Mentzer.

One consequence was anonymous, accusing, threatening letters left in Mentzer's letterbox at night. His eldest son, Arthur, 12 and a big strong lad, intended to hide near the letterbox with a club to discourage the culprits, but did not. At least, he claimed he did not.

When Arthur left school in 1937, his first full time employment was as deckhand on Richardson's tug *Coralie*. But after seven months there, he was inveigled by Captain Blundell to work for him on *Kuri*, where he remained about four years. Clearly the pair had no issues, one with the other.

Post tragedy, Mentzer's wife Myra was visited by victims' widows, on different occasions. There were two recollections of these visits: one was of shared sympathy between two women in tears, the other perhaps more confrontational, along the lines of 'Your husband killed my husband.' One such latter visit was, sadly, by Medcalf's widow Hannah, who lived just across the road. Mentzer's youngest son, Tom, 9, (the author's father) riled at seeing his mother upset, set the garden hose onto Hannah Medcalf to chase her off the property. And she may not have been the only widow he so treated.

Somewhere around 1979, when Mentzer's widow moved into a nursing home, she was visited by Jack Fenwick's daughter, Joan Stevens. Stevens stated that there was more to the tragedy than had been portrayed, and that Billy Martin was to blame. But this claim was unsubstantiated, no record is known to exist, thus it remains just hearsay.

Jack Fenwick lived up to his reputation as a "highly respected citizen, a man who did a tremendous amount of good in the community, helping people in various ways." First, he voluntarily paid the victims' funeral expenses of £185 (\$23,477 in 2020.) Then in March, writs against him were issued in Wellington on behalf of the widows and children of eight of the victims, for a total of £14,500 (\$1,840,090) The statement of claim alleged amongst other things that the accident was due to Mentzer's incompetence, but the defence countered that he was "a fit and proper person and was competent and qualified to act as master." *Tu Atu*, the defence alleged, was on the wrong side of the channel, and "Mentzer was entitled and compelled to use his discretion in an endeavour to avoid an imminent collision, but was unable to avoid the accident."

Fenwick, however, did not allow the hearing to proceed. In May, his offers were accepted and the matter settled in chambers in the Napier Supreme Court. A total of £10,200 (\$1,296,331) was apportioned amongst the widows and infant children. In December, a further settlement of £104 (\$13,152) was reached on behalf of a widow who was living in England.

John Fenwick, eldest son of Jack, remembered the collision. He was 15, and although away at a Scout camp at the time, said there were loose tools in *Doris*' hull the following day. His opinion was that *Tu Atu* grounded, slew across and hit *Doris*.

Russell William (Peter) Fenwick, Jack's nephew, also 15, could have been aboard *Doris* on the night of the collision; instead, he'd gone to the pictures.

Two survivors from *Doris* were said to have been strong swimmers and one, Robert Pratt, went on to become a surf lifesaver, subsequently president of the Hawke's Bay Life Saving Association. It's easy to imagine why, motivated by experience, he took up that pastime.

John Boyd, another *Doris* survivor, was in October 1939 cycling down Goldsmith Road in Napier, one of the steepest roads in New Zealand. At a sharp and steeper elbow, his bicycle punctured and he lost control, flew over a garage roof, landed on concrete at the rear of the house. He died the following day in hospital, the first of three known cycle deaths at that same location.

The author's boyhood home was next door.

December 1932 was not *Doris*' first collision. She had in November 1922 collided with ss *Koau* in the Inner Harbour and begun to fill with water. Taken alongside the wharf, she sank. Jack Fenwick had at that time the Harbour Board licence to run her.

A suggestion was made in the 1990s that it may have been in Richardson's interest for Captain Martin to be exonerated, for blame for the collision to be laid elsewhere. This was on the basis that Martin being found culpable would have cost the Company a great deal by way of compensation to the victims' families. Richardsons, it was suggested, did not have insurance for such eventualities. In fact, the Company did have insurance; they were a member of the United Kingdom Mutual Steam Ship Assurance Association, Limited. Known as the Protection Club, this covered loss of life, life salvage or personal injury to any person on board a Member's steamer. In addition, there was cover for loss of life or personal injury to "any person on board any other ship or boat" caused "by the improper navigation" "or other negligent act" of any Member's steamer.

That policy would, of course, need a legal eye to determine the finer points of validity.

It should be noted that while the Inquiry nautical assessors Worrall and Holmes were appointed by the Minister of Marine the Hon. JC Cobbe, the two captains – albeit both retired – had between them fifty-three years service for the Union Steamship Company of Dunedin, which company at the time was a major shareholder of Richardson & Co of Napier.

Jim Blundell conveniently omitted to mention the instance of double-dipping. Richardsons at the Inquiry had an agreement with the Crown Solicitor; they would continue to pay the wages of their employees who took the stand, and those same employees would not claim witness expenses. Captain Blundell, however, submitted his claim, which the Marine Department was legally obliged to pay. Department Acting Secretary Millier authorised said payment, and ensured that Richardson's manager was notified accordingly. Outcome unknown.

*Tu Atu* continued to run cargo to Wairoa, and was used as transport for watersiders out to the roadstead. She was re-engined in 1938 and bought by the New Zealand Government in July 1942. Towed to Auckland, she was used by the Navy to transport stores, water and fuel around the naval base. In July 1948, an incident where a naval rating fell over her side was reminder of her troublesome manoeuvrability. Still in Navy hands until at least March 1954, it's thought that when she was eventually disposed of, she was taken to Deep Cove, used as a water tender for *Wanganella*, the hostel ship for workers on the Manapouri hydro project.

*Doris* continued to serve Fenwick, but being an unregistered vessel, she is difficult to trace. It's thought that she was eventually sold to a fisherman named Munro, perhaps in the 1940s. He took her to Wellington to use as a fishing boat, and she was lost ashore there in the 1950s.

In September 2015, the New Zealand Geographic Board released their report regarding a petition for a change of name of East Pier, Port Ahuriri. It included a potted history of the *Doris* disaster which cited the relevant newspaper articles yet made the following unbelievably slipshod points:

*While witnesses testified to the 'perfect sobriety' of the captain of Tu Atu, visibility on the night was poor and the captain did not recognise the Doris' lights as belonging to another vessel.*

*An official enquiry under the Shipping and Sea Act was conducted the following year, which found the Tu Atu completely at fault for the disaster.*

There was public discussion in 2017 towards erecting at East Pier a memorial to the ten victims and the disaster; surely truth is a finer memorial?

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