

AN ASTONISHING JOURNEY TO THE 1968 ZEPHYR NATIONALS

The Platinum Anniversary of the Zephyr class at Howick in 2026 will host a guest with a pedigree like no other. Sue Currie came to recent attention by pure coincidence. She was a teenage Zephyr sailor in the 1960s during an era where female participation was not common, was shipwrecked on the way to the 1968 Zephyr nationals, then flew to Auckland the following day and commenced racing that afternoon – all within 24 hours of the sinking. At the time she was a graphic designer. In following years she established a career as a self employed fine artist, married, raised two daughters and currently lives on the shores of Lyttelton Harbour.

Sue's current connection to the Zephyr class was fortuitously triggered by the remarkable story of Mike and Finn Drummond's Cook Strait crossing in two Zephyrs. This was reported in our May 2025 edition of West Wind, followed by a similar article in Boating NZ's July issue. A photo of the Drummonds' sailing into Wellington Harbour on 10 April 2025 with two Interisland ferries in the background was the catalyst for further investigation, revealing a remarkable coincidence. Vague stories existed within the class of a Zephyr lost in the 1968 *Wahine* sinking, but it was actually two Zephyr sailors travelling on the ill-fated ship. Both survived – one was Sue Currie.

Exactly 57 years later, on the same day – almost to the same hour that Sue washed up on the Eastbourne shoreline, Mike and Finn Drummond sailed their Zephyrs into the same harbour—coming ashore at Worser Bay in relatively benign conditions.

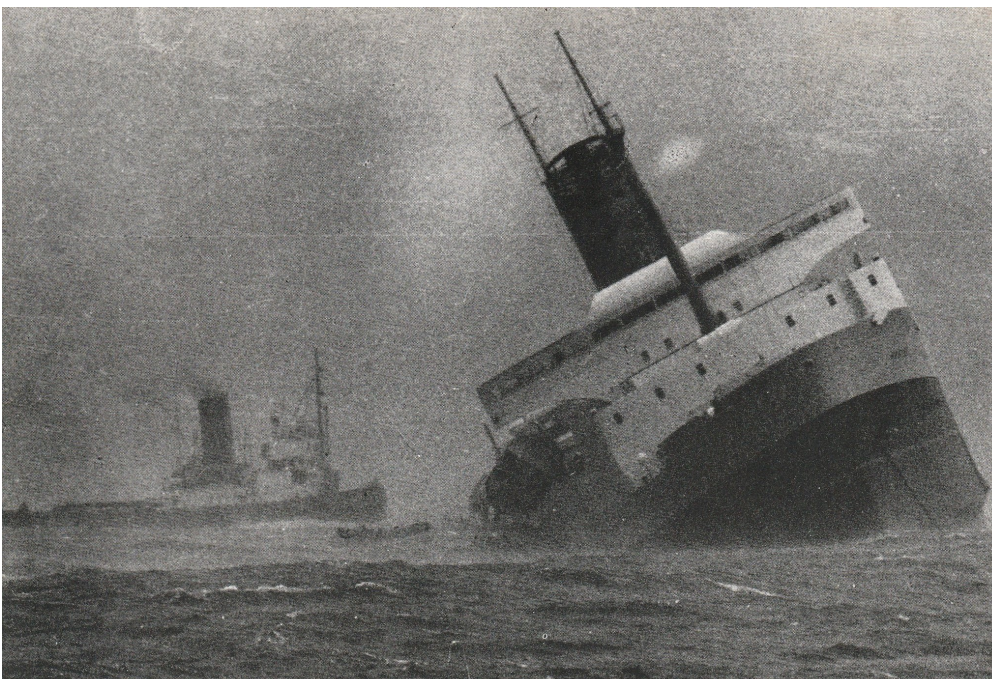
This is Sue Currie's *Wahine* story: -

Sue started her sailing as a seven year old in P-class, then to Zephyr #150 *Easterly* - a new, Des Townson-built bare-hull her father Ian finished at home. She was the first lady sailor at Charteris Bay Yacht Club.

The 1968 Zephyr nationals were scheduled to start on 11 April 1968 at Maraetai Beach Boating Club, Auckland. Sue and fellow Zephyr sailor Geoff Beaumont embarked on the *Wahine* in Lyttelton Harbour on the evening of the 9th as foot passengers—their boats were sent to Auckland a week earlier. The departure was in calm conditions, but by time they were off the Kaikoura Coast the wind had risen and sea conditions worsened. Huge waves continuously whacked the side of the ship making loud reverberating sounds, followed by hull shuddering. The noise was likened to the 'Gong' strike that preceded all Rank Corporation's 20th century movies. By 6.30am when the *Wahine* was approaching Wellington Harbour the southerly was hurricane strength - in excess of 100 knots , with huge accompanying swells. Heavy rain, hail, freezing temperatures and zero visibility added to the miserable conditions. Sue recalled she, '...wanted to die from seasickness.'

The realisation something was wrong began when, "...the engines were being repeatedly reversed, then cycled full ahead." Sue wisely overdressed in all her wool clothing. Many didn't, staying in light cotton, with some ladies even wearing high heels. Once the boat grounded, graunching sounds echoed through the ship, "...like thousands of tin cans grating on rocks. Out of lower portholes huge rocks could be seen within touching distance. Despite this, crew were saying everything was under control."

"The *Wahine* slowly started listing to starboard. As the listing worsened, there was a sudden jolt, with many passengers slipping, then becoming injured as chairs and tables began falling down the heavily tilted floor. Two hours after first reef contact, the abandon ship order given. Queues formed for lifeboats, but many crew members had already left on life rafts, leaving a few remaining crew and able-bodied passengers trying to launch remaining lifeboats. It was a shambolic evacuation. Only huge life-jackets with no crotch straps were available, unsuitable for smaller people and totally unsuitable for children or infants. There were not enough lifejackets for everyone." By this point the wind had dropped to gale force 40 knots.



◀ A lifeboat can be seen leaving the stricken *Wahine* while the tug *Tapuhi* looms in the background. Sailing through the air, just under the starboard wing of the bridge is an inflated liferaft.
Book: 'The Wahine Disaster'

Sue believed her only option was to jump into sea because all the lifeboats had gone. The hail had stopped but the water was freezing cold. On hitting the sea, her life jacket was immediately ripped off, but fortunately she was able to get back into it. "I couldn't see the far shore after I jumped off the stern because of poor visibility. Many passengers were floating around the heavily listing hull. No lifeboats or suitable rescue boats were in sight - only a huge tugboat in the distance, trying to pick people up." Sue thought this was more hazard than helpful, with the risk of being crushed by the pitching tug. She decided her best option for survival was to swim to the northeastern side of Wellington Harbour to escape the rocky shoreline to the south east. She thought her alternatives were remaining by the ship and being sucked under as it capsized or to die from exposure. She reasoned that the incoming tide and wind would helpfully push her up harbour if she swam across it.

Once Sue started swimming, she saw no other passengers, eventually reaching the breaker-line abeam a sandy beach. Huge dumping waves were smashing on the beach, but were dangerously devoid of shallow water below the dumping waves - just beach and/or rocks. Her only option was to get dumped and hope for the best. Unfortunately, after the first dump, the swirling southerly undercurrent swept her back out to sea, and south - closer to a line of huge rocks. After another failed dump and getting washed back out, the third looked terminal. In front were the exposed rocks. Sue thought, "This is it, I've had it." Fortunately, the next dumper was larger than the two previous and swept her over the first rock line, tumbling like a pebble on the bottom of the wave. She landed on a small beach, gained a foothold and with adrenalin-fuelled energy scrambled to safety. Once above the breaker danger, she realised she was totally alone. There were no preceding passengers or rescuers anywhere in sight. Without a watch, Sue thought she'd spent about an hour swimming for the shoreline.

Sue started walking and eventually stumbled upon two policemen who told her to keep walking. Later, she stayed and comforted two elderly ladies collapsed on the shore who were hypothermic and in shock. A lifeboat came ashore nearby, and a local farmer with his flatbed truck appeared. Sue and a barely alive group of survivors were loaded on and were taken to the Wellington Post Office. If Sue hadn't been holding on to the two ladies either side, they would've fallen off. She thought two others were probably deceased.



◀ Oblivious of their surroundings as a four-wheel-drive vehicle carries them to safety on the eastern side. Book: The Wahine Disaster

Zephyr sailor Sue Currie is sitting upright on the flat-deck with her back to the cab.

"There was much waiting around in Wellington. I had a blanket lent by Red Cross. They were amazingly helpful – handing out blankets and giving out donated dry clothing. Only one phone was available for all survivors, so a very long queue formed. No food was given out and it was evening by the time I received dry clothes from the DIC department store which offered one free set of clothes per person. Passengers were then on their own. There was no support from any Government, Wellington City Council or Union Steamship Company staffers. I believe the reason I survived was because of my yachting background as well as lifesaving training from school days."

At the Post Office Sue reconnected with Geoff Beaumont. Sue's parents had arranged a family friend to pick the two up, then feed and house them for the night. At 8am the following morning Geoff phoned NAC about their booked flight to Auckland and was told the aircraft was fully loaded and awaiting their arrival at the airport. Soon after Sue and Geoff were airborne. On arrival at Auckland, they were collected by another family friend who drove them to Maraetai Beach Boating Club. On arrival, Sue and Geoff unpacked their boats and sailed the invitation race the same afternoon. It was not a good regatta for Sue, the strong winds followed them north for what became a heavy weather nationals. Unsurprisingly for what she'd been through, she came down with influenza and missed two races. Despite her horrendous experience getting to the nationals, Sue came third on handicap.

Sue requested compensation for lost luggage, but a Union Steamship Company manager sent a return letter of refusal - without supplying his/her name. The ticket fine print absolved the company of any responsibility for lost goods, personal harm or death. Passengers travelled at their own risk. Sue was never debriefed by either Police or any other statutory body. She wasn't offered the opportunity to provide a witness statement to the Court of Enquiry. The twenty-six-day Enquiry found numerous shortcomings and faults but nobody was prosecuted. This was considered by many passengers as a whitewash for an event so serious that 51 people lost their lives.

Clearly, Sue Currie and Geoff Beaumont were made of stern stuff – post traumatic stress disorder was yet to become a widely recognised disabling condition.



▲ Sue Currie and Geoff Beaumont unloading their Zephyrs at Maraetai Beach Boating Club in preparation for the 1968 National Championship invitation race - 24 hours after being shipwrecked on the *Wahine*.

▼ Sue Currie fitting a borrowed sail to her Zephyr #150, *Easterly*. Her original sail was hand luggage on the *Wahine* and was never seen again.
Photos: Sue Currie Archives.

