

WATERFRONT LOSES A COLOURFUL CHARACTER

GINGER GIBBS: 1954 - 2007

BY KEITH INGRAM



Some would call Ginger Gibbs a likeable rogue; some might say he's a bloody rascal, while others will remember his frequent womanising and that regular, satisfied smile on his face.

The widely respected fisherman, biker, powerboat racer, restaurateur and pirate, who died at home after a heart attack on January 17, at the age of 52, was recognised as one of the Auckland waterfront's more colourful characters.

It would be fair to say he loved his girls. He was also a good mate who suffered no fools. He could out-cuss the toughest bosun, leave a mule skinner thinking he was in Bible class and teach many a biker a whole new language. As a fisherman he had done most things. He was an experienced seaman who could relate lessons and many a story of the sea or a salty yarn where he was just ahead of the law. But there was a softer side under the swearing, macho bravado he portrayed. He was a family man with five children and a large, extended family whom he loved dearly. And there were a few skeletons in the closet as well.

Over 600 mourners from Auckland's waterfront and further afield, including about 50 bikers riding some of Harley Davidson's finest machines, turned out to farewell what could be the last of his kind, the type of guy you only meet or have the privilege to know once in a lifetime. For after they made Ginger they lost the mould at sea.

Most will probably have never heard of his real name. Craig Gibbs was born to Bill, "Anzac" and Ngaire in the Mokohinau Lighthouse in 1954 near Great Barrier Island. His father was a whaler who had moved from Great Barrier to the Mokohinaus as a lighthouse keeper.

At the age of 14, after obviously reading too much Tom Sawyer, and feeling the call of the nearby Pacific Ocean, he did what all children dream of. He ran away to sea as a cabin boy, and so began his passion for life on the briney.

This association would last for over 28 years before he established Swashbucklers, a leading Auckland seafood restaurant and bar, where he would take on a life of some respectability. Note the word "some", for respectability was hard work, and it never changed the man he was nor his colourful vocabulary, his love of the ladies and the chance of a good yarn.

One might question, why a restaurant and bar, and what skills did a drunken fisherman have to run them. Yes, there was a time when Ginger would drink most people under the table, and those in the know will recall the popular sly grog retreat in one of Auckland's wharf sheds known as the green door, which would ultimately give rise to Ginger's new-found hospitality and mine host skills, even if these did include giving patrons a right rollicking burst from time to time.

The stories abound, and one that comes to mind occurred

not long after Ginger had opened Swashbucklers 10 years ago, which for all intents and purposes was legal.

"Radar", named for her ability to tune into five conversations at once while manning the bar, received a visit from the man from the local liquor licensing authority, only to find out that they were trading illegally.

Ginger was duly called from where he was cutting fish, and in true Gibbs fashion, and using his "If in doubt come out on the attack" approach, gave this city bureaucrat a right royal rave up and something about closing the door after him. Our licensing man responded that he would have them closed down in a week, and he did, leaving Radar and her mates devising how they could sell fruit concoctions to the discerning local fishermen and Auckland's trendy set.

After a fair dose of humble pie, training in the error of liquor licensing ways and the parting of some hard-earned cash to meet legal commitments, including such begrudged donations in the guise of fines, a new licence was bestowed on the establishment among rowdy cheers as another party developed.

By this stage Ginger rarely touched drink. It was far better for him to sell the stuff, and by not drinking he could not get sucked into booze schools with some of the waterfront's finest.

However, he was a man of honour, and another story springs to mind as the restaurant was growing in popularity and new staff were hired. Kingfish was the specialty of the day, and as the fresh young lass who was thrown in at the deep end was taking the orders, she was asked if the kingfish was fresh.

Being unsure, she totted out the back to where Ginger, in white overalls and seaboots, was cutting up the day's catch fresh from the boats for the galley.

"Fresh!" he exclaimed "#@*&^?" he repeated. "Who is the f#%\$(c)r who dares to ask?" He tossed a fine kingfish onto his shoulder and strode purposefully into the dining area.

On identifying the man in question in a suit and tie in the company of a fine-looking women enjoying a nice chardonnay while waiting for their orders to be taken, the fish came crashing down on the table with the words, "Is this #@%#* fresh enough for you?"

To say the diners were startled would be an understatement, as glass, wine and cutlery scattered. To be fair to our suit, he quickly gathered his wits and suggested that that piece would be fine, pointing to a choice part of the kingfish. The mess was cleaned up, the wine replenished and the meal enjoyed.

As the suit left to pay the bill he was quietly told that the account had been paid. It was Ginger's way of making a statement. The word soon got round about the fresh quality of

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SEAFARER CLOCKED UP THE MILES

JOHN TRAVERS: 1955 - 2006

BY LINDSAY WRIGHT

John Travers' seafaring career started from great heights. He'd often tell me how his father used to take him fishing from the Wellington wharves, grab him by the hands and swing him out over the water, saying, "I'm gonna drop ye...I'm gonna drop ye."

Oddly enough, that experience imbued the young Travers with a love of the harbour, the sea and the boats that worked it, probably the last thing his father expected. That love never diminished.

John and I met more than 30 years ago while he was a deckhand on the *MV Success* and I was a deckie on the *MV Te Aroha*. Both were small, wooden ships, built to work the rugged coastline of New Zealand under sail, and flat-bottomed to take the ground for loading and discharging off the beach.

But both had been motorised, the *Success* to collect quarantine garbage off ships in port, and the *Te Aroha* to lug loads of tourists around the harbour.

That didn't matter to John and me. As far as we were concerned, we were the last of the working scowmen, the last swaggering sailormen left on the Wellington waterfront. We both loved our work and gave it our all.

"Round-bilged," John would scoff at the *Te Aroha*. "Not a real scow."

John, who was already a husband and father, left the *Success* to take a steady, well-paid job with the pilot boat crew. He gained his skipper's ticket and worked as launch master on a variety of vessels, from the heavy, old wooden *Tiakina* with her slow-revving Blackstone diesel, to the *Tarakena*, an aluminium launch with twin 550hp Detroit.

It requires steady nerves and precise judgement to put a small launch alongside moving freighters in the stormy tidal waters of the Wellington Harbour heads at all times of the day and night and in all weathers, but John did it for 25 years without a serious incident. We worked it out once, and figured that he'd done about 300,000 miles between the pilot boat berth and the pilot station.

Along the way, John earned an awesome reputation for his seamanship and boathandling skills, but he'll also be fondly remembered for his sense of humour, his warm compassion and his love of humanity.

The stories are legendary. A pilot handed John's deckie his cap, just as he was about to board an inbound ship, and demanded that it be put on his office desk for his return.

That was just too inviting for John, and the characteristic Travers glint sparkled in his eye. He handed over the helm and began kneading some fresh bread they had aboard, then mixed it with coffee powder and cocoa until it looked like a long, brown log, which he carefully coiled inside the captain's cap, garnished with a few squares of toilet paper.

Back alongside the wharf, they put the cap on the captain's desk, as ordered, and sat back in the smoko room to wait for the



blast. By now several people were in on the prank and watched as the pilot strode down the ship's gangplank and across to his office.

Minutes later the smoko room phone rang. "You...you...bastards," the pilot spluttered at one end. "Well, it's edible you know," a poker-faced John replied at the other.

Then there was the Christmas he was disembarking the pilot off an outgoing cruise ship. John borrowed two huge speakers, and lashed them on the deck of the *Tarakena*. As the ship cruised sedately through the harbour heads, John hit the play button and blasted out a few hundred decibels of Bing

Crosby singing I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas.

The pilot later reported that the ship took a list as the passengers all rushed to the side to see where the music was coming from, and everybody left Wellington with big smiles on their faces.

I was arriving from Perth, Australia at the same time on a fishing boat delivery, and the *Tarakena* followed us to our inner city berth. After we'd tied up, John treated us to a blast of Bing and received a round of applause from passersby thronging the wharf.

Not many people who knew John will ever think of him without smiling. He had boundless talent as a seaman, cameraman and cartoonist, and boundless enthusiasm and imagination to match.


On another occasion I had two wheelhouse windows taken out by a wave while leaving Wellington. Once the ship was back alongside the wharf and repair work was underway, John took me back to his and Raewyn's house, ran a hot bath, prepared a hot meal with a glass of wine and talked me through what had happened.

Then, just as I was leaving, John slipped me a carefully itemised invoice for services rendered. We sailed four days later, and all the way to Cape Horn I took that invoice out of my pocket every few days and laughed myself silly.

We exchanged e-mails almost every day. Often they were just a few sentences about weather and lately a lot about Shetland, where he and Raewyn moved about three years ago. He loved the rugged beauty of the islands passionately. The rocky countryside and the sea suited his creative photographer's vision, and it was the perfect place for a man who'd never fallen out of love with the sea.

After a stint doing deliveries for the local hardware store, he'd just started running a wee boat servicing a salmon farm, and was back in his natural element.

Two days before Christmas, John was taken by a sudden heart attack. Hundreds of people turned out for his funeral and burial at a cemetery overlooking the Lerwick Harbour heads, and hundreds more mourned his passing in Wellington.

New Zealand and the Shetlands both lost a fine seaman and a special person. John left hundreds of people who feel privileged to have known him. 

TOP RACE OFFICIAL WAS WELL LIKED

GIORGIO F LAURO: 1947-2007

BY KEITH INGRAM



One of the best-known America's Cup officials, the Italian Giorgio F Lauro, died on January 11 at the age of 60. He was an International Sailing Federation committee member and had been an ISAF race official since 1994.

Lauro was a leading official in Auckland during the 31st America's Cup and the Louis Vuitton Cup challenge in New Zealand, where he freely shared his race management professionalism and expertise with the many Kiwis he regarded as his southern friends.

Giorgio was known as a man of action and a committed servant of sailing. He started his career in sailing as the main organiser for the Flying Junior World Championship in Italy in 1975. He became an ISAF international race officer in 1994, and two years later an international judge.

He gave his services to the sport at some of its most prestigious

events, acting as an international technical officer at the 2003 ISAF Sailing World Championships in Cadiz, Spain, and at both the Sydney 2000 and Athens 2004 Olympic Games.

Giorgio suddenly became ill in Qatar over the New Year, and died on January 11. He stepped off a race-committee boat while in Qatar and straight into the hospital. Until the last minutes of his life he was helping other patients, giving directions to the doctors about his own therapy and generally managing life in the hospital.

To the many of us whose lives he touched we wouldn't expect less from a man who handled two Olympics and one America's Cup. He had an exciting life, and he lived it the way he wanted to, travelling in the company of good friends.

The funeral was held at the S Giovanni e Paolo Church in Venice on January 16.

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the seafood served, and business boomed.

Ginger's brothers were Shag, Squid and Couch. Nicknames were the thing for all, and he was quick to tag anyone he liked with a nickname. It was a sign that he accepted you, although one would wonder if he liked you with some of the names he coined that stuck. To all he was just Ginger Gibbs, and you could take him or leave him, like it or lump it.

Did he have a real name? Yes, but it was rarely used. I well recall another story when a prospective seafarer, looking for a job, fronted up to a fishing master with a reference from Ginger. A mighty fine reference it was, too. The master just happened to know Ginger, and thought he would check this prospective sailor out.

"Who?" said Ginger. "Never heard of the #@&*!! What's it say?"


The text was duly read out, only to earn a burst of language that in essence suggested that Ginger had never written something so wussie in his life, which was true of the man.

"How's it signed?" he demanded.

"Regards, Ginger Gibbs," said our master.

"Tell the #@&^+?o'l to f&#@ off. It's not my letter." Ginger then revealed to our taken aback master that when he signed any official paperwork it was always as Craig Gibbs.

Some regarded him as a pirate, some called him a smelly fishmonger, while others we had better not repeat, for fear of speaking ill of the departed. Whatever you called him, Ginger had a passionate history with the sea, and even more so with the Tasman. He successfully made more than 200 Tasman crossings, the last being as the Flying Pirate, when he broke the liner *Oriana's* record for a trans-Tasman crossing from the Sydney Harbour Bridge to the Auckland Harbour Bridge.

Ginger's family and friends laid him to rest in his own chosen spot at the Tryphena cemetery on Great Barrier Island, his island home. He has left his mark in the sand, and as the tide turns we bid farewell to a friend, and mourn the loss of one of the maritime industry's more colourful characters. 



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