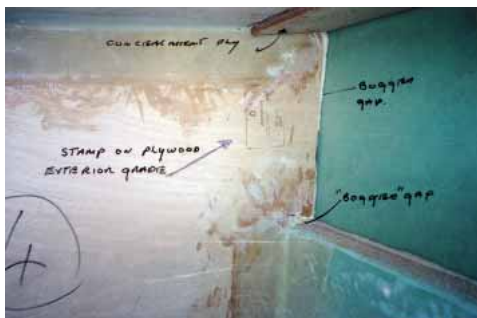


# WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR BOATBUILDING MESS?

BY KEITH INGRAM



A dog's breakfast hidden inside a hull void



Insufficient wing deck beams made of unsuitable cedar



Shoddy workmanship inside a locker

The production of the Silver Tiger range of vessels built by Kelvin and Ernie Travers under a variety of company names has left a trail of devastation for both owners and the industry to clean up.

Historically, *Professional Skipper* has not got into the politics of boatbuilding. Rather, our reviews of new commercial craft entering the industry concentrate on the owner's intended requirements, with a focus on new ideas, innovations, performance and intended use.

It is not for us to question the construction methods of boatbuilding, because when it comes to commercial craft, plan approval, construction surveyors, safe ship management procedures and Maritime New Zealand inspections, all have the responsibility to ensure a vessel is built in accordance with its design and is fit for purpose.

Plus we have the Marine/Boating Industry Association, which has the over-arching responsibility as the industry's watchdog, ensuring that the New Zealand boatbuilding industry maintains a reputable standard and quality assurance. This is a given.

However, there comes a time when one has to speak out, especially when so many who have prior responsibility remain noticeable by their silence. This is of particular concern when it involves future passenger safety being put at risk due to poor boatbuilding construction practices.

We raise this issue to ensure that the industry is aware of the Travers' history as they appear to have misled boat designer Ron Givens and his clients, and in doing so have brought the New Zealand boatbuilding industry into disrepute. Of particular concern is how many of these vessels sneaked through what should be a rigorous construction survey and safety inspection system. Following the *Kotuku* accident the question of survey standards remains a real concern.

On this occasion, it is the production of the Silver Tiger range

of vessels built by the Travers father and son team, who have left a trail of disaster in both commercial craft and other vessels that have failed to meet the designer's specifications and accepted good basic boatbuilding practices.

Not only this, it would appear that to stay ahead of debt collectors they would close up shop on a Friday, only to start up again under a different name on the Monday, figuratively speaking, to evade creditors.

Just who are these guys? A website search revealed that they claim to have 43 combined years in the marine industry, "...from Polaris submarines to dinghys.

"The directors of Travers Developments are Ernie and Kelvin Travers. Ernie served his time as a shipwright before moving to New Zealand in the early 1970s and has worked in the boatbuilding industry ever since. Kelvin has grown up working with Ernie and is a commercial launchmaster, with over 10,000 hours on vessels in New Zealand and Pacific waters."

For a couple of old marine industry hands who are associated with statements like this to allow such spelling of dinghies or shipwright, key words in an industry where they claim to have served their time, says a lot about their knowledge of or commitment to our industry.

We have received numerous complaints from owners who have exhausted the traditional avenues of speaking with the boatbuilder, surveyors and the Marine Industry Association, which has ducked for cover under the excuse that the MIA only represents its members.

Hold on a bit. I can recall Silver Tiger vessels built by Kelvin and Ernie Travers being promoted at MIA-run boat shows as fine examples of New Zealand boatbuilding. If they were not members, why were they able to be promoted under the auspices of the MIA, our guiding association.

I can only speak from concerns to our commercial industry,

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as a number of vessels were destined for charter, including one in bareboat charter. One can only assume that our leading recreational boating magazines will also be speaking out, for silence is only condoning these activities for other scurrilous characters to follow.

My response is that given that over half of the 13 vessels we know of built by the Travers team were destined to be commercial craft, with a number of them being exported, surely it is the responsibility of any member of our marine industry, be they surveyors or marine industry workers or suppliers, to speak out to ensure that the high standard and good name of our marine and boatbuilding industry is upheld.

We first contacted the designer of Tiger catamarans, Ron Given, and commissioned a respected specialist wooden boatbuilder and designer, Max Carter, of Marine Design, to inspect some seven vessels we could gain access to.

Ron has an international reputation as a designer of proven sailing and power catamarans, including the 17.6m offshore gamesail vessel *Te Ngakau a Kupe*.

"I am personally devastated by the representation to honest clients that I was still involved and was managing the design changes in the construction of these vessels," says Ron. "Unfortunately, living in New Caledonia meant that I was unable to respond to these developing bad practices, as they did not come up on my radar screen until too late."

He said Kel and Ernie Travers' original vessel, the *Silver Tiger*, was built in accordance with his designs, which he says are proven and safe, and construction was supervised. Apart from the first three vessels, two of which have developed subsequent problems from lack of construction supervision, the remaining vessel designs appear to have been used without authority from

him, with numerous alterations and lowering of design standards to a level where the vessels now appear to be constructed to an unsafe standard, using materials that most prudent boatbuilders would not consider.

Ron says he was not paid design royalties for the subsequent hulls produced by the Travers, nor intellectual property fees, and yet they continued to trade under his design name.

Ron was also concerned about the manner in which the Travers continued to operate under a variety of guises, all tied in to his reputation and Tiger design name. He said many of his vessel designs feature the word Tiger, starting with his original sailing catamaran, the Paper Tiger.

Max Carter reported that there was evidence of attempts to cover up defective workmanship in the vessels he inspected. "There appeared to be no integrity toward project management or the standard of materials being purchased and used in the construction of the vessels. Construction methods did not follow good practice and failed to meet even elementary boatbuilding construction standards," said Max.

"There was clear evidence where the boatbuilders had consistently cut corners on both the construction and the quality of materials that failed to meet the original design specifications," he said. Even the basic principles of hulls being dimensionally similar were not complied with, as hull and superstructure deficiencies were present in all the vessels Max inspected.

One would expect that when you build a catamaran that the basic principle of the hulls being a mirror image of each other is taken for granted. But not so in the Travers' case. Not only were the stems askew, but also there were instances where one hull was longer and the dimensional volume different between hulls on the same craft. ▶

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Our photographic evidence clearly indicates that many hulls were out of fair, twisted, dimensionally out of line and in some cases not true sisters.

Specifically, one 12m catamaran destined for Australia failed to meet Australian Marine and Harbours survey standards after supposedly being built to New Zealand plan approval and survey standards as part of a sister agreement between countries.

In no particular order, the following faults were found to be evident and in some cases were consistent through all the vessels inspected by Max:

- little or no effective stiffeners in the hull, with ply sheet butt joints and no doublers and ill fitting scarfs
- Forma foam insulating material normally regarded not suitable for structural applications and used as structural cores
- GRP laminate in the inside of the voids were not fitted, nor clean, faired and sealed
- stiffeners and strengthening material was absent or cut short
- plywood strips were stuck on to conceal faulty workmanship in the hulls
- wing deck joints lacked stiffeners and doublers and structural support
- for'ard windscreens up to 140mm out of wind which would fail to take armoured glass. The opposite window was 50mm out of wind
- hull stems vertically out of alignment and chines at odd heights and erratic chine lines
- delaminating of the wing deck due to sub-standard construction and materials
- in one case, the flybridge overhanging aft deck sagged 70mm with a 76kg static load
- a difference in the hull depth at the transom of up to 30mm, on opposite hulls
- a number of vessels revealed hulls of different lengths, different toe-in and twists in the wing deck.

This is not a good look, and it would appear the variety of companies the Travers have been involved with have misrepresented the public by using literature as a marketing tool that these boats were all built to Maritime New

Zealand safe ship management standards.

Apart from the first vessel, and in all subsequent cases, there is evidence where the vessels failed to comply with stated publications that construction was to New Zealand marine survey and plan approval. The photographs suggest that some effort was spent to disguise defective workmanship by ensuring inspection access into many areas of the hulls was not made easy.

One can only ask why independent monitoring by the approved surveyors did not pick up these construction faults and defects. Clearly, the alarm bells should have rung when a reputable surveyor walked into the shed and saw pallets of industrial-grade construction plywood that would be suitable for making patterns, but not accepted as a normal substitute for the specified marine-grade plywood.

Bundles of blue, close-cell polystyrene-type insulation foam being used for wing deck core construction and other structural parts of the vessels should have also rung alarms, as structural foam must be able to take shear, impact and structural tension. Polystyrene insulating-type foams are not designed for these rigours, although they may be used in boats in the appropriate areas, but not to the extensive level of these vessels.

Even the glass cloth and resins came into question. From the outside the vessels frequently looked like a tarted-up lady, but underneath there were multiple faults and imperfections. Polyester resin bog was applied over bare, unsealed timber and non-abraded glass laminate, with subsequent delamination or breakouts as a result.

In the seven vessels that Max Carter inspected, even those built to survey, there was too much substandard workmanship in his opinion to go unnoticed even by those with only an elementary knowledge of good boatbuilding practices, he said.

How some of the vessels made it into survey without challenge remains a puzzle. Where were the checks and measures, and what happened to the documentation for plan approval, progress inspections of both



In one example the inboard hull depths were 500mm and 530mm respectively

materials and construction, and adherence to drawings and good workmanship practice? Just who was responsible?

We are mindful that numerous owners have been burnt and have subsequently spent many thousands of dollars trying to correct the problems so that they at least meet the prescribed standards for work and retain some resale value.

The tragedy is that the boat owners were sucked in by smooth sales talk. In some cases these owners are now reluctant to speak out for fear of their vessels becoming devalued, even though they have to do expensive remedial work and try to recover the costs from the Travers'. This is an issue that the courts will probably have to deal with.

The really sad part is that while many of their vessels remain in New Zealand, two went to Western Australia, one to Noumea, one to Canada and another was scheduled to go to Fiji. All the delivered vessels have been identified to have severe construction faults on their arrival to their overseas owners, and required substantial remedial repair work, with litigation following.

One boat in Western Australia has sat for a long time in a local yard and has been held up by Australian boatbuilders as an example of poor Kiwi workmanship and all the reasons why not to buy New Zealand-made. This, along with the boats in Noumea and Canada, has severely dented our reputation as a quality boatbuilder of international standard. And yet the MIA chooses to remain silent.

It looks like the Travers' have owned or traded under a number of companies. While the marketing name stayed as Silver Tiger, the companies behind the scenes have been a series of what appear to be shelf or convenience companies. Once the deposit was paid and work commenced, albeit as a façade, dodgy, quick construction appears to have been carried out to the level where the builders could demand a large progress payment from the owners, who now report that once it was paid, they found themselves trying to deal with liquidated companies.


To our knowledge, the Travers in a

relatively short space of time have been involved with Silver Tiger Limited (struck off) Silver Tiger Catamarans Limited (in liquidation), Travers Development Limited (in liquidation), Imation Holdings Limited (in liquidation) TDL Marine Limited (in liquidation), Marine Merchants Limited (in liquidation) Western Marine Holdings Limited and Marine Plant Hire Limited, among others. So many liquidations in such a short space of time has to raise serious ethical questions.

What is to be done? Not a lot, as it would appear that our industry watchdog, the Marine Industry Association, either does not want to know or has no teeth. At the very least we believe they should have investigated the owners' complaints, raised the alarm and then distanced our respected boatbuilding industry away from these two.

While it is hard to say that it is a case of caveat emptor ("Let the buyer beware"), given the evidence we have exposed, if the MIA had investigated, noted the concerns, heeded the warning signs and raised the alarm bells so that the members and suppliers to the industry knew of the developing problems, they could have made an informed decision not to supply the materials required to build such substandard craft.

Clearly, the Travers' business practices do not withstand accepted fair trading scrutiny. We have clear evidence of ongoing suspect marketing, with questionable statements to clients and owners, coupled with too much evidence of substandard boatbuilding practices to allow them to continue in our industry unchallenged. It is now becoming a public safety issue and whether these vessels are now fit for purpose.

The question remains. To maintain its credibility, how does the New Zealand marine and boatbuilding industry deal with the aftershock and the trail of devastation left behind by these two? Surely we as an industry must react! For to do otherwise just condones this type of ongoing business activity and implicates us all, making us just as culpable. 



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