

High winds and choppy waters defeat bid to row 18 miles up Tyne in two hours

Veteran oarsmen lucky to be alive after sinking

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Wagstaff, who has been rowing 42 years, said last night he feared a tragedy the longer he and his teammates stayed in the freezing river.

He said: "I was very anxious as I knew it could have been serious. Somebody could have drowned or suffered severe hypothermia.

"I knew the longer we remained in the water the greater the chances there were of somebody being seriously ill. Our fingers and toes were completely numb.

"Thankfully the wonderful actions of the emergency services and the public and staff at the Cophorne Hotel meant any such tragedy was averted.

"We had checked the tide all the way along the route before we set off, and it was fine. But as we got past the Swing Bridge we met some quite freak conditions.

"We could not have foreseen them."

Station Officer Tony Steele from Tyne and Wear fire service said: "Some of the crew had been in the water for more than 10 minutes and they were suffering from hypothermia.

"They didn't have the strength left to climb up the ladders on the side of the river bank.

"One crew member was in practically the worst condition I have ever seen,

he was close to breaking point. It is difficult to imagine him surviving much longer.

"The crew had already used up a tremendous amount of energy in rowing from Tynemouth to Newcastle and their reserves were used up by the time we arrived.

"We had to haul them to the shore and literally carry them up the ladders on the side of the quay. There is no question that they wouldn't have been able to hang on for more than a couple of minutes longer."

SO Steele praised staff from the Cophorne Hotel on Newcastle's Quayside who raised the alarm, threw life-belts to the crew and later took blankets to warm them.

The boat sank about 200 yards upstream from the hotel, near the Redheugh Bridge.

"I cannot speak highly enough of the Cophorne staff. They threw out life-belts to save the crew and encouraged them to keep going until we arrived. They were magnificent."

The veterans were trying to row 18 miles from Tynemouth to Newburn in two hours.

They set off at 10.30am and came to grief shortly after midday.

Alex Shiel, 40, captain of the Tyne Rowing Club, based at Newburn, Newcastle, said: "Nobody was seriously hurt, although their pride is somewhat dented - and they

are very cold and wet.

"The row was arranged to celebrate the new millennium.

"It was to have been the first time the crew rowed over the course, but they had hoped to continue the once popular tradition of rowing on the Tyne, as made famous in the 19th century by famous oarsmen such as Harry Clasper and James Renforth.

"Every one of the crew is a very experienced oarsman and they used their experience to get as close to the river bank as they could.

"Only the cox was wearing a life-jacket because it is impossible to row in them."

The oarsmen were taken to the Royal Victoria Infirmary and later released.

Two who were suffering from the effects of hypothermia were detained a little longer.

SO Steele said: "The conditions were far from ideal. The water was very cold and very choppy, which is why the boat started to sink.

"We had to use an awful lot of manpower to stage the rescue, using fire appliances from Gateshead and Newcastle, because we weren't sure which side of the river they were on when we received the call."

But Dr Wagstaff said what happened yesterday could have happened in June.



Aftermath: Fire service rescuers with the water-logged boat alongside the river front at Newcastle after its crew were rescued from the Tyne.

Picture: Trevor Gray