

THE NIGHT OF THE LONG PADDLE

John Lawler

ONCE again a sea kayak assault on Flinders Island was on the agenda and four intrepid Tasmanian seniors were lining up for the challenge, led by oldest man of the sea Laurie Ford.

With Laurie's extensive paddling experience and 39 previous trips successfully under his belt, what could go wrong? So the March 24 start date arrived, build-up paddling trips had been dutifully completed, adjustments and improvements had been made to our boats, supplies bought, practice packs made and nerves steeled. Just execute the plan simple.

The four Tassies leaving from Little Musselroe Bay in the state's far North-East included Laurie, expat Toby Clark, who flew in from Ballina especially for the two-week fun adventure, Ian MacDonald, and John Lawler.

On my first foray across Banks Strait to Flinders with a slightly different group we were known as the BOBs (Bearded Old Bastards). On this one I have a feeling we may be tagged the SOBs (Silly Old Bastards). If qualification for that moniker gives you just an inkling of "interesting" times ahead, read on.

Having suffered a dislocated left shoulder two weeks before a previous trip to Macquarie Harbour/Gordon River in early February, and then again in the middle of that trip, I was a tad nervous about doing the Flinders trip just five weeks after the second dislocation. No matter, I'd keep my paddle stroke low, avoid any high braces and stay out of trouble ... too easy.

After all, the orthopaedic surgeon did say my second dislocation had just been unlucky, I had regained fairly good movement and the CT scans showed I only had a small break in the tip of the roundish socket bone (my medical term) and an operation would probably not render it any better. Everything was in my favour, wasn't it?

"Life's short, make the most of it, go off and enjoy yourself," he happily encouraged. "Just avoid any shit (his medical term)."

With Toby's words of warning that the doctor's advice would only be against doing the trip, I had been thrown a real curve ball just days out from the departure. Now I was definitely going. I raced off to see paddling mate and physio Matt Lancaster to get the shoulder well and truly taped up as a support mechanism, and even got pics taken of the process so it could be taped again mid-trip if needed.

Only needed the advised drugs then, and I was ready for the off.

Saturday, March 24: Up at 6am to be ready for Mac's pick-up at 8am, quick load of boat and gear and an 8.30am set-off for the five-hour drive to Little Musselroe Bay, where the initial plan had been for a possible 3pm launch and Banks Strait crossing to Clarke Island, or further on to Preservation Island if the conditions were friendly.

Having turned right at Sorell and ending up at Dunalley before realising our mistake at the East Coast turning (yes, left at Sorell), in retrospect it seemed the omens were not good. Back on track, we made it to LMB by about 3.30pm but were aware the initial launch plans would have changed because of the lousy weather forecast. We fully expected to camp there for a day or two until conditions improved.

We arrived to greetings from Toby and Laurie, and to meet Georgia, Tom and Roger for the first time – three Victorians joining us for the crossing. Tom and Georgia were joining us in their double kayak for the Flinders fun but Roger was planning to continue on and do a Bass Strait crossing on his own.

With the initial forecast for gales and rain over the next couple of days we unloaded the boats (gently on the left shoulder) and were about to set up camp when Laurie suggested we hold off until the 5.30pm updated forecast.

The plan had been to wait until about 5am on Tuesday for expected light winds and low swells. But the 5.30pm broadcast offered a small window of opportunity for a night-time crossing if we left about 9.30/10pm. Light to variable winds of around 10 knots and low seas ... even in the dark it would be easy, wouldn't it?

Laurie was keen for the night paddle, having done it several times before, and was wary of the Tuesday forecast changing again and leaving us once again waiting at LMB for favourable conditions. So we agreed: pack the boats, don our gear, test out our red-light flashers and prepare to paddle out offshore a bit at 9.45pm to test the conditions before agreeing to go any further. If anyone felt uneasy about continuing, then we would all return.

In the few hours of waiting we all had a bite to eat and chatted as the darkness and colder night air drew in around us, gradually forcing us into extra layers. I retreated to Mac's car for a nervous doze. It was nervous all right and not much of a doze, unfortunately accompanied by a growing bout of indigestion following my helping of shepherd's pie with garlic. Should have copied Toby's simple repast of plain beef sausages, with enough left over to have cold later. Such an economical gourmet that Toby.

Then it was launch time. Boats lifted to the water's edge one by one, a simple move until Laurie slipped on the slimy boat ramp and fell heavily on his backside but brushed it off as nothing. Out through the lagoon entrance and some small waves and into the darkness, each sticking to the little cluster of red blinking lights like a swarm of fireflies.

After making it out okay and progressing easily into the due north direction we all agreed to paddle on. The die was cast and into the pitch black we paddled. Soon we had some moonlight and stars to brighten our way, and even my shoulder was feeling fine. It would only be another three or four hours and we'd be landing at Spike Bay or Rebecca Bay on Clarke Island.

Keeping a check on my \$10 waterproof watch (which has ticked on through thick and thin) when the moonlight and the moderate sea conditions allowed I noticed three hours had slipped by, but strain as I might I could not pick up any sight of land. No worries, another hour would do it.

I found I was paddling fairly comfortably and keeping up with the group, but there was a growing unease in my stomach. No, surely not seasickness. That was the last bloody thing I wanted ... push it out of mind, it's just indigestion, paddle on.

Four hours passed and the unease grew, this time because we had not made landfall and questions began being raised by one of the Victorians about our progress, speed and direction. Laurie stuck resolutely to his course, but I was unaware that he had his problems – back and thigh pains and plenty of water in his cockpit.

Then I had my own Waterloo. The shepherd's pie came up like Vesuvius, repeatedly, and no doubt coloured the inky waters gaily – not that I could tell or cared, though I did have a brief thought about it attracting unwanted big fishy things. Thankfully, in the pitch black, I don't think anyone noticed, and after it was up I felt heaps better. It didn't affect my paddling or balance so I knew it wasn't seasickness, and that was a huge relief. Marvellous how such things can be counted a mighty blessing in certain circumstances.

To get some sustenance back into me I rafted up with Tom and Georgia and took on some jelly beans and a swig or two of Coke. Fortified again. But no, twenty minutes or so later the volcanic indigestion struck again, only in smaller quantity – but again I felt fine afterwards, phew!

By this stage it was obvious we had been dragged off course by the tide and current and the Victorians were consulting their GPS gadgets. We were making no ground toward Clarke Island, and apparently were being swept westward. About this time Laurie capsized when caught by a wind shift while trying to read his compass, and Tom, Georgia and Roger helped him back upright and to pump out his cockpit. Unbeknown to me his pump battery had died.

Not long after the Vics elected to turn and head back to Little Musselroe Bay, fearing we could not strive against the tide to make Clarke Island because we were so far off course. And then there was the predicted oncoming storm and gale-force winds.

I have to admit I was none too bloody keen on the predicament myself, but the rest of us (Toby, Mac and me) chose to stay with our leader, Laurie. The group should never have split.

It was now about 4.30am-5am, we had been paddling about seven hours. The Tassie four rafted up to take stock and then I realised Laurie was struggling. He admitted his legs and back were troubling him and took some Asprin and had a drink. I took a couple myself for a headache I had coming on, no doubt caused by the two eruptions.

But we had a bigger headache to resolve. Miles off course, apparently, a good storm brewing and an ailing leader.

Laurie's advice was to paddle on until it got light so we could better see where we were. Agreed. Then the thunder and lightning struck, bringing heavy rain and eerie darkness. As dramatic lightning strikes momentarily lit up the skies I caught glimpses of way off land forms, but I had no idea of what islands they were. We battled on, and I remember thinking how beautiful the lightning strikes were. Strange how the thought processes work.

We plodded around for another hour or two until the grey dawn began to surface, only to be blotted out by low cloud – great. By now the winds were picking up and the seas were mounting, so the decision was made to run before the north-easterly storm and make it back to LMB – at least somewhere on Cape Portland.

It sounded good to me. Now just the strength of body and mind to pull it off.

No chance to check the time now, the seas were confused and rolling in at two metres or more. The wind was howling and all my concentration and limited experience was focused on staying upright. But it must have been around 7-8am. We'd passed the darkest hour before dawn test, so why not the rest of the challenge – at least that's the way I saw it. Now I had a definite mission it was buckle down time.

Mac, Toby and I were paddling reasonably close to one another and kept in sight often enough despite the bigger rollers dwarfing us from time to time. But Laurie put his sail up, no doubt because of his difficulty in paddling, and quickly shot off in front of us – headed for Cape Portland, I hoped.

I strained to keep his sail in sight, and he waited once more for us to catch up. None of us three were game to raise our sails, just happy to remain upright and support-stroke like crazy when the threatening big waves crashed in.

About this time I was thanking Matt profusely for his strapping job on my shoulder, praying it would hold up to the constant bracing, and repeatedly telling myself to keep the action low where possible to avoid the disaster of another dislocation. That would have made things very “interesting”.

The hours and the battle dragged on and I could barely make out Laurie in the distance. Miraculously I was staying upright, and then I could make out the welcoming sight of wind turbines on the far-off horizon atop the coastline of Cape Portland – and I had my target.

With the north-easterly pushing us toward the Cape, thankfully, we were making better strides than we thought, though it didn't seem like it at the time and some of the side-on waves were becoming perils as the wind picked up. I don't know what qualifies as gale-force, but I reckon the wind was 30-35 knots at its worst.

It seemed to take an age for those wind turbines on the horizon to get any larger, and I thought I could feel the influence of the current dragging me eastwards toward Swan Island. With Laurie's previous warning ringing in my ears, about missing Swan Island and being pulled out into the Tasman Sea, I doubled down on the paddling effort and asked everything of the shoulder. Amazingly it stood up to it.

I had lost sight of Mac and Toby by then and believed myself to be on my own – shit! Head down, paddle on and get to land, any land would do. The turbines slowly grew bigger and I thought I could see Laurie's sail on the shoreline, but the winds continued to howl and Swan Island was looming closer. I started to pick out a distant sandy beach landing spot, but the battle to reach it continued relentlessly.

A rocky point eventually offered the hope of an adjoining sandy beach but as I inched closer I could see tricky rocks blocking a straight forward entrance, and being a bit shy of rocks now I sought another beach further east on the Cape.

At one point the wind gusts nearly blew the paddle from my hand, and as I got closer to shore it changed direction and started blowing westerly and almost capsized me. Bugger that, I hadn't made it this far only to be turfed in now and ingloriously washed ashore. It was now or never to pick a landing spot.

Rounded another rocky point and spied a relatively calm corner at one end of the beach, which I willed every muscle to graft toward. Somehow I crept toward it, the water got shallower, the waves and wind dropped off, there was no surf and then there was sand under the boat – hallelujah!

Fell out of the boat on my right side, again mindful of the left shoulder, and staggered around a bit on stuffed legs before being able to pull the boat further up the beach and collapse on the deck, wondering where the hell the others were.

The trusty watch said it was 10.15am – I'd been paddling 12½ hours. I was seriously stuffed, spent and done in but graphically reminded of the value of four little words – the will to survive.

Ten minutes later I caught sight of Mac battling his way in from about 200 metres out, so I pulled the sail out to show him the easier direction to the beach. The wind almost wrenched it from my hands. He tried to get in but couldn't beat the wind and current and paddled on, I presumed to the next beach.

Then five minutes later Toby came paddling around the point from a westerly direction, caught sight of me and the sail and nosed in closer to the rocks and made it to the protected corner of the beach. I pulled his boat

ashore and gave him a hand to get out of the cockpit. He was so stuffed he couldn't walk properly for a few minutes, and then declared: "Well, we've been to the edge. We'll talk about this one for a long time."

We decided Laurie had gone ashore further to the west, and after about an hour's spell and in much calmer inshore conditions we paddled on to the Little Musselroe Bay lagoon entrance, which we found was only a 20-minute stint and a couple of beaches away to the east after doing a shoreline reccie.

As we walked our boats up the shallow inlet Mac paddled up behind us, showing us how to navigate the shallows to the boat ramp. He had landed one beach further around from us.

We all pulled up to the ramp and gingerly lifted our boats onto the pebbly shore and counted our blessings. By then it had been about a 13-hour paddle, and Mac and I had been on the go since 6am the previous day when we had risen to set off from Hobart.

It had been a 29-hour epic, including the never-to-be-forgotten Night of the Long Paddle.

JOHN LAWLER
Night survivor

