

FISH 2010 ADVENTURE

We arrived at the sleepy town of Cradock two days before the big race and set up camp in the leafy grounds of the Marlow Agricultural school which Jude, our trusty landcrew was billeted in the school hostel in town and we suddenly became aware that we would have to be making our own food until the event really got under way. Would we starve? Our gas cooker was blowing up dangerously so we couldn't cook, but smooth-talking Stevo soon got the pasta cooked by his sister's clan nearby. Starvation temporarily averted.

Next morning, we nervously got the boat into the water above the Marlow chute and found the river running fast but flat until the chute suddenly appeared around the bend obscured by reeds and not well marked. We lined ourselves up and then thrashed down the 2m wide 5m drop. Exhilarating and great to get going. Hard left at the bottom and we were on our way. Then we started down the smaller rapids honing our skills as we went. At this lower end of the river you have to choose a good route through the reeds and there are narrow channels which join back into the main flow usually with a rapid in the narrows. Good fun.

Pretty soon we were at the dreaded Cradock Weir which looks like nothing from the top but quite scary from the bottom. We got out, portaged and looked at it closely, not dreaming of the drama it would cause us later on. A couple of rapids later we arrived at Cradock, were met by Jude and big Al, my brother and also in our landcrew. Then back to camp, and on to try the Saltpan rapid, the biggest one apart from Keith's Rapid, which we had elected to portage on the day. We lined up Saltpan, ripped under the bridge, went too close to the pylon, capsized and swam, bouncing down over the rocks, straight through the big stopper, bent the rudder, and got out feeling pretty sorry for ourselves. But we had to do it again before the race. So out came the hammer and a rock and we bashed the rudder straight, conferred about the line to take and did it again. This time jubilation as we took a better line down the right and finished intact at the bottom. We were ready to start in the first batch at 7am next morning.

We took advantage of our "international status" to rub shoulders with the paddling greats of SA. Steve and I posed with Michael Mbanjwa and Stevo made his usual cocky and challenging remarks to all around. Then off we went across the Grassridge dam, doing our best not to be last to the dam wall. We did beat a few others and felt a bit better. Up the boulders of the dam wall and then a km portage down through the African bush, and a put-in to the fast flowing Fish. First obstacle is "Double Trouble" which is a chute-turn-chute-TURN over a high weir. We shot down them both but the turn at the bottom got us together with quite few others. That calmed the nerves and soon we were on the way. Next we were at the Toast-rack, a very low bridge with 6 foot wide tunnels running at an angle to the water flow. We lined it up smoothly and shot through, feeling pleased. Then come the weeping willows and sharp bends. You cannot see which is the line and I several times could not anticipate, so we speared into the reeds, twisted round to face upstream and furiously paddled to straighten up. Keith's Flyover next and we looked longingly at it thinking "Maybe

next time” It is a great rapid which 10% of the paddlers attempt and of those 30% survive it, most of those who don’t destroy their boats. So it is not good to come all the way from Aus and destroy your boat in the first hour of the race. Then on to the suite of rapids at Salt pans. First a weir then around the corner and with a shiver of excitement we came into view of the bridge and weir. We lined up the access perfectly and shot under the bridge hitting the first side wave just right. Then hugging the right bank we thrashed through the big bucking waves hardly aware of the cheering folks on the banks. Keeping right we got down to the blasting stopper at the bottom and crashed through to the right of it, a perfect run through our biggest challenge. We cheered and whooped with relief and glee. So much so that about 30m on we went for a swim completely unexpectedly. Never mind, we were on our way.

Then followed a series of rapids and stretches of flat water.

Stevo at the back started to crack the whip and get us concentrating on technique and pretty soon that welcoming finish on the narrow river, reeds both sides, was in sight. You put your boat down amongst the thousand odd others and go up into the huge marquee to have a sausage burger and a beer! Not your typical Aussie kayakers fare.

At the end of day one we were 314th out of 864 finishers in a time of 3 hours and 45 minutes. We were really happy with that. The boat needed some serious work done on the rudder and also the seams towards the back had parted quite a bit, but we unfortunately did not notice that at the time, but it would come to haunt us a little later...

Though most leave their boats on location for the night we took ours back to Cradock to fix it. In town we caught up with my nephew and his mates, all architectural students, who were passing through, and I showed them the stats on my GPS. We were doing 20km per hour down the Double trouble chute and the Salt pans rapid. We were exhausted and slept for a few hours before waking up and not really adequately fixing the boat. There is a repair shop which works all night fixing dozens of damaged but repairable boats and ours should have been there!

Next morning we had been allocated batch “E”. Each batch is a group of 50 boats so it goes up to batch “Q”. The further back you get the more congested on the rapids, so “E” was good! Our start was 8.10 am, but just before the start we discovered the damaged seams behind the rear cockpit and we taped them up as best we could. The 50 boats create quite a wash in the narrow river but we were about in the middle of the batch. On day 2, first up is a portage to get the body going and soon we were in the go of things, teasing the Saffas. Stevo is the world’s expert at that. Soon we were chasing a boat down an unnamed bigish rapid and they suddenly hit a rock and went sideways right in front of us. We smashed into their rudder and were swimming ourselves right into a sharp bend in the company of several other upturned boats. In no time we were back in the boat but struggling to get out into the stream against the current. Eventually we shoved off, but I had lost almost all my

steering. A good natured Saffa called Fergus came along and advised us that our rudder was completely bent over and how were we steering? Good old Fergus stopped behind us and straightened our rudder, but not before Steve had clouted him on the lip with his paddle causing his lip to swell and bleed. Stevo always has a useful retort said the girls love a bloke with an injury and he should be thanking us! We were grateful to Fergus and soon pulled away bent on improving our position. Next comes the Gauging Weir which we shot perfectly, a good, even, green water flow when you get the right line. After this is the Marlow Chute, a 5m drop down a fish chute about 2m wide. Hard left at the bottom and off we went leaving a sea of boats which had not managed the bend at the bottom. All good.

Before we knew it we were at the big challenge, the Cradock Weir. We had been going well and there was a queue of only about 6 boats ahead of us. The chickens portage here and several of the boats we had overtaken took out and started running across to our left. Pretty soon it was our turn and the lifesaver was directing us across a line to the drop point of the weir. Did we get the line right? Not this time! We went smacking down with the back of the boat scraping and breaking as we dropped. Those seams I told you about earlier opened up and took in the water though we still didn't know about that. We were pitched into the water and received no cheers from the hundreds of vultures in the audience waiting to witness the unfolding catastrophes. We later discovered that people for hundreds of miles around the district come to watch the chaos which erupts on the second day of the race at the Cradock weir. They just love it! And we didn't disappoint!

Even though the back of the boat was buckling upwards we got back in and started paddling. After about 20 strokes I was wondering why I couldn't steer at all and why we were sinking. We dragged ourselves on to a rocky ledge and surveyed the damage. The back of the boat deck was completely broken, though the hull had not sheared. We got out the duck tape and started winding it round the boat just behind the rear cockpit. It looked quite good even though it waggled a bit. So off we went and did OK until the next bigger rapid. Once again the back sheared, worse this time and again we sank, watching anxiously as those boats we had worked so hard to overtake gleefully raced past us. I said to Steve to let rip with the duck tape and I couldn't understand why he was passing me little strips six inches long. No more duct tape! Nothing for it but to nurse our craft once more through the last few rapids. Gingerly we paddled round the last few bends and then we saw the finish. The commentator saw our predicament and everyone knew we were just trying to get across the line. Our steering disappeared as the rudder stuck higher and higher out of the water and we started sinking again. We scraped across the line just as the boat started to founder on the rocks but we were finished.

Our final position was 464th out of the 864 finishers and the day 2 time was 3 hours and 58 seconds. We were disappointed to have lost about 15 minutes in our catastrophe, but it was a satisfying experience to finish anyway.