

# My Hawkesbury Canoe Classic

(Don't know why it's called this as I only saw 1 canoe among 499 mostly kayaks)

by Lisa Healey

The day started with all the packing for an event like this, a bit like camping vs Trailwalker. Packing into a plastic box clothing carefully labelled for each checkpoint just in case required. Food, gels, electrolyte drink, water sorted. Soup heated to fill a flask we'd need that hours later. Pain relief & No Doz just in case.

Boat on the car roof, gear loaded into the boot & we're off, it's midday on a beautiful hot Saturday. We're followed by Land Crew 1 Alex & Falco (aka Swimmer & Elite Athlete).

Thinking we'd be getting to Windsor ahead of the crowd, we weren't, there were about 499 boats, cars, paddlers & land crew ahead of us, taking all the good spots. We resorted to a spot down the back of the paddock, didn't bother me much we had Swimmer & Elite Athlete to carry the kayak to scrutineering & anywhere else it needed to go. There were a few things left off JD for land crew, this was one of them. Managing mud was another (that's for later).

We got ourselves registered, scrutineered (check that we have all the required equipment on board – 3 torches – laminated river maps – pea-less whistles – emergency blanket – compass – PFD, that had its own check – fluorescent glow sticks attached to front & back of boat, little did we know how significant those glow sticks would be during the night, for identifying other boats in the blackness).

Back to the car for some much needed lunch carefully selected for carbs & tastiness. The crew had rigged up some necessary shade, to protect delicate paddlers from the sun.



Club photo, briefing, the last pee stop & we're ready to go, hang on Lisa spots a massage opportunity with the physio & she disappears. Back in time for the final PFD check & we're in the water. So lovely to have Swimmer & Elite Athlete doing all the boat carrying, NELI our beautiful Tomaree is only 28kg, but we'd loaded her up.



Never have I seen so many doubles, all being pushed around by a strong incoming tide (not in our favour). We're off. Plan is to find a boat travelling a bit faster than us & jump on for a washride. Picked the boat but for some reason they were travelling up the centre of the river, not the place to be in an incoming tide, so we dumped them, & tagged on with someone else closer to shore. For the next 3hrs that's how it went, bouncing from boat to boat, being pulled along in a slipstream, of course we were used for the same purpose. All part of the friendliness on the water, often conversation exchanged, sometimes not.



As the sun set it was apparent that there was no moon (I was sold on this being a full moon experience, we had NO MOON). We found ourselves alone on the water, passing many a house lit up like a Christmas tree, lots with bonfires & people enjoying the warm night & the sight of the annual HCC no doubt. We approached our first ferry crossing, there were 4 in total. Suddenly we were surrounded by boats including a giant 6-man outrigger. We were all lined up like the beginning waiting for a signal to cross the line of the ferry. An exciting time knowing that just around the corner was our first supported checkpoint & we were right on schedule. We rounded a very dark corner to the sight of a bank full of lights & crew, all waiting for their paddlers. Team NELI had coordinating caps that lit up in a particular way that proved to be excellent to identify for paddlers & crew alike (a NZ design).

What I know is that as Swimmer took care of the boat, Elite Athlete escorted us with care up a sand bank to a beautiful candle-lit picnic with much more food that we could possibly consume & 2 picnic blankets with distance in between in case we "needed space". Above our dinner was a giant digital stopclock to keep us on time. 15mins was the plan, & we blew out to at least 30. All I will say is that The Captain of Tomaree was not letting the side down. The Lackey just had a lot to do!



Down to the water where Swimmer had been restocking & waiting with our boat, she's now facing the right way for action, & we're off into the night, yes it was very dark. This section is a bit of a blur. I know that I yawned a few times, I know that we didn't talk much, I know there wasn't much wash-riding, I know that the tide turned & we were going faster, & I know that we got a great ride into the next stop 3.5hrs away, right on time.

Land Crew 1 meets Land Crew 2.

We cruised right into a dirty great mud flat where we were greeted by the most generous of volunteers who





hung out in the mud up to their knees & thighs pulling boats in so that we only got sticky mud up to our calves (that stinkyness was to remain with us for the rest of the paddle). The moment that raised my spirits to such heights was when Swimmer exited the water with mud up to his elbows, plus mud to his knees as he had slipped & lost his balance. Thank goodness Crew 2, Martin & Michael (aka Kona-Man & Rookie Triathlete) were on board to assist, Lackey was still fluffing around, something about a vest. With belly laughter, No Doz & food inside we departed once again, after a big push off from the mud. I noted that the boat was turned around, restocked & even got a wipe down as she had a muddy face, thank you land crew.

There's only one more stop planned, with no land crew access. Low Tide Pit Stop. This is an experience I had been anticipating for weeks & it didn't disappoint. As we rounded a bit of a hairpin turn 2 hrs after leaving Wisemans, some dear souls who had nothing better to do on a Saturday night called from the bank, "would you like a cup of tea?" to which I responded "yes, 2 white teas, please" & the volunteers jumped into action. The instruction was to go to the end of the mud. We were experts at mud negotiation & knew just what to do. We beached ourselves & were hauled up the mud by a happy chap, again knee deep in the stuff. No need to get out of the boat here, service was to the boat & we promptly received a plate of offerings including the much anticipated scones & jam from someone else wallowing through the mud, followed by a third person equally happy to get dirty & 2 cups of tea.

What treasures they were!

With a good push off we were on our way, only 2 hrs to go & on water we were familiar with, or so we thought.

The next 50 mins went without drama until we were almost at Spencer, a highlight was seeing a string of car lights travelling along the road next to the water on the way to Spencer, knowing their paddlers would probably not meet them but being there just in case. We had no intentions of stopping at Spencer, only 1 hr 10 mins to go. A shame that the tide had turned & was about to start running against us for the rest of the paddle.

Then we hit fog, suddenly all that was familiar was not. We did have company for a while but they weren't sure where they were either. I checked my map & it just didn't look right. We were heading in the right direction but with no confidence. Our company moved off in another direction. I don't know how many giant jelly fish were hanging in the water but we kept hitting them, they were enough to put the fear in me in the dark, they are hard & mess with your paddle stroke when you hit them. Then a sand bar got in the way, with no visibility of the banks on either side, we just paddled blindly for the middle. It was the stuff of thrillers where you expect to see something with big teeth leap out of the water & take off an arm. As Captain of Tomaree it was my job to navigate & what a fine job I did too given that Lackey couldn't even see me from where he was

sitting. We were surrounded by dark greyness, I was thankful for the company of my paddling partner & couldn't imagine doing this on my own. I understand why so many people do this race in doubles. Confidence shattered, fatigue forgotten, we wanted out of there & with a couple of stops to gather my head we made it to the next checkpoint without hitting all the possible obstacles & got some very helpful directions. Confidence restored, visibility improving, I knew where we were going. Out of the blue a dear old soul (he sounded old in the dark) appeared from nowhere, he'd capsized twice, was soaked yet warm he told me. I was happy for company again.

One checkpoint to go & with a last call out of "3-4-4" into the night, a voice from ahead called out from the dark "Is that you, Lisa?" It was JD, a fellow club paddler, there was comfort in that. JD was doing this for the 10<sup>th</sup> time & we were about to pass him.

We powered ahead down the channel with the Brooklyn Bridge lit up ahead & the finish at Mooney Mooney in sight.

Our names were called out as we finished & the atmosphere was alive, at 4.50am.

Greeted by Kona-Man & Rooky Triathlete, we left our boat in their capable hands, received our medals & bathed in the accomplishment of finishing. In dry clothes, toasted sourdough & coffee tasted great at 5am on Sunday morning. It had been a long night. As the crew loaded up NELI, Captain of Tomaree spotted a massage opportunity & she was off.

Satisfied we went home, showered & crashed, scrubbing of the mud under toenails would have to wait.

Our category Brooklyn or Bust started with 72 double kayaks & we came 6<sup>th</sup> in 12:24:50, arriving at 4:54:50 am.

Would I do it again? Absolutely!

Would I do it solo? No way!

Would I do it again with Neville? As a matter of fact we're talking about it.

To our wonderful Land Crew, you were awesome & we thank you.

