

Massive Murray Marathon Report – Susan Williams

(reproduced from Susan's Facebook post)

The Massive Murray Marathon, from Yarrawonga to Swan Hill, in the states of New South Wales and Victoria, Australia, on the Murray River, 5 days, 404 kilometers, November 19-23, 2018.

From heat to hail, snakes to spirits, wind to whirlpools, hold on to your hats, this one is definitely a wild ride.

The Murray Marathon is 5 days and 404 kilometers across the Australian bush. It is, for the most part, remote, arid, flat, and brown country. There isn't, they say, much rain here, so when you see something green, you're either near a river or in an area with irrigation. Cattle and sheep are on either side of the road, with the occasional suicidal group of kangaroos or emus darting in front of the car to test your driving reaction times, much like our deer do back home. Tony and I would be driving along, and I would be fascinated by the roos and emus, much to the chagrin of Tony who told me to stop staring at them and start paying attention because he didn't want any to hit his car. Only when we narrowly avoided a kangaroo, it must have left a few hairs and probably some kangaroo snot on my side door, that's when I realized they really are as big and as dangerous as deer.

Tony and I traveled to Yarrawonga the day before the race to check in and see opening ceremonies and attend the mandatory pre-race meeting. You know those meetings, where they say wear your PFDs, help anyone you see in trouble, blah blah blah, everyone half listening like the safety instructions on an airline. Everyone knows this stuff and you never need it, right?! Yea, always the famous last words.

We pulled up on a beach to camp at the finish line of day one. It's not a campground like we have with assigned spaces, it's a sandy beach beside the Murray River dotted with trees and grass. You park where you feel like parking, put \$5 per person into an envelope and drop it into a slot at the toilet block (bath house). By staying here we would have to drive to the start at 5:30 in the morning but at the end we would be right at our camp for the night. It gets really dark in the Australian bush and the toilet block was too far away for my lazy self to walk to in the middle of the night, so I stepped outside the camper to answer nature's call while a group of nearby kangaroos looked up and, while still chewing on their grass, watched. Weirdest voyeurs ever.

Kookaburra birds were screeching all around us in the morning. I absolutely love the sound of them. Tony said that the settlers, when they first heard them, thought they were going to be slaughtered by aboriginals or wild animals. Hearing the kookaburras in a whole new light, I can see exactly why settlers would think that. While Kookaburras aren't very big (less than a pound and not even 18" head to tail), they're super loud, sounding almost like an evil laugh, and in the darkness before dawn where you can't see what's making that noise, I can understand why one might think something was going to kill you.

Out in the bush you use what you bring with you, including your own water supplies. I'd forgotten to allot for water to brush my teeth. Now I could have used some of the water for my coffee but let's get real. So I did the next best thing and brushed my teeth with my coffee. Let's just say that's a whole new minty experience which, having tried it, I would only recommend to people I don't like.

There are either 3 or 4 waves in the Marathon start, I forget the number, but I specifically asked the race organizers to put Tony and me into the first wave to go out every morning. Tony himself could go in any wave and still finish on time, but I'm not that fast or as good as he is so I wanted the most time each day to enjoy the journey and not worry about cut-off times. On the first day, 71 boats started in the first wave. That number increased each day as slower boats in waves behind us were moved up by the organizers to give them more time too.

With 71 boats on the line in wave 1 on day 1, I was a bit apprehensive of the start. Crashing, swimming, or just generally dealing with waves and wakes is not my idea of fun at the start of a 5 day race and a 93 kilometer day. To my surprise it was quite a civilized start, no one blasted off the line like an idiot, no one crashed into us because they lacked boat control, all in all it was a nice calm start. Ah yes, that should have been my clue. When races in Australia start civilized they just don't end up staying that way.

When we got to Cobram, Tony pointed out where Bill Dunn's ashes were sunk in the river. I recognized it from the photos. Bill Dunn was a legend of the Murray Marathon, Peggy and I met him last year and he sang to us, and it felt weird that he wasn't there this year. I can only imagine how it felt to Raaahd and Tony in this spot, having been best friends with Bill for over 30 years.

The birds were loud in the trees. The cockatoos are big and white with yellow on their heads and they fill the trees. They're critically endangered due to illegal trapping and poaching for the caged bird trade but you wouldn't know it in this part of the Australian bush. They're so loud that sometimes you can't hear anything else. They're also destructive. They look pretty, but they'll chew you, your gear, and your boat up if given half a chance. One of them, a

few weeks prior, chewed up my sandal a bit. I didn't really mind because who else in the U.S. can wear sandals that they can say have been chewed by Australian cockatoos?

The funniest moment of the day was when one of the guys in a later wave came past us singing the "Love Shack" song but he changed all the words to "Love Boat". It was super creative and made me laugh for miles.

We were following young Jack and Tyler, both in C-1s, when Tyler stopped. He looked tired. He and Jack had been going at it full speed for a while, trying to beat each other. Jack disappeared into a "short cut" creek, which I don't think was an authorized way, nor a real short cut for that matter since he came in way later than us after that, and Tyler hopped on our wake. He stayed on our wake for about 35 kilometers. At one point he sprinted ahead for a feed and then pulled out from the embankment right back on our tail. Tyler is 17 or 18 years old I think. Mighty impressive drafting skills for anyone to stay on us for that long, but especially at his age and in a C-1. We welcomed the company and I'm pretty sure Tyler did too, he thanked us several times for the ride.

As is usual for the Murray Marathon, we had wind and we had heat. The wind was annoying and in our faces most of the day. I was wishing for a day of no wind just once on the Murray. It wasn't going to be today.

The heat was a little more than we expected, and unfortunately it caused Tony's liquid food mix to become not so good. And, really unfortunately, it was only after he swallowed a big gulp of it that he realized it had turned. While he ran up on shore at a sand bar to return the food to the earth from whence it came, I held onto the boat and took a swim in the river to cool down. I didn't mind the break at all, as long as Tony was ok, which he was after a few minutes. We weren't out to set any records in this race, the whole goal was just to finish and have a good time.

One of the nicest things about the Murray Marathon is how people help each other and greet each other. All day long when later waves of paddlers passed us they always had a nice greeting or a good word. I imagine it didn't look too good with me holding onto a boat in the river with my bow man missing in the bush, so lots of people slowed as they went by to make sure we were ok. "Answering nature's call" is the polite and standard answer one gives to indicate all is well in these situations in Australia.

Despite my displeasure at the wind in my face all day, 93 kilometers was finished soon enough and day 1 was in the books.

Our 71 boats increased to 78 on Day 2's start line. We got away reasonably cleanly and within a kilometer we were drafting the Tongway's K-2. Lots of people were drafting the Tongway's K-2. Like more than a dozen boats. It was so much fun! Every time the train passed someone, it seemed like they too hopped on the draft. I don't know how many ended up in the line, because boats came and went, but it was loads of fun to be a part of it. We were the first boat on the tail of the Tongway's and often had 3 or 4 on our side wake plus the dozen behind in a line. We stayed that way for a solid hour, until we dropped back for a much needed nutrition and hydration stop.

The wind was at it again as were the loud cockatoos high up in the trees above us. There were brown cows coming down to the river to drink on some of the turns. They didn't seem to even notice 192 boats going by.

The heat was heavy again, and Tony said when we got to the forest it might be cooler and the water would be deeper on the turns. The forest? I must have lived in the city too long, it all looked like forest to me. For two days we were going through nothing but forest. Green trees, gum trees with the occasional evergreen, with green bushes on either side of the high, carved, brown banks. Gum trees are Eucalyptus trees, and there are a lot of kinds of gum trees, like 900 species that make up 75% of all the trees in Australia. They're as much a part of the landscape as the sweeping plains and the far away horizons. Along the Murray River they're giant, gnarled trees with green tops and variegated brown trunks, whose sun bleached roots sprawl down the washed out brown embankments toward the cloudy water. There wasn't anything but forest for the entire 140 kilometers we'd gone so far in two days. Turns out Tony meant the actual named Barmah National Park forest which, as far as this city person could tell, looked exactly like the unnamed forest we'd been in for the past 2 days.

We stopped for a quick swim on a sand bar to cool down from the heat, and the wind felt good when it hit my wet clothes. Soon enough we were half way through with our day and it was time to find our crew for a pit stop.

We rounded a corner to see Checkpoint B, the half way marker, and lots of pit crews on the banks looking for their paddlers. Our pit crew was remarkably easy to spot everywhere we went thanks to the bright yellow shirts they all wore. When I had the shirts made, I asked for a very bright color but I didn't specify what bright color. The yellow turned out to be an amazingly excellent choice, it was a great contrast to the green trees and the brown banks. Our crew was up on a high bank.

They were up so high that I assumed they were going to throw our hydration and nutrition bottles into the river in front of us and we would pick them up out of the water as we went by. Nope. Frank Frank, who shall now be forever known as Flying Frank Frank, leapt from the tall bank into swirly brown river water well over his head, popped up

directly beside our boat, and flawlessly dropped everything we needed precisely in our laps, all the while smiling the whole time. I've never seen anything like it. It was the most epic pit stop ever. I still don't know how Flying Frank Frank got out of the water and back up the high banks after we went by.

Soon after, the skies, in the Australian bush that doesn't get much rain, turned black. Thunder and lightning broke from the clouds as if Thor and Zeus decided to have a war to see who could come the closest to hitting us. Thunder cracked above our heads and lightning flashed all around. Suddenly the rains poured down, bouncing off the deck of the boat making it sound like a drum. The river was stunningly gorgeous with the big water drops splashing upwards as they hit. I thought, my kingdom for a camera, but I don't even know how you'd capture such an image. It was misty, with light fog in the air all around, and the mist swirled and twirled like ghostly spirits dancing across the water. The high brown banks turned a dark chocolate color with the rain and the bright green leaves on the trees turned dark green, almost a green-navy color, and swayed with the wind. The bleached tree roots reflected white with each lightning strike, looking like eerie skeletal hands reaching down for the river. Big raindrops came down, creating circles on the water that echoed out along the surface until the rain came so hard that there was nothing but the sound of drums and rolling thunder, with cracking bright white light flashing down to the ground through the trees everywhere, and water bouncing back up inches above where it hit the water surface. It was at once the most surreal, beautiful, and frightening sight one could hope to see while on the water.

The storm passed quickly and with the end of the storm came the renewed heat, this time with humidity. We took another quick swim to cool off. With about 31 kilometers still to go on day 2, it was a welcome relief. What needed more relief though was Tony's backside. He had padding on his seat but it wasn't quite enough. Comfort is a priority on long races, what's slightly uncomfortable at 2 hours is medieval torture at 6. We came around a corner and there were the bright yellow shirts again.

We had not expected to see our crew until Checkpoint C, it was wonderful to see them up on the banks cheering for us. They were on the opposite side of the river from where we wanted to be, so when we crossed the river and headed straight toward them they knew immediately that we needed something. Tony yelled "Red seat pad, left side, in the back!" Flying Frank Frank made a dash for the Jeep, found the seat pad right where Tony said it was, and was back with it in a flash. Now the interesting part, getting it under Tony's butt while we're sitting in deep water next to a high bank. No problem for two pros. Tony stood up in the bow, Flying Frank Frank dropped the pad on the seat, Tony sat back down, and off we went, with Tony uttering an audible sigh of relief.

Once more the racers in later waves started passing us and the greetings began. I always enjoyed that part of the race. It's only a sentence or two with each boat. "How ya going mate?" or "You look like you're going well," or something similar. But it boosts morale and it's so good to see everyone go by. The funniest one was when I asked a passing boat, "How are you feeling today?" and the man flatly replied "Undecided."

In Barmah National Forest there are wild horses. They come to the river to drink. Many people saw them but I was not as lucky. I kept looking for them and the koalas in the trees. I think everyone saw koalas and horses but me. I also didn't see Tony's GPS. He had attached it to his shoe so he could see it. We wanted to take another quick swim in the heat so we pulled over to what looked like a sand bar. It wasn't. It was mud, and the kind of mud where you sink to your ankles really quickly. Well, Tony's GPS went into the mud and, sadly, it wasn't attached as well as we thought it was and it was lost in the mud. So we got on our hands and knees and started feeling around for it. We couldn't see it because the Murray is brown and murky to start with, and now it was stirred up because we'd beached the boat and walked in the mud. So we had no choice but to get on our knees and feel for it. We spent about 10 minutes trying to re-trace our steps but just couldn't find it. Meanwhile we kept saying "Answering nature's call" to all the passing boats asking if we were ok.

2/3 of the way through the day is Checkpoint C, where Tony picked up a can of Coca-Cola for a planned last minute sugar rush when we were about 10 kilometers from the finish. Checkpoint C was about 30 Kilometers or thereabouts from the finish, and it was just past this checkpoint where I reached my low point every day. Because I don't do math, I round things off. So with 30 kilometers to go, we had about 3 more hours to the finish (a little more maybe), and that always gave me a bit of a low in morale and energy. That's when I'd focus on the wrong things, like the odd blister I'd developed and how much it hurt.

Right about that time Karlie came by. We played tag with Ashley and Karlie all day on Day 1. Sometimes they would be ahead, sometimes we would be ahead. It depended on who stopped when for a pit stop or a nutrition or hydration break. Ashley couldn't paddle on Day 2 so Karlie had gotten on an OC-2 with another lady and, while I was contemplating whether my blister would feel better or worse when it eventually broke, there they were coming by us. Not ever being one to pass up a free ride, Tony started drawing our canoe toward the OC-2. I took the hint and

followed suit and we were on their wake. Much like Tyler the day before, we didn't give up the draft. We stayed with them for a good 20 kilometers. It was good practice, good fun, and I forgot all about my blister.

With the boost from Karlie and her OC-2 partner, soon our 94 kilometer day was done. Tony said my steering had improved from the day before. It's not easy steering with his 7 millimeter tolerance for where he thinks we should be on the river, so I was certainly happy to hear he thought I was doing better at following his instructions. At dinner that night I made a comment about Tony's 7 millimeter tolerance, which caused not just Tony, but the whole group, to laugh. Apparently I'm not the first one of his canoe partners to notice his stringent steering requirements.

When we got out of the boat at the finish line, I thought it was a bit odd that several people kept asking me if I needed anything out of the car. I thought, surely I don't look that bad that I need first aid or other such things from the car. The fourth time someone asked me if I needed anything from the car, I finally looked up. Someone (or someones, plural) had pranked us. All over the windows there were hearts and arrows and "Love Boat," "Baby on Board" and "Almost Married". I was dying laughing. Tony did not think this was funny in the least bit, but I couldn't stop laughing. I took photos before I appeased Tony by washing it off. I still laugh when I think about it.

The end of Day 2 meant we slept in Echuca at Tony's house, with indoor sit-down flush toilets where I didn't have to lift up the seats to check for venomous spiders before sitting, as is required for toilet blocks in the bush. I couldn't wait to have a hot shower instead of swimming in the river and calling it a bath. And, best of all, Tony has a massage chair at home.

The beginning of Day 3 brought more roos and emus to avoid on the dirt and bitumen roads but, more interestingly, it brought half a dozen people who had seen our pranked car to the boat ramp asking me if I really had a "baby on board." It is times like those that I wish I had a wit quick enough to think of a good answer. And, to make things worse, Steve Dawson had passed us the prior day while Tony and I were on our hands and knees looking for the GPS. When he next saw them, Steve told our crew, and consequently anyone else within earshot, not to expect to see us any time soon because we had pulled over to, well I forget the phrase he used but let's just say that, at the time, Tony and I didn't realize that two people on their hands and knees looking for a GPS in the mud might look like two people doing something completely and entirely different to people passing by on the river.

Day 3 had the most difficult start. Tony said we had to sprint and we had to be first into the turn or it would be disaster. As soon as I saw it I remembered from last year that the start was narrow and quite a few boats went sideways in front of Peggy and me. Tony would have none of that and told me several times, in a tone of voice that clearly indicated it was not an option, that we would be sprinting. I am not a sprinter. Nonetheless I gave it my best shot and as I heard Raaahd screaming from shore that we better be first, we made it, first around the turn, right into the wakes of the two rescue safety power boats. We managed to avoid the carnage of our start only to be tossed about in powerboat wakes. Tony was sternly and loudly shouting down the river "Get moving! You're too close!" to the power boats. I can't help but wonder who on shore heard him and thought he was talking to me that way.

Soon we were drafting the Tongway's again, with another dozen or more boats. We headed into "The Narrows," which to me was like going into "The Forest" since the whole Murray River is narrow to me. It sure was pretty with extra high banks and switchback corners. There aren't any straight sections on Day 3.

Around one corner there were brown and white cows high up on the banks. They were mooing as all the boats went by. At first I thought it was Tony mooing at them but it was not. The cows mooed at every boat.

Day 3 requires concentration because of the whirlpools. They make La Gabelle in Shawinigan look a bit tame. The Murray whirlpools have a height change and many of them go entirely across the river. And, worse, they spin in the opposite direction of the ones we see in the northern hemisphere. Yep, the water in the sinks, showers, toilets, and the Murray River whirlpools goes the opposite direction of ours. That made it interesting on quite a number of corners when I'd forget that important little tidbit of information.

Once again the wind howled. Those high banks just funneled the wind at us. The good part was, with no straight sections, the wind wasn't in our face the whole time. The bad part was, with no straight sections, the wind was also hitting from the rear or quartering from the front frequently which makes it harder to keep the boat going in a straight line. Once again I wished for just one day on the Murray without the stupid winds.

Every day, right near the half way point, Raaahd and Nicole would pass us. You could count on Raaahd to have a smart remark ready, but today he was nice and said we had a good start. That was great to hear. Since Raaahd passed us, I knew Checkpoint B and a half way pit stop had to be soon.

As we came in, Flying Frank Frank was ready for us. However we weren't ready for the other pit crews and spectators in the water. They were trying to be helpful but I think they didn't understand racing canoes. Frank was yelling, "No, No! Don't stop them!" And I was yelling, "Don't touch the boat! Don't touch the boat!" but it didn't

work, 3 people grabbed our canoe trying to stop us and nearly flipped us in the process. Only when they realized the canoe was tilted severely up did they finally let go and we avoided a swim.

The nice thing is that all the pit crews try to help each other. North American racing canoes still aren't all that common in Australia so most people simply don't know not to touch them at pit stops. And many of the teams for the Murray Marathon are relay teams so the boats do stop and the paddlers change out. I think having a racing canoe come in for a pit and not stop while your crew quickly drops what you need on your lap is a fairly new thing for most of the people to see. The coolest part is, when that happens, all the people on the shores cheer really loud for you. It's energizing and boosted my morale every time.

Paddlers were starting to get a kick out of the matching shirts I made for me and Tony. Lots of people commented on them every day, and I think even looked forward to seeing them each day. Today's shirts were rainbow striped metallic and had a bright shimmery shine to them. I regretted them only briefly when the sun hit Tony's back part way through the day. Our crew said we were really easy to see.

The wind was up again today and after the Hawkesbury and the first two days of the Murray I was really beginning to dislike the Australian wind. It's the kind of parched, arid, strong wind that makes you wonder just how much snot can dry inside your nostrils before you wouldn't be able to breathe. Yes, these are the things one contemplates when half way through the 3rd day of a 5 day race.

Today was another day for quick swims along the river to cool off, with the customary "just answering nature's call" reply to everyone going by. The reality is that most racers "answer nature's call" while in the boat. It's a water sport and we have bailers in the boat to remove most of what goes in there. The swim isn't to answer a call, it's to cool down and wash off. Ashley and Karlie went by.

Day 3 is Tony's home paddling territory and ends in his town of Echuca. 10 kilometers from home we start seeing houseboats lining the shores of the Murray. Echuca is a tourist town, 2 1/2 hours north of Melbourne. While Melbourne is on the coast and might sound like a place you don't need to leave in order to relax on the water, remember that Melbourne faces Antarctica and the coastal waters are not only filled with man-eating sharks and deadly jellyfish, but they're also damn cold. So people escape the city and come to Echuca, one of Australia's holiday towns. Houseboats are one kind of rental unit you can live in during your vacation here. Rarely do we see one move, I think most people just rent them, sit on them, drink all day, and then drunkenly yell our names as we go by. Sadly none of them offered us beer or whatever they were barbecuing on their decks, some of them smelled really good.

At 5 kilometers from the finish there is a boat ramp. It's the one closest to Tony's house. If we were ambitious we could portage the boat to his house from there, it's only about a mile walk from the ramp to his front door. I don't know that I'll ever be that ambitious.

The 3 kilometer mark brings the dreaded green buoy, the turn around marker for the Wednesday night local Echuca Moama Canoe Club races that I swear I'm going to hit each time I swing around it when Tony tells me to turn. This time, being that I didn't have to go around it in current, I welcomed it, knowing we were close to the finish.

Shortly after the green buoy, a jet ski with a flashing police light on it came upstream at us. I was focused on the bright lights. I'd never seen a police jet ski before. I said to Tony, "I wonder what he's doing?" Tony, much like Peggy last year, likely thought I was crazy. Having focused solely on the tiny jet ski, I managed to entirely miss the 3 story lurching paddle steamer coming up the river right behind it. That is what the jet ski was doing, letting us know a big paddle steamer was coming around the corner. So for the second year in a row, I had to power up and sprint to the other side of the river to avoid being run over by a ship that I didn't see that was larger than the size of an average person's house.

Two more paddle steamers followed the first, one putting off a large wake as it went by in a narrow area, and the other turning to go down river directly in front of us. I asked, "What do you want me to do?" Tony said, "Get in front of it, you don't want to be on that wake behind it do you?" So just a kilometer from the finish, another quick sprint was in order to get ahead of the paddle steamer so we didn't have to battle waves to the end.

The Echuca wharf was a welcome sight. The wharf cam is there where, at home, every Tuesday night at 2am I watch the Wednesday night races. They're always fun and often the racers will wave at the camera, knowing I'm up in the middle of the night to see them go by.

Ashley and Karlie had just pulled in to the finish before us, and when I got out of the canoe I went for another swim. Ashley yelled loudly, "Oh come on Susan, you just peed half an hour ago!"

The finish line of Day 3 is my favorite. There is an Aboriginal Smoke Ceremony on the boat ramp. Racers line up as we get out of our boats to go through the smoke of lemon gum tree wood. The Aboriginal official conducting the ceremony explained to me that it is meant to welcome us to the river, welcome to the country, and to connect us

with the people. It wards off bad spirits, acknowledges ancestors, and pays respect to land and water. I love it. I took a deep breath as the smoke hit my face.

Day 4 started by raining mud. Yes, raining mud. I'd never seen such a thing before but Tony explained that because Australia is so flat, when the clouds pass over the red center, they can pick up dust from the many big dust storms that occur. And then, when it rains in the east, it rains mud. Everything was covered in mud when we came outside to drive to the start line, cars, boats, sidewalks, all brown and covered with mud. I should have realized right then it would be a bizarre and unusual day.

We wore rain jackets from the start, it was supposed to rain (in the bush where it "doesn't rain") all day. Our start was lumpy because we got in the mix of waves and wakes but it was ok and we jumped on the wake of a different K-2 today, the Tongway's having escaped us in the initial fray.

The river currents and whirlpools were weird again, and every now and again Tony would say, "What are you doing over here?" when I would exceed his 7 millimeter tolerance for where he thought we should be on the river. My usual reply was "I don't know" because generally I had no idea why I ended up where I was. Today there was an extra weird one. We were coming around a corner, minding our own business and drafting the K-2, with lots of boats in a line behind us also drafting, when suddenly we were sideways across the river. It happened so fast that Tony had to rudder from the bow to get us straight again. He doesn't like to lose a draft, so his "What are you doing over here" was a bit more annoyed than usual, but we recovered nicely and with a couple sprint strokes were back on our draft. We stayed our usual hour until we dropped off to take a nutrition and hydration break.

Right about then it started to rain mud again. I watched the deck slowly turn brown with mud and then the mud rain changed to clear rain and washed the mud off the deck. The wind started to howl. I, and many others, had been complaining about the wind for the first 3 days of the Marathon. We hadn't seen anything yet, not even close.

The Murray is twisty, and it snakes back on itself many times over the course of the race, sometimes making nearly a full circle. This meant the wind came from every direction possible. We came to one of the many U turns and looked ahead to see big whitecaps and rain blowing sideways in front of us. "That doesn't look good at all," I said. "You'll be alright," came the response. Uh huh. Last time I heard that I had two big welts on my thigh from some kind of Australian mildly venomous spider.

Around the corner and into the whitecaps and driving rain we went. The mist was blowing by us in long puffs like angry ghostly spirits. The rain pelted us, coming sideways, stinging my hands as it hit, the whitecaps raging as the wind screamed.

We made our way from bank to bank, always searching for the side of the river with less wind and less whitecaps. We knew we were adding kilometers to an already long day but there was no choice, either we found calmer water or we would get nowhere in the wind.

At one point we had to pull over for a quick rest and to take some nutrition and hydration. We couldn't stop in the wind or we would just be blown backwards. The only place we could find among the high mud banks was a corner filled with reeds. I'm not a fan of Australian reeds. Last time we hit some of them I ended up with spider bites. But this time it was any port in a storm and I just hoped it was too windy for the spiders to be out today.

At one point Mad Mick and Krazy Kelly came by ahead of Raaaahd and Nicole. That was odd but Nicole later said she had trouble steering in the wind. Mad Mick and Krazy Kelly ended up finishing first that day.

The mist in the rare quiet sections was gorgeous, but it caused my glasses to fog up occasionally. The wind was relentless. It just never stopped and got stronger and stronger as the hours passed. It also got cold. I was glad I wore several shirts and a rain coat. Even though I was soaking wet, because even the best paddling raincoats can take only so much, I was still warm. That could also have been due to the fact that we could never slack off or else we'd just go backwards in the wind.

The first hail storm came about 2/3s of the way through the day. It was small hail and mixed with a bit of snow and ice. The wind and freezing rain-hail-snow-ice stuck to the deck, causing me to complain bitterly that if I wanted to paddle in ice I could have stayed home.

Karlie and Ashley passed us 3 times. They had less wind resistance than we did, being in an Australian TC canoe with much less freeboard than ours. When the wind was behind us, we went faster and passed them. When the wind was on our beam or quartering and I was getting blown all across the river, they passed us.

Tony and I stopped for a quick rest and, when Tony got out of the boat, he scared a bunch of kangaroos hiding from the weather and wind in the brush. They all hopped away quickly.

The waves became stupid big on some sections of the river. We kept crossing back and forth, always looking for any spot that would keep us in flatter water and out of the miserable high winds. A lot of crews would pass us while singing, many relay teams kept their morale up by singing. The best were the girls who came by and, when they saw us, sang Yankee Doodle. It not only improved their morale but mine too.

My morale was at an all time low. The winds were horrible and I didn't care for the whitecaps and waves either. And just about the time when I would have been very happy to burn half the boat for warmth and use the other half for shelter, the hail started again.

This hail was big. The hail balls were the size of my thumbnails. The first one to hit Tony smacked him in the hand and he said "Ow" really loud. I laughed, because he doesn't usually say ow for anything, but my laugh was short lived as the hail pounded down, and to add insult to injury, not only did it hurt just falling from the sky, but it also hurt when it bounced off the deck in front of me and then hit me in the face.

And that did it. I was tired, I was fed up with the miserable day and the wind that just would not stop, and I hated everyone and every thing. I was so tired that I started to laugh. Then I laughed so hard that I snorted. Because what else are you going to do in the middle of the Australian bush on a river where it "doesn't ever rain," in a hailstorm, in ridiculously high winds, when you're exhausted and can no longer stand the sound of the wind and the whitecaps?! You know what else you do? You start screaming. This was me going down the river, the whole river heard me, "I AM SO GLAD I CAME EARLY TO ACCLIMATE TO THIS HEAT!" and "I'M SO HAPPY I TRAVELED ELEVEN THOUSAND MILES TO GET PELTED BY HAIL!" and, when you could see the wind blowing the current backwards up the river, I screamed, "I NEVER PADDLED 62 KILOMETERS UPSTREAM IN A 63 KILOMETER DOWNSTREAM RACE BEFORE!" Tony's shoulders were shaking he was laughing so hard, and so was everyone around us.

At one point I could see a severe wind gust coming across the water, the trees were bent so far that I was afraid one would break and crash down on us. I was barely managing to hold the boat straight as it was so I knew I was going to get blown off the charts with this gust and my only hope was to keep the boat upright when it hit. We stayed upright but we got blown right into the trees and the embankment. This time Tony's sense of humor took over and he said, "Well, we might as well eat something while we're here!"

We started out again when the gust stopped, but the wind was still raging high and blowing me everywhere. Tony always says, "What are you doing over here" when he doesn't like where I am on the river. This time when he asked, I replied loudly, "What I'm doing over here is seriously regretting my life choices today." Through the wind I heard a "Me too" from a boat beside us. A little while later when he asked again, "What are you doing over here?" I yelled back, "What I'm doing over her is realizing that my dad was correct and I probably should have gotten right with the Lord before we started today." This also made Tony and everyone else nearby bust up laughing.

About 4 kilometers from the finish we saw a K-2 roll over in the middle of the river up ahead of us in the whitecaps. There were several people needing rescues that day and now it was our turn to help. With two of us in the canoe we were the best ones to help because the solo boats likely wouldn't have been able to pull a K-2 to shore. The K-2 people had a hold on their boat, but it was filled with water and they couldn't swim it to shore in the wind, it just wasn't budging, it was stuck in the whitecaps. Tony yelled for them to grab ahold of the stern. They did and we gave it all we had. Our speed was hovering around one and a half miles per hour and it took a long time, but we got the two paddlers and the K-2 to shore where they were safe to empty it and get back in.

The severe winds and whitecaps continued right to the finish line, there had been no break for most of the day. At the finish we learned that the race organizer couldn't end the race when it got to be especially hazardous because, when it rains in the desert bush, the roads, what few roads even exist in the wilderness, become impassible with rapid flooding and deep mud. Just getting out of the finish area was an experience in Tony's jeep. Getting paddlers off the river once past the final checkpoint was essentially impossible.

How bad was the wind? All reports indicated the sustained winds were 25-40 knots (28-46 mph) with gusts up to 60 knots, 60 knots is 68 miles per hour or 111 kilometers per hour. Those numbers are not typos. People have asked which was worse, the Hawkesbury or the Murray. I thought the Hawkesbury was bad, and it was, but Day 4 of the Murray was bad for much longer. Flying Frank Frank said that in the 10 years he'd done the Murray these were the worst conditions ever. Tony has completed 38 Murray Marathons. Tony said that in 38 years he'd never seen anything worse on the Murray than these conditions.

And the worst of all, because we had to wear rain jackets all day, no one could see our cool matching shirts. For the record they were bright leopard camo.

On the way to our campsite the winds still raged but the rain stopped. Because it is so flat, we could see the dark rains in the distance on one side of us and the sun, white clouds, and blue skies on the other. We saw not one but

two wedge tailed eagles fly over us. I considered this to be a very good sign. The wedge tailed eagle is the largest bird of prey in Australia and is important to the Aboriginal culture as their creator and spiritual leader. Merv traveled to see Peggy and me last year to give us a blessing of Bunjil the Wedge Tailed Eagle for protection on the river.

We had winds all night. Ridiculously high winds that never stopped. I felt bad for Flying Frank Frank and Valmai, sleeping in a tent on what Valmai called "the bed of nails" in the wind. It was cold all night too.

We saved our best shirts for the last day, a shiny color change, from lavender to blue, in a fish scale pattern. Every time we moved the shirts changed color and they were shiny bright in the sun.

We had a clean start but I wasn't up to drafting on the final day. I was just too tired from the day before. The winds were just as bad and the mood of the boats alternated from happy to be on the last day to somber knowing we had relentless winds again all day.

I was in a lot of pain from trying to control the boat the day before. I didn't sleep well because my shoulders just wouldn't get comfortable even with another dose of ibuprofen, and the howling wind all night disturbed me with thoughts of another insane day. We had lots of turns and lots of whirlpools to contend with. The banks were less high so we had occasional breaks from the wind because it didn't funnel quite so badly as it did through the high banks of the day before. I ate some more ibuprofen like it was candy and hoped for the best.

Once again we played tag with Karlie and Ashley. They got ahead of us initially but we rounded a corner and saw them on shore. Ashley was in the boat. Karlie then suddenly got in the boat faster than anyone I've ever seen get into a boat ever before. I've never seen anything like it, her speed was amazing. Just then we got close enough to hear her. "Snaaaaaake Snnnaaaaaake Red Bellied Black Snake ... Snaaaaaake." And off they went in a flash. The Red Bellied Black Snake is on the list of Australia's 10 most venomous. It took us miles and miles to catch them again, after their adrenaline wore off and they slowed down. I said, "That'll teach you to pee in the boat like the rest of us," and Karlie replied that she couldn't because she had secured her lunch under her seat, but she also indicated she wouldn't be doing that again.

Tony and I stopped to stretch on what we thought was a sandy corner. It wasn't and we both stepped out of the canoe into knee deep suck mud. We needed the stretch and a break from the wind so we just stayed there for a minute, carefully keeping our feet moving so as not to sink in further and lose our shoes in the mud.

Being Friday meant it was Thursday back home and American Thanksgiving. Many boats wished me happy Thanksgiving as they went by. I thought that was very nice. I commented that I could be home having turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, and wine but instead voluntarily chose to drink Perpeteum and pay money to paddle in the wind and cold. Despite my complaints, I really was thankful to be there.

The wind didn't stop, and it sometimes hid the whirlpools when the wind ripples stirred up the water. Every now and again Tony would say, "That one got ya didn't it?!" I couldn't tell if he was amused or annoyed. A K-2 came by and we drafted it for a while. We drafted right through the whirlpools, with the wind, testing my steering and, hopefully, improving my skills. Earlier in the week we'd drafted some interesting boats. We drafted a tandem SUP for quite a while and we drafted a dragonboat. The dragonboat was funny. I don't think they liked us drafting so they kept sprinting in an attempt to lose us. They had no idea that their sprints just caused a bigger and nicer wave for us to surf back there. The more they sprinted the easier our draft was, until they exhausted themselves, called for a rest, and came to a complete stop in the middle of the river.

Sheep were coming down the steep embankments to drink. I thought they were goats at first. The white sheep had recently been sheered, and they were coming down one of the steepest and highest banks of the day. The white contrasting against the brown banks and bright green trees and bush was very pretty. Only when we got close did I realize they were sheep and not goats, and that some of the sheep had black heads.

We caught Karlie and Ash again and drafted them for quite a while. I kept noticing all week that there was no trash in the water. Ash and Karlie would stop in the middle of the river to have their lunch or a snack break, as did so many other teams, and everyone carefully kept their trash in the boats. There were almost 200 boats in this race for 5 days and 404 kilometers and not one piece of trash. Bravo to the Australians for their respect of the water. I sorely wish I could say the same thing after our disgraceful General Clinton and AuSable races.

The wind never ceased. For a long time I could only paddle on the left. I could hut Tony back and forth but I couldn't paddle on the right or the wind would swing us around. The ibuprofen had helped but it didn't take all of the pain away and my shoulders were on fire from the one sided paddling for miles at a time. Just when my morale dropped to an all time low, Peter and Anna Phillips came along in their K-2 and stopped to paddle with us. They were considerably faster but Peter said he wanted to slow down and paddle the last kilometers with us and come in together. What a morale boost and a joy that was, to have Peter and Anna paddle next to us.

There are two challenges just before the final finish line, within a kilometer from the end. The first are the paddle steamers creating big waves and wakes as they come by and the second is the final big whirlpool across the whole river just above the finish line. Both can send exhausted teams in for an involuntary swim. I didn't like either one, and we wobbled a bit in the paddle steamer waves, but we went through ok, crossing the finish line right beside Peter and Anna. What a fantastic way to end the Murray Marathon.

Our real time on the course was 40:38:22 and our real finish place was 43rd out of the 85 boats that entered the full distance race. Only 65 of the 85 actually finished. It was a tough year. Also, all races in Australia are handicapped according to age, gender, and type of boat. Because Tony and I are old, our handicapped time was adjusted to 30:54:53 giving us an official 23rd place finish in the Murray Marathon.

Turns out there was no prior record in the UC 2 Mixed Over 50 class ("UC" being "unlimited canoe," the only class our North American racing canoes fit into) so once again Tony and I became Australian record holders.

It was a good week.