

# Rolling on the river

This year's Massive Murray Paddle event featured characters and excitement in equal measure, *Ricky French* reports

The trick is to not allow yourself to get turned sideways. From our boat we can't tell if there's anyone in the kayak up ahead, bobbing parallel to the waves. It's day three of the Massive Murray Paddle, about 15 kilometres from the port of Echuca, and things are about to get desperate.

Surging wind gusts rake the normally benign Murray into a mean chop. Paddling is like riding a pushbike uphill over a severely corrugated road. From the front seat of our Mirage 730 kayak I take the full force as we rush over to assist. My partner Mark Thornthwaite sits behind and shouts at the back of my head, "Dig in, Ricky! Dig in!"

Tired as I am, I do what Mark says. Mark is the reason I'm here. In fact, he's the reason every one of the 340 paddlers is here. But now's not the time to consider history, there's a boat to get to.

"Do you see anyone inside?" Mark shouts. "No!" I yell back.

The waves pummel and it feels like we're being forced backwards, but we finally reach the stricken craft. It's flooded, it bobs lifeless, looking deflated and defeated. Its crew are in the water, one at either end, holding on for dear life and trying in vain to drag both themselves and the boat to shore. I recognise the familiar red of the team uniforms. Dungulayin Mileka, or 'Blues and Brothers,' whose members comprise at-risk Aboriginal teenagers and local police officers. The team was created to foster bonds, repair relationships and encourage teamwork. If there was ever a call for it, it was now.

Mark takes charge. He pulls our kayak up alongside and shouts, "Grab our back handle as we go past!" There's a sudden jerk of weight as the cop does as instructed. We dig in and paddle hard but it's like towing an elephant carcass through mud. Finally we reach a floating pontoon and the two ship-wrecked kayakers haul themselves up as Mark and I tether their kayak. The guys are silent and shivering. Probably shell-shocked. I'm about to start making phone calls to get them picked up by the rescue boat but Mark has other ideas. He says to the cop: "Give me a hand to tip the water out of your boat. We'll

soon get you guys back in and on your way."

It's natural that Mark Thornthwaite would want to send the pair on their way. He sent the whole event on its way back in 1969, when at age 21 he got the idea to paddle the Murray, 404 kilometres between Yarrowonga and Swan Hill as a way to raise funds for the Red Cross. Almost from the start, things didn't go to plan.

His paddling partner pulled out on the second day, leaving Mark to battle on alone. On the third day he did his shoulder and wrist battling high winds. The support boat pulled him off the water and took him to hospital in Echuca. He was treated and discharged the next day, and was allowed to finish the event, paddling into Swan Hill and in the process into Australian flat-water history. But the disappointment of not making the whole journey still gnaws away, and it stimulates him to motivate everyone to push on, to do the very best they can.

48 years later the event is still going strong. Records and line honours are hotly contested, even if the official mantra is for a social, fundraising paddle. This year sees 340 paddlers and 84 teams. I've joined up with Blue Mountains Grammar School, and I'm a little nervous.

For a start, I've done bugger-all training. One paddle, in fact; a leisurely two hour float down the Goulburn River with kayaking legend Bill Robinson. Bill has been instrumental in keeping the event going, in forging connections between people and spreading the good word. He's probably paddled more kilometres on the Murray than any other person, and it's his 27th year paddling the event.

New organiser Shannon O'Brien says he's looking forward to building the event up to what it once was. "We want to encourage as many beginners and intermediate kayakers to get out there, raise some money and give it a go." After being run as a fundraiser for the Red Cross for 40 years, and then the YMCA for eight, this is the first time participants can choose where their fundraising dollars go. By the time day one in rolled round I had fundraised exactly \$194 for Victoria Police,

owing to a speeding fine dished out while driving to Bill Robinson's place in Nagambie.

Our team is doing the paddle in relays, with each of our 41 members paddling one leg a day. It's at the checkpoints where you meet the other teams and get immersed in the atmosphere of the event. Old friends hug and slap backs, familiar faces are greeted fondly and new faces are welcomed. Many have been paddling the event for decades, including Tony Hewish, who first did it in 1970. "The paddling keeps me alive," he says. "It gives me an incentive to keep fit."

Possibly the most striking and beautiful boats is a hand-made wooden Canadian-style canoe, made by John Enfantie, a member of Tasmanian team 'Old Tassie Devils.' John built the boat from Huon pine, king billy pine, celery top and blackwood. It goes surprisingly well, and always makes



'Mad Mick' takes a break in his Colorbond boat. Photo: Ricky French

an eye-catching arrival to the checkpoints.

I'm paddling an Eco-Bezhig belonging to Gregg Borschmann, our fearless and unflappable leader. Gregg pushes me out onto the Murray and yells one final piece of advice: "If you're going to fall out, wait till you're at least out of sight."

It's hot. The mercury is pushing 40 and there's only moderate respite on the water. My checkpoint at Cobram seems a long way off. Being in a single kayak is lonely. Occasionally another boat slips past, a blur of rotating paddles and a few pleasantries. But mostly my eyes and mind are focussed on the next bend in the river, on keeping the rhythm going and monitoring my body for signs of fatigue (and then trying to block them out).

The motto of the Massive Murray Paddle is 'connecting people, river and country,' and out on the river you really do feel the connection. It's the river, the mighty Murray, or 'Dhungalla', which feeds so much of our country and has such an important spiritual (and practical) history with our indigenous people, that brings us all together. For the Blues and Brothers team it was about using the river as a guiding arrow, setting small goals that lead to bigger ones. Team organiser Tony Lovett says, "It's one cop and one kid in a boat. And you have to work together or you're not going to get anywhere." The river had brought them together, it provided the setting for both healing and growing. The great hunter Ngurunderi paddled his canoe

here, chasing the Murray Cod. Ngurunderi caught his fish, the same way that everyone who comes here catches whatever it is they are after. For me, I just want to reach Cobram.

I turn my head to watch the trees flash by. The gums stand on high banks and watch over us like spectators lining the course. I try to estimate how much farther it is and tell myself I'll feel better tomorrow. Finally, mercifully, the saviour of checkpoint C comes into view. I wash up on shore, half expecting a team of men in rescue gear to haul me out of the cabin by my arms and carry me briskly to a waiting ambulance. But instead I'm met by Gregg who says, "Shit, Ricky, you made really good time."

Billy Dunn had an accident. He fell 26 metres onto concrete and his body is held together with titanium. That was 16 years ago. But it hasn't stopped him paddling the Murray. He's done the event 31 times. He's now 76. He soaks up the atmosphere at checkpoint B on day three, sharing stories with old and new friends, smiling and posing for photographs, eating a ham and cheese sandwich and slapping at the occasional mosquito. The Country Women's Association is the sharpest and funniest team by a long stretch. "We're looking for a nice, young gentleman to swim to the other side and bring back our kayak," they tell me, adding, "Don't think we won't make you do it." They hold up a sign that says, "Chicks With Attitude."

Team DILLIGAF seem to be everywhere. The anagram, they say, stands for Do I Look Like I Go Awfully Fast? Well, obviously. Long-term race stalwart Michael 'Mad Mick' Dinkgreve is paddling a kayak he made himself entirely out of Colorbond steel. Close observation reveals his secret weapons to be white bread sandwiches and cans of coke. He might be mad, but he's not the only one.

But possibly the best story is the father and son team of Gary and Tyler Creed. They're paddling a canoe built in 1974 that used to belong to Gary's father, before he died two years ago. Gary's refurbished his father's boat and is now paddling it with Tyler. There will be no relays for this remarkable team in their 'Pink Panther' canoe: they're doing the full distance, with Tyler now the youngest person to complete the whole 404 kilometres. Three generations of true blue Murray legends.

Heavy rain has forced the cancellation of day two, so organisers order a repeat of the day one course, proving wrong the maxim that you can never paddle the same river twice. On day three the convoy moves to Picnic Point, deep in the Barmah Forest. It's an isolated enclave of tents and river gums, with the swollen Murray lapping at our feet. Darkness falls early as the sky blackens. Late arrivals pitch tents in the rain, while other

teams hold meetings around campfires, which sizzle and steam with every raindrop. By the morning the campground is coated in deep mud. The boats jostle for starting position. It's a mad rush for the first hairpin bend but my main mission is to avoid getting swamped by the flurry of crafts. ("Wait till you're out of sight...")

In the narrow bends of the Barmah Forest the river takes on a racecourse feel. One by one paddlers pass, some heads down and arms whirring, but there are plenty of us just lapping up the beauty of the place, watching the swallows dart across our bows like tiny jet planes, and craning our heads to take in the mighty river red gums, their trunks flooded by the river that spills over its bank and spreads across the forest, pooling into the vast Barmah Lakes.

The pain sets in around the 20-kilometre mark. There are still eight kilometres to go. I haven't seen any other boats for a while but I soon notice a motor boat has come up behind and is tailing me, keeping its distance but always there. My heart sinks a little. I know who it is. It's the ship of shame.

My mind drifts back to the opening ceremony and the world's longest safety briefing. There was something about a sweeper boat that would bring up the rear, and if the last boat didn't reach the next checkpoint in time it would be unceremoniously towed in. "It's known as the ship of shame," Gregg had explained in a meeting. "It's the only boat you don't want to meet on the water."

The last eight kilometres, hounded by the ship of shame, nearly kill me. But the menacing threat of failure keeps me going somehow, and slowly I grind the Eco-Bezhig into the boat ramp at Barmah, where once again Gregg is waiting with a camera. "Smile!" he yells. "King of the Barmah!"

Friday, Swan Hill. It's the end of the line for paddlers in the 48th Massive Murray Paddle. The students of Blue Mountains Grammar School paddle across the finish line together, smoke from an orange flare coating their fleet and giving them the look of an invading force emerging from the jungle, set to ambush. Bill Robinson arrives soon after, his face whitewashed with sunblock and satisfaction.

"How do you feel, Bill?" I ask. He looks up from his kayak at the kids paddling into the jetty, their bright faces water-specked and glowing under the Swan Hill sun. He smiles, and when he speaks, he speaks for everyone.

"I feel bloody marvellous." **W**

*Ricky French* is a writer and columnist from Melbourne. He grew up in New Zealand, where he still returns to regularly to tramp. A frequent contributor to Wild, Ricky is an advocate for improved access to Australia's wild areas for hikers and paddlers of all abilities.