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The Story
of
The First
Murray River Canoe Marathon
1969



by
Mark Thornthwaite

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of
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1969

To Bill & Kate,

Hoping you have enjoyed
the Marathon. Thank you on behalf of
Red Cross. Mark.

by
Mark Thornthwaite

All proceeds from the sale of this edition are donated to the Australian Red Cross Society - Victoria, organisers of the Murray River Canoe Marathon.

Original story by Ralph and Mark Thornthwaite - 1969

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Cover Photo

*Start of the Red Cross Murray River Canoe Marathon—Yarrowonga, Victoria
27 December 1969*

From Nearest Camera

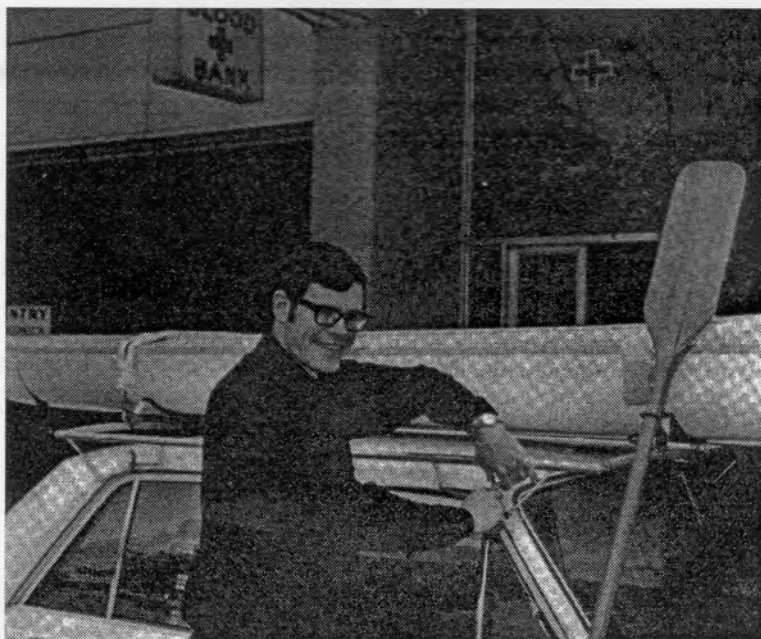
TK2 Christopher Green & Ian Fraser
TK1 Fred Shirwood
TK2 Mark Thornthwaite & Lee Hammatt
TC2 Jim Hesselschwerdt & Trevor Whitehead
K1? Philip Ball
K1? Barry McGuffie
TK1 Bretton Wood

Acknowledgments

The Murray Canoe Marathon and this story would not have been possible without certain people who have played an influential part in my up-bringing and who have continued to be interested, patient and supportive of all of my endeavours.

To my parents, Ralph and Joan Thornthwaite, I have dedicated this story.

To my wife, Janet, and my daughters Veronica, Stephanie and Allison, I also thank for their patience and understanding.



Mark Thornthwaite, of Rosanna East, on of the 1970 Red Cross Trend-Setters gets ready to take his canoe from Red Cross Headquarters to the Murray River for the five-day marathon he originally planned as a one-man effort.

Introduction

As a Senior Scout and living in South Australia, I had paddled long stretches of the River Murray and the Coorong adjoining the Murray Mouth. During the 6 years I lived in Victoria, I had often thought of exploring by canoe, the higher reaches of the River in that state.

The story of how the Canoe Marathon became involved with The Red Cross Society is interesting in itself. Briefly, through a friend of our family I had entered a Red Cross "Trendsetter" Competition for younger people, and it was necessary to have a method of raising money to successfully participate in that competition. My intentions to paddle a 250 mile stretch of the River over the Christmas - New Year period of 1969 - 1970 became known to that friend, Mrs. Hope McMeekin, who was a staff member of the Society.

The fact that the Trendsetter Competition involved me as the only male entrant amongst a number of females was frightening and I suppose I could have been excused for bowing out. The concept of the Marathon was already in the air and being publicised. There was no retreat.

It caused some mild consternation and amusement as the organising meetings for the Trendsetter Competition got under way. Printing and publicity had to be revised, and I had to be re-assured many times.

So it was, for a change, a male who was breaking into something which had traditionally been regarded as a feminine field.

There was no doubt that a 250 mile canoe race from Yarrawonga to Swan Hill could be compared with afternoon tea parties, bar-b-ques, mannequin parades etc. for raising funds. The emphasis was more importantly on the fact that I had to finish what I started, even if I couldn't paddle the distance.

There had never been a canoe marathon of this magnitude before, and, whilst some Red Cross officials were a little dubious, it received official blessing, and the organisation got under way. It was early in December. There was too little time to get a full scale plan arranged. Ted Madden, boating writer for the Herald/Sun Melbourne newspapers and also reporter for radio station 3DB, gave it publicity which resulted in a dozen canoeists accepting the invitation to race, and the Victorian Amateur Canoe Association becoming associated through its Secretary, Ross Chenoweth.

At various meetings, we organised the route and stop-overs. At the same time I was contacting likely people for sponsorship on the basis of cents per mile

paddled by me. Dad and Mum started the ball rolling with 10 cents per mile and others followed suit. The total of all sponsors' support was just on a dollar a mile.

The Red Cross Society obtained sponsorship for prizes. Lipton Tea, Swan Hill Lions Club and the Swan Hill Sun Centre Tourism Council were also supportive. There were many other aspects of organisation and support, all important in themselves, but too numerous to mention.

Ted Madden was to play a dual role as captain of the escort boat and as an officer of the Australian Coastguard Auxilliary, he used his 23 foot launch "Crusader" to very good purpose.

Modifications had to be made to the pack-rack of Dad's car, and a light-weight seat with back rest was designed and fabricated for the canoe. At that stage I was planning to paddle solo, but a week before Christmas a character by the name of Lee Hammatt (character being the operative word), rang and offered to paddle with me. I had met him on two or three occasions and he represented the rugged outdoor type, who, while being a real wanderer, had turned his hand to many things. He had no canoeing experience but could learn on the way, and at least I would have some company. A second seat had to be made, but this took less than half the time of the first.

Dad had figured that caravan parks along the Murray would be crowded, and as we had no bookings, he decided that publicity might add some weight and obtain some preferential treatment. He made two 36" by 18" signs and fixed them to the canoe pack-rack. Sign writing featured the Red Cross Trendsetter Appeal and identified the car as Thornthwaite's land party. This proved to be one of the brighter ideas as in some towns, complete strangers such as local Red Cross Branch Members, news reporters, TV cameramen etc., knew at a glance who we were and could stop us. I might add that the signs were only thought of and made the night before our departure - Christmas Eve of all times.

It was only team-work among the family which enabled us to get away, for we entertained some close friends, Bert Ashby, one of my sponsors by the way, his sister and a business partner at Christmas dinner. Mum had the food packed in the caravan, and Dad connected it to the car ready for a quick getaway.

With Christmas dinner over, we finally got under way, heading up the Hume highway and intending to stop at Euroa overnight. Another bright idea - travelling on the Hume highway on Christmas day meant that it was practically deserted. Next morning we continued the journey to Yarrawonga and found that the town was already in holiday mood. It was Boxing Day and there was a speed-boat regatta scheduled for that afternoon.

Our destination was the Scout Hall which had been made available as our

headquarters. Ted Madden and his son, Tim, who was to be the Land Party for Ted and bring the boat trailer down the river, was already there.

A Red Cross personality, Sue Sutherland-Smith, who was also in the Coast-guard Auxilliary, was there with the 3rd crew member for "Crusader", Picasso, her black miniature poodle.

Mr Stan D'Altera, Red Cross Staff and Marathon Co-ordinator, and Mrs Hope McMeekin, who was in charge of fund raising and co-ordinating the Branches in the river towns, both greeted us. The other conoeing parties and Ross Chenoweth, who was to be the official time-keeper for the Marathon, all arrived at varying intervals.

The competitors and their land parties gathered, canoes and equipment were eyed off, assessed, and quite a few misconceptions formed. Ted Madden spent the afternoon at the speed-boat meeting, and between times we sign-painted the caravan with ticket writing water-colours, so much so that it later became known as "Ashton's Circus", particularly when heading the land party convoys.

Our memories at Yarrowonga can be stated as follows:-

- Ted sitting on a packing case in the centre of the Scout Hall punching away on a portable type-writer which was set on another.
- The consternation of the canoeists at the evening briefing when First Aid was discussed and the lads were told that Sue Sutherland-Smith would be on the crash boat and ready to rub methylated spirits on sore bottoms.
- The consternation of Dad at a later briefing of the land party when he was asked to act officially in various capacities including that of wagon-master as it later became known.
- Mr W White of Yarrowonga, connected with the Scout Group and evidently one of the leading identities of the district, spruiking through a load hailer touring the huge caravan park advertising the Marathon.
- Me, trying out the lay-back seat in the Valiant Pacer with ideas of having some un-interrupted sleep, only to find that Kim and Solomon (two Siamese cats which Mum and Dad had brought along with us), walking all over me in the night by getting through a window of the car. Even so, I think I slept comparatively well, for next morning Dad told me that several of the competitors were up well before me at 4.30am for a race to start at 7.00am.

DAY ONE

At 6.30am we were down at the launching point in the caravan park, joined by a TV cameraman, reporters, Mr Woodward (from Lipton Tea) who had come across from Myrtleford that morning, and a number of spectators from the park. Of all people at that hour of the morning, Hope McMeekin who is known not to be an early riser was the surprise, and she admitted it quite readily.

The morning was typical of the summer in the riverland, and there had been the promise of a hot day. The water was cascading strongly over the weir a few hundred yards upstream in the back-ground, and a good current was assured.

In true astronaut style, there was the count-down and we were off, seven canoes with a total of ten paddlers. Fred Shirwood, recently made a grand-father at 42, was a strong paddler in the light-weight single and drew away. Bretton Wood, about 23 years old, had a good style. He was also in a slim single canoe and was a club-mate of Fred's at East Ivanhoe.

Philip Ball, 16, of Carrum, and Barrie McGuffie, 17, both had form which was unknown to me, but were regular paddlers. They were in light singles, but Barrie looked a little uncertain in what I was later to learn was a canoe which he had finished only a couple of days before and had never tried out!

The 9th Box Hill Rovers had a heavy looking double kayak crewed by Ian Fraser and Christopher Green. I knew that Lee and I would have a difficult job with our fibre-glass touring kayak, but I was thankful that I was not in the Box Hill craft.

The remaining one to start was a big Canadian style touring canoe paddled by Jim Hesselschwerdt and Trevor Whitehead. They were sitting up on chair-height seats with cushions and were paddling the traditional under-arm style with large single-bladed paddles.

Dad had a theory that whilst this was clearly the slowest canoe over short distances, it would figure quite well over 250 miles. We had plenty of time to consider the pros and cons, count our strokes per minute, calculate mentally how many strokes there were in an hour and how our hands and back-sides would stand the torture. So we paddled ... and paddled ... and paddled.

In the meantime Dad had dismantled the Lipton Tea banner, collected others from around the park, and had breakfast and made the van ready for travelling. Kim, the Siamese, was up to his old tricks not answering to the whistle and there was some concern at what could be an embarrassing delay. However, a commo-

tion in an adjoining street with a lot of barking, heralded Kim's appearance with hackles up and tail bushed out - one crisis averted. Dad found that he was not unscathed, however. The skin on the right rear inside leg was torn and gaping for about four inches. The cat knew how to deal with city dogs, but failed to realise that some tough looking country dogs were a little ignorant of city rules of conduct. There was no time to even think of looking for a veterinary surgeon at that stage, so Dad marshalled the convoy and moved off.

Ted Madden was having diabolical trouble with Crusader's main motor which was a massive outboard - in fact it refused to function for most of the day. He was forced to rely on a smaller standby outboard. It saved him a lot of fuel, but was incapable of pushing up against the current.

Ted kept his fingers crossed while trying to locate the fault in the larger motor, but it had to happen. Bret Wood had pulled onto the bank and as Crusader overtook him, he signalled what was previously agreed upon as the "OK" sign. This was in the vicinity of Cobram and at about 1 pm, but Bret did not come on, and all efforts to trace him, even by getting private speed-boats to go back upstream, had failed. Actually, he had given up, and had left his craft to seek some habitation. His actions caused a good deal of concern, with repercussions as far away as Melbourne.

Lee and I thought we were tired and sore, but it was nothing compared to what we would feel later. Dad finally came into view as we rounded the last bend at the sand-bar of the Tocumwal town beach. We were pleased to be there. He had a loud hailer, and amid announcing to campers etc. that we were arriving, he directed us to the finishing line. We had stopped numerous times on the way, and after not seeing any of our land parties for the whole day, the Red Cross ladies of Cobram and Strathmerton were a welcome sight until we tasted the vile mixture of luke-warm fruit juice, salt and glucodin. They inspected hands and generally gave first aid treatment for sun-burn. We had taken normal precautions, but peculiar places like the backs of hands had been affected.

Julie Green from my office was there with her two sisters to greet us. Her home was not far from Tocumwal, and with everything that had happened, I had forgotten that she might be there to see us, so it was a pleasant surprise.

Up to the park, and after showering, we had a bar-b-que for dinner, and I began to feel a little better. Dad had advised the Tocumwal Police in case Bret tried to phone. At 9.30pm, they came around to the caravan park to say that they had located him at Cobram, so after advising everyone concerned, and collecting Lee, who had drifted off to a local dance, we finally got to bed.

My sister, Gail and her flat-mate Jeannette had decided to follow us to Tocumwal, and they played their part in collecting money at the town beach where the canoes came in and at the caravan park. They had also been seconded

to assist in the Bret Wood episode.

First day race progress was as follows:

Fred Shirwood	9 hr 44 min 45 secs
Jim Hesselschwerdt & Trevor Whitehead	10 hr 7 min 20 secs
Barrie McGuffie	10 hr 7 min 47 secs
Philip Ball	10 hr 10 min 17 secs
Lee and myself	11 hr 43 min 18 secs
Chris Green & Ian Fraser	12 hr 7 min 55 secs

Lee and I slept in the Valiant that night, and I really slept. Dad woke us at 6am and we scurried around with gear and breakfast, and then loaded the canoe onto the car to return to the town beach. All except Bret Wood were ready. Even at that hour in the morning it was warming up and we applied extra sunburn protection. We said goodbye to Gail and Jeanette who were returning to Melbourne.

DAY TWO

Another count-down and we were on our way. There seemed to be an incredible number of campers along the river banks, and I could not help thinking just how much money could be raised if every person could be contacted. No canoeist need feel lonely at this time of the year in certain areas, and there was always plenty of advice, banter, and offers of a cold can which would have been disastrous had we succumbed.

The day was Sunday, the 28th December, and it was developing into a scorcher. At Seymour, not so very far away, the temperature reached 111 degrees Fahrenheit. Bret Wood was driving his car that day and followed the convoy to Picnic Point. Fred Shirwood was out ahead, but by 10 am had burned himself out, besides having a badly blistered hand. He was good at "sprinting", but the nature of this Marathon race was starting to make itself felt.

I was becoming concerned about my crew member, Lee. He was definitely slowing down, and said later that he was plagued by an almost uncontrollable desire to stand up, which of course is impossible in a craft of this type. Finally, he admitted that he was a hindrance to me and felt he was letting me down. There was no doubt that I would do better alone, even with a two-man canoe, because of the better draught and less water friction. The seats which Dad and I had made were moveable, which meant that I could re-position my weight to the centre of the craft to improve its handling. I put Lee ashore with the surplus gear at about 12.15pm. He could hail Crusader without any trouble.

Thinking of my sponsors I was determined to press on, and actually settled down well. I had a short spell on the bank at about 2pm and then paddled solidly. I knew the other kayak was behind me but I had no idea how far. Fred, of course was also behind but had quit.

Already there were so many surprises that it was impossible to figure whether the others were hours ahead of me, or perhaps laid up just around the next bend. There was no way of communicating, and seeking information from the odd group of campers was proving to be unreliable. A little after 5pm I could hear the unmistakeable sound of Crusader which I assumed was coming upstream to check on tailenders. (Ted had earlier on in the afternoon passed me to take other crews who had pulled out on into Picnic Point). The motor had the powerful sound of forcing the big cruiser against the current. Such was

the stillness of the bush, and the never-ending winding of the River, that it was an incredible thirty minutes before Crusader came into view.

Ted was low on fuel and had made some precise calculations as to how far up-stream he could push without passing the point of no return. He gave my position as twelve miles out and reckoned that I could be in by 8 pm. Stating that he could only go a certain distance further up-stream for Chris and Ian and would have to moor and wait, he pushed off and for about another twenty minutes I could hear the sound of the motor receding.

Sweeping around the next bend I came upon a luxurious house-boat moored to the bank, and the owner offered a can of beer which I did not refuse. The owner asked about my collection tin too, and although I did not have one, he gave me a \$2 donation.

Twilight was turning to darkness. The noise of bird-life diminished and again I heard Crusader in the distance. Had I not paused at the moored house-boat, Ted's estimate for my arrival would have been accurate. As it was he cruised up and took a position astern of me at about 8 pm. He was picking me out in his spot-light and as we approached camp, he tooted a greeting. According to people at Picnic Point, the white canoe in the spot-light made a really pretty picture. Feeling the way I did, I could not have cared less. The day had been a killer, yet somehow or other I felt in better shape than the previous day.

Sue Sutherland-Smith insisted on a first aid check and did some work on the knots in my wrist and arm muscles. After a shower we had dinner. Mum and Dad were able to produce enough to feed not only the family and Lee, but also Hope McMeekin, Sue, Ted, Tim and Stan. Picasso gnawed at the scraps. Cans of beer appeared as if by magic, but eventually the supply ran out and it was bed-time for everyone.

I just hoped that someone would be awake in time next morning to prop me up in the canoe and say "right, now Mark, PADDLE".

Both Tocumwal and Picnic Point are in New South Wales and I now turn back to cover Dad's events of the day. Because of the fruit-fly blocks on the bridges and the time-consuming searches of the car and caravan, he decided to stay in N-S-W although there was a more direct route in Victoria. He was advised to avoid the lower river track, and take a longer intermediate road to Mathoura, but poor sign-posting caused him to miss this route with the result that he had to go north right to Deniliquin. Ross was with him and the party stopped there for lunch after which they headed south along the Echuca highway to get back to Mathoura. Picnic Point is about 8 miles from a turn-off just south of Mathoura and Dad marked this with Lipton Tea and Red Cross banners as he went. The track was all across low-lying river flats with numerous wooden bridges and he expected to finish quite literally at a picnic point. To his amazement he found a

camping and caravan reserve with wardens living on the spot; altogether the most attractive stop-over of the trip. The wardens knew nothing officially about the Marathon, but extended every hospitality and agreed to a collection being organised.

Launches and house-boats lined the river bank, and it was interesting to see two of them which had been converted from the famous pre World War Two Catalina flying boats. Ted had gone ahead of the canoeists as he wanted to phone a progress report through to Station 3DB. Stan D'Altera also wanted details because he was being pestered by the press and other radio stations.

Dad thought that there could have been a phone at the Warden's cottage. The structure was sheltered by over-hanging willow trees with the front entrance only a few feet from the river bank, and the stream up to within a couple of feet of the flat ground. Decaying timber and a lot of the most interesting looking junk decorated the vicinity, and some saddle horses were paddocked nearby. Dad said that it reminded him of colour films of habitation in the Mississippi swamps. No-one was around, so he and Ted called at the door to be invited into what was probably the lounge. The Warden was seated in a rather dilapidated lounge chair and had his ears close to the radio. To Ted's request, he confirmed that there was a phone next to the radio and for Ted to help himself.

Dad took the opportunity to glance around at the cobwebs and mass of old-fashioned furniture, but what dominated the room was, to his amazement, (I might add) a huge two manual reed organ with a full concave pedal board. It was an ancient instrument but he was assured that it still functioned. We kid Dad that he exaggerates, but he declares that the organ occupied a third of the room. Making due allowance I settled for a quarter!

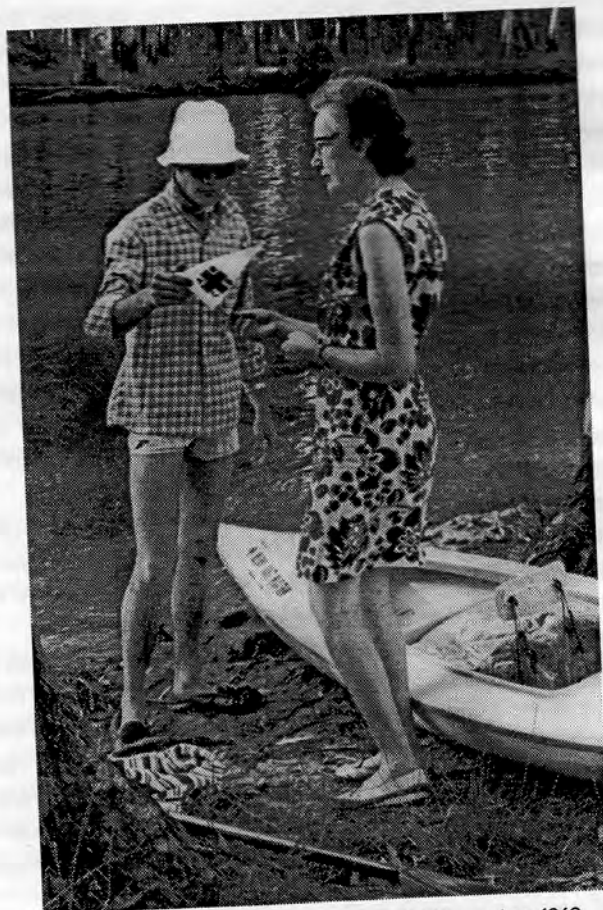
In the mean-time Ted had lifted the receiver to hear voices, and was instructed to replace the hand-piece because the phone was on a party line, and from that stage, Ted was given step-by-step assistance by the Warden as to the method to make the call, otherwise he and Dad might still have been there.

It appeared that the first seven miles of phone lines across the flats was of no concern to the PMG, except of course the revenue it produced, so the Warden was left to make repairs. Gum trees are notorious for shedding timber, and seven miles of wire and gum trees were not easy to live with. The warden offered apologies for the weakness of the signal and Ted did his best over the line to tape a news commentary. He then rang Stan to find that he had not been able to endure the suspense, frustrations and pesterings in Melbourne any longer. He was already on the road to Picnic Point!

Dad and Ted left the cottage with Dad vowing that he would fight the Chief Warden for the latter's job. Picnic Point was a delightful spot surrounded by bird-life of every description, plenty of social activity in season, and with every

promise that living there could be pleasant as well as take him to a ripe old age. He went through his loud-hailing routine, and the collectors, including some ladies from the nearest Red Cross Branch, went through the park.

Stan arrived with congratulations about the standard of route-marking, and quickly absorbed the atmosphere, so to speak, assisted by a can of beer. Having caught up with some events and some dinner, he was a good deal comforted and was happy to return to Melbourne which he insisted was necessary that same night. And I thought that I was punishing myself !



*Start—Day 3—Picnic Point Sunday 28 December 1969
Some last minute motherly advice!*

DAY THREE

We knew that Fred Shirwood and Bret Wood were returning to Melbourne. Chris and Ian, although now officially out of the race, felt refreshed enough to paddle along. I was continuing as a single and considered myself as eliminated except for my mileage sponsorships. Philip Green and Barrie McGuffie were starters while Jim Hesselschwerdt and Trevor Whitehead had only to finish the course to win the doubles section.

The River was beautiful at 7am. The current was still strong, there was no wind, and for a start it was cool. Campers along the bank at Picnic Point gave us an ovation, many from their sleeping bags as we bent over our paddles. Suddenly it developed into one of those shocking days, with high temperatures, and a howling north-west wind which blew dust and red sand from I don't know where.

After 8 miles I was dropping behind, but generally, the blistering wind assisted us as far as the Barmah Bridge, which was about the half-way point of the day's journey to Echuca. The effect of the wind can be judged by the fact that the first canoes were under the bridge by 10am, and even I had made it by 10.45, much to the alarm of the ground party which had decided to check us through that point at about mid-day. They arrived at the bridge at 11am only just in time to learn the position from Ted and Sue.

Some ominous drops of rain heralded a cool change and the wind turned abruptly to a cruel blustering south-wester.

My left arm was packing up, simply losing power. I stopped and applied liniment which seemed to improve it like magic and resumed paddling. Those ahead of me had reached a point of the River where the rising wind from the new quarter had less effect on their progress. I was paddling into the teeth of this already cooler blustery wind which played havoc with the progress of the big canoe, sitting higher in the water due to a single paddler's weight.

The extra strain caused my left arm to become useless, and to cap it all, I rounded a bend to see the longest straight stretch of water up to then, and lying directly into the wind which was coming up between the trees lining the banks as if a tunnel. Choppy waves were over 18 inches. I was exhausted, and it only needed the Box Hill Rovers' Landrover to come into view as it did and I pulled into the bank. We talked for a few minutes, and Crusader came around the last bend to catch up with me.

Sue administered the lemon, salt, and glucodin mixture but Ted suggested I should quit. He realised that I was nursing my arm, and although made as a suggestion, it had the tone of authority with which I did not feel like contesting. I didn't have the strength to even try to argue. The canoe was loaded on top of the Landrover and I joined Sue and Ted on Crusader where I received some more treatment.

We seemed to travel for ages before sighting the Canadian canoe and surprisingly, the Rovers' kayak a few minutes ahead of them, but the latter stopped for a little first aid and thus Jim and Trevor drew ahead. Crusader continued and overtook Barry McGuffie and finally, another hour's paddling time ahead of him, Philip Ball, who looked as though he had just started out. These two boys had been very close right through, but Barrie had no coaming on his slim racer and the choppy waves had washed into his cockpit with the extra weight slowing him down. To make matters worse, he had capsized, with the result that recovering the craft from the water and emptying it had cost him extra delay and drained a lot of his energy. I felt really sorry about his misadventure because he showed guts and determination which I had not seen before.

The expressions on the faces of the family and friends when Crusader pulled into Echuca mirrored my feelings. I was disappointed at letting my sponsors down and also letting the River beat me. My left arm was in a sling and there was no canoe strapped to the deck of Crusader. I agreed to see the doctor in Echuca to find out my future prospects more than anything else, and was diagnosed as having a "super spiratus lesion". I was able to better understand the condition as an upper arm muscle which was badly inflamed at the point where it had been working continually over a ridge of bone. He muttered dire consequences if I tried to continue, but felt that severe pain would dissuade me anyway. I went off to the chemist armed with prescriptions.

We returned to the town landing later to watch the canoes come in, and there were some tired competitors who needed no rocking to sleep that night. It had been the vilest day yet, and with the heat of the previous day, it added up to make this an extreme race under extreme conditions.

Dad and I found time to relate the day's events and I take up his story. Upon fixing a rendezvous at the Barmah Bridge, he made for Mathoura, phoned Hope McMeekin's hotel at Moama and left a message for her to meet them at the Bridge at noon with replacement medical supplies, which had become affected by heat on Crusader the day before. He replenished the fridge with beer by getting the local pub owner to open up early. The car and caravan received an awful battering by the blistering wind on the way to the Barmah Bridge, but he finally rounded a bend in the road to find himself facing the fruit-fly inspection

point on the bridge approach. There were some tomatoes and apples in the van, and believing that there was no hurry, they parked at the block and while talking to the inspector, they ate the prohibited fruit. Ten minutes after passing through the block, they found, as I have already stated, that all the canoes had passed under the bridge. Sue, on Crusader, had decided not to wait for Hope McMeekin with the medical supplies, so Mum and Dad were faced with re-crossing the bridge into New South Wales in order to stop her, knowing that there would be yet another road-block at Echuca. It meant another stretch of highway, battling the howling wind on the plains above the Murray Valley, but for relief from the heat, they suspended wet towels from the insides of the car doors to make the car into virtually a Coolgardie safe. They picked up a stranded motorist on their way to Moama and Echuca and were practically there when they intercepted Hope McMeekin.

Signalling her to turn and follow, they finally pulled up at the road block on the Victorian side of the Echuca Bridge. Here was the first favourable event of the day. Someone, presumably the inspector at Barmah, must have telephoned through, for the inspectors waved them on without a search. A kindly thought indeed!

Later that afternoon, midst canoes arriving, Mum buying provisions, doctors visits etc., Ted noticed that the untended Crusader was adrift from the jetty half a mile away and was making across the River downstream. Children had evidently slipped her mooring ropes. A two car dash through the outskirts of the city and through a park finished at the jetty to find that a speed-boat had Crusader in tow and matters were returned to normal.

There were anecdotes galore about events at Echuca. We had to laugh for instance when Ted and son, Tim, appeared at breakfast time, knocked on the door of the van and asked for the "loan of some power". We offered them the whole galley but no, all they wanted was some power. They had breakfast out of a Sunbeam fry-pan set on the bonnet of the Toyota station wagon parked on the park's car wash and with the fry-pan coupled to the caravan with 75 feet of electric flex. Anecdotes like this will be re-counted for years to come I feel sure.

DAY FOUR

Barrie McGuffie had slept in our van, but refused any breakfast because he was afraid he might not keep it down. At least he had a good comfortable bunk and some sleep. It was a new experience for me to be on the bank and wave as the canoes left again at 7am. My arm felt OK until I raised it above my shoulder, but I planned to try it out in the canoe that evening at Turrumbarry Weir.

In the caravan the night before we had opened collection tins, the money from which was going to my "Trendsetter" funds. Red Cross Headquarters was anxious about some progress reports on fundraising. Of the tins opened, there was about \$90 worth of coins and it took some time to count and wrap for banking in the morning.

So, in addition to some shopping, we went to the Echuca Branch of the National Bank where the Manager attended to the business, after which we headed for Turrumbarry Weir. We attempted to deviate at one point to check on canoe progress. We had directions from a woman on a station property and twisted our way through a maze of tracks for ages without seeing the River. Ross Chenoweth was in the vicinity in his station sedan and did manage to find the River bank, but as there were no campers to be seen, he had no idea whether the canoes had passed the spot. We all returned to the highway none the wiser, and I began to appreciate that the land parties had their own problems and frustrations.

Arriving at Turrumbarry, Dad paid his respects to the Chief Lockmaster and obtained what privileges were available. The large Lipton Tea banner was erected, contact was made with the local Red Cross Branch representatives and the usual rigmarole for making collections got under way.

The water flow at Turrumbarry is usually "dead" owing to the pool of the weir and a big channel drain-off, so we did not expect the canoes to be early. The inevitable speed-boats and skiers were busy and it was a very pleasant day. We unloaded my canoe as did Laurie Chenoweth, Ross's 12 year old son. His was a slim white Olympic styled canoe, very unstable, but very fast.

As we eased mine into the water, Ian Fraser of the Box Hill Rovers came over and offered to paddle with me. They were a wonderful team of fellows, and I had a feeling that he was a little concerned my arm might give out and leave me stranded. He settled down quite well as we paddled upstream with the idea of

greeting the competitors, and we must have travelled three or four miles before returning.

Crusader had pulled in for Ted to survey the launching ramp. This was the end of her escort for the canoes. From Turrumbarry to Swan Hill, the River is very shallow in spots, certainly not sufficient for Crusader's draught. Ted was satisfied with the launching ramp and then offered to take Hope McMeekin and Mum upstream for a last check on the canoeists. I do not know who was the jinx, but Dad said that Crusader's motor immediately objected and it looked as though the cruiser would have to be placed on the trailer. After some delay, the trouble which seemed to be caused by weed, was rectified and the two ladies rejoined the boat, to have their 'jaunt' after all. They overtook us still going upstream. I was quite pleased with my arm and felt that I could manage the full day's paddling to Swan Hill the next day.

It was clear from the times, that the competitors were taking this day's paddling rather easy, to the extent that they were about an hour and a half behind form. We learned that at about 5 miles from the weir, Barrie attempted a break from Philip who, with an hour of aggregate time up his sleeve, was content to tag along. Philip hung on however, and was only 5 seconds behind Barry at the finish. Barry's time for day four was 10 hours 12 minutes 35 seconds with an aggregate of 39.49.55; Philip's was 10.12.40, his aggregate being 38.42.02, while Jim and Trevor in the big Canadian type tourer were 10.36.50 for an aggregate of 40.31.48.

Crusader was loaded onto the trailer behind the Toyota to be transported to Lake Eppalock. The crew and Tim were to return to Swan Hill by road for the Marathon finish. Canoes were already loaded on cars and the convoy left Turrumbarry as the shadows lengthened. Fortunately, I had driven to Murrabit 6 weeks earlier and surveyed the isolated camping spot by the bridge, as even knowing the route, "Ashton's Circus" arrived after dark. Everyone set to, making camp and preparing a meal, but with several interruptions.

A farmer from nearby, appeared in his utility and disagreed with our information about the number of River miles to Swan Hill. He knew someone locally who had a very reliable and complete river map, which he would consult and report back.

A happy drunk swayed into the lamplight with about 5 dogs snooping and sniffing everywhere. He just wanted to talk in a very inebriated style and finally staggered off into the night after donating a dollar to Red Cross.

The farmer, Charles Humphries, returned to settle for 47 miles, which was about mid-way between his own estimate and our information.

Dad drove off at 9pm to phone Stan D'Altera from the Murrabit Post Office, 3 miles away. The automatic phone was in a booth against the wall of the Post

Office, and after a nine minute call reporting times, events and discussing plans for the final day, he emerged from the booth to be hailed by a voice from the postmaster, whose head was protruding through a small trap-door beside the booth. Glancing beyond the postmaster's head into the lighted room, Dad saw that it was the bedroom, and happened to notice a woman in the double bed placed right against the wall adjoining the phone booth. The man, who was in pyjamas, explained that they had gone to bed, but could not help hearing the conversation through the thin wall and added that he had a couple of telegrams for Barrie McGuffie. Would Dad mind delivering them? Country postmasters evidently need to have some secret service training also, unless the acquisition comes naturally! It's an interesting point as to whether Barrie would have ever received the telegrams but for this episode.

Stan D'Altera also had messages from friends of mine in Melbourne, as well as for the Box Hill Rovers, all very much appreciated, (might I add).

Barry's father had re-joined the party at Turrumbarry Weir and was in the convoy to Murrabit. There was no alternative but for them but to camp in their car. He had earlier declined our offer for Barrie to sleep in the van again. Later, however, Mr McGuffie asked Dad if the offer still stood, as Barrie needed a good night's sleep.

Ross Chenoweth worked out the handicaps for the following day, with the sole idea of trying to bring all the canoes into Swan Hill as close together as possible. Because the distance was longer than originally planned, Dad and Ross also decided to start the 5th day's paddle from Murrabit West instead of where we were camping.

I was going to paddle, and with young Laurie Chenoweth and the Rovers in their kayak, we could increase the three remaining competitors to a field of 6 craft. Then a voice from the darkness offered to accompany me in my double. It was Clive Thomas, a ground party member of Jim and Trevor's team. He had no real canoeing experience but was willing and so was I, but again, I wondered whether Clive was prompted by concern for me. I was relieved in any case, and the camp settled down for the night.

DAY FIVE

There was the usual flurry and scurry in the morning. The two kayaks were to be first off, with the Canadian type 15 minutes behind, and the three singles in another 45 minutes. Rather than wait for Ross, who was transporting other starting officials and the scratch-man, Dad left to mark the route as he went, so that the competitors on later times could have their land-crews follow. With everyone finally away, the land parties returned to break camp and drive to Swan Hill via Kerang, where Hope McMeekin intended joining the convoy.

Philip's total margin of 67 minutes 52 seconds at Murrabit was too much for Barry. Had Philip been unfortunate enough to capsize as Barry did on the third day, things might have been different, but Philip had the edge on experience and a slightly more stable craft for the conditions. Barry tried desperately, to the point of collapsing after the finish, but Philip was only 23 seconds behind him over the line.

Jim and Trevor brought in their double another 21 minutes later. They did a fantastic job with their big craft, which was really large and stable enough to take camping gear and food for weeks on end. They had made up time by not stopping for rest pauses like the cramped single canoeists were forced to do. The alternatives to sitting on their chair-height seats and cushions, were to kneel on one knee and the other in turn, or both, while still using the big single-bladed paddles in under-arm action.

It was just the old story of the hare and the tortoise - almost - because they did not quite beat the singles, even though it was an interesting performance.

Official time for Philip over the 250 mile race was 45 hours 36 minutes 20 seconds.

Clive, who paddled with me, refused to stop all day except for a few minutes on one occasion, and how he managed it I never knew. My arm miraculously survived and between us we managed to push our craft over the finishing line in first place, although unofficial. As we had started first on handicap, we never saw another paddler all day. There were very few people to see the end of the race, as it was early in the afternoon on New Year's Eve, a working day.

Surprises lurked everywhere on the trip. As Dad arrived at Swan Hill, and "Ashton's Circus" wheeled through the caravan park, he met an old friend from Adelaide, our former home city. Ron Fisher was one of Dad's Scoutmasters, a

canoeing enthusiast, and incidentally, one of my sponsors. He had come all the way from South Australia to view the finish of the Marathon.

The collection routine was organised with the local Red Cross ladies, the final banners erected and the parties waited for the canoes.

Officials, sponsors, public address technicians, press and TV staff started to arrive, and the Mayor of Swan Hill was due at 3pm. Unfortunately, all the canoeists beat the gun, so to speak, but it did give them time to shower and clean up before the final ceremony. This was held on the River bank along side the sign-painted caravan which added a little more atmosphere.

Dad was official spokesperson for the Red Cross Society and thanked the sponsors and everyone else for their parts played in making the Marathon a success. A few more speeches, prizes, and scrolls were presented, and the ceremony finished with an invitation to visit the Swan Hill Folk Museum for refreshments.

Venue was the lounge of the preserved Paddle-steamer "Gem", which was afloat in a seven acre park museum of restored early Australian settings. It's a must for all visitors to Swan Hill to see. The Mayor had invited seniors to the Swan Hill Club at 6.30pm, but Dad for one, felt so exhausted at this stage, that after having dinner and talking with friends, fell into his bunk, despite the fact that it was New Year's Eve. I was already on top of mine, fully dressed with the idea of rising later to see in the new year. I was awakened by the cat at daylight, and still fully clothed! Need I say more?

After breakfast, we said our goodbyes and headed for home, collecting Hope McMeekin at Kerang on the way. "Ashton's Circus" was finally reduced to two cars and a caravan, still highly decorated.

Ted Madden had said that he could see a great future for this Marathon as an annual event - probably the longest canoe race in the world. He paid me a nice little tribute - to the effect that few men today see a creative idea develop to something big and exciting, and that I was indeed fortunate enough to have had such an experience at my age.

Of course it still had to develop, but as a pilot venture it was certainly a success. That success was due to the energy and effort of many people, too numerous to mention here. But to them, I sincerely extend my heart-felt thanks.

The Marathon captured the imagination and interest of the public, and publicity for Red Cross resulted in donations coming spontaneously and freely, wherever collection tins were taken.

In that year, we tested a lot of theories and tried a lot of ideas with only three weeks' notice. I had no doubt what could be done with enough time to organise a similar event, and I hoped that Red Cross could take advantage of this and gain some real financial benefit from Murray River Canoe Marathons of the future.

It would not be until 1973, when I would return as a paddler again, this time from Adelaide, to where I had moved after having met and married Janet. The River had defeated me in the first Marathon for a number of reasons. I was very ill-prepared, I had a craft totally unsuited to the conditions, and I relied on a companion with whom I had not trained. In 1973, I entered as a single paddler, built my own TK1, and trained regularly. I completed the distance in 43 hours 9 minutes and 38.8 seconds, although to me, my time was un-important.

I had finally been able to conquer the River Murray Canoe Marathon. The rest is history.



*Swan Hill—31 December 1969
Dad in one of his official capacities*



*Philip Ball—16 years old—of Carrum, Victoria.
The fastest overall paddler receives a silver tea service*

Canoe marathon a big success

Sixteen-year-old Bonbeach High School student Philip Ball won the Red Cross Murray Canoe Marathon after a five-day struggle with another 16-year-old Barry McGuffie, of Blackburn.

The event, over a 250-mile course between Yarrowonga and Swan Hill, is believed to be the longest canoe race in the world.

Except for the final stage, between Murrabit and Swan Hill, where there was insufficient water for a big boat, I

By TED MADDEN

followed the race in my 23-ft. outboard cruiser, Crusader, as Coast Guard escort.

It was an unforgettable outdoors adventure for everybody who participated.

Barry McGuffie won line honors by being first into Swan Hill, but Philip had gained a 70-minute break on him on the third day, when his canoe overturned, and won the Lipton Trophy by 57 minutes 30 seconds. Except for that one break, there was never more than a few minutes between the two throughout the entire 250-mile journey.

The senior canoeists, used to competitive sprint events, burned themselves out in the first two days.

Fred Shirwood, 42, won the first stage, of 52 miles, from Yarrowonga to Tocumwal, in 9 hrs. 44 min. 45 sec.

He held a lead of nearly 23 minutes over Jim Hesselshwerdt and Trevor Whitehead, in their Canadian touring canoe, with Barry McGuffie 27 seconds behind them, and Philip Ball coming in two minutes later.

But next day — when it was 111 degrees at Seymour, and the canoeists were on their longest and most gruelling stage of 59 miles from Tocumwal to Picnic Point — we had to pick up Fred near Strathmerton, utterly exhausted and with a severely blistered hand.

A few miles farther on, Mark Thornthwaite's

partner, Lee Hammat, had to be taken out.

Mark, the Red Cross Trendsetter who had hit upon the idea of the event, felt obligated to continue, and kept on, paddling his heavy double kayak alone.

We'd had our own troubles in Crusader, getting through the formidable forest of snags near Tocumwal, which the drivers in the Murray powerboat marathons had dubbed the Siegfried Line.

We now had to take our casualties on to Picnic Point and return to pick up Box Hill scouts Chris Green and Jan Fraser, who were still 35 miles out at dusk.

We reached them at 6.20 p.m., low on fuel, and only a few minutes short of our point of no return.

Courageous

It was 3.25 p.m. when, with less than a gallon of fuel left in our tanks, we finally escorted the courageous Mark Thornthwaite in to Picnic Point.

Mark had paddled for nearly 13½ hours.

The incredible youngsters, Ball and McGuffie, meanwhile, had done the 59 miles in a shade over 10½ hours, Philip beating his rival into Picnic Point by only one second.

Next morning, the canoeists received an unexpected bonus in the form of a howling northerly, which sat behind them all the way down past the Moria Lakes and the Barmah bridge.

But then the change came; the wind whipped round to hit them right in the teeth as the river turned south-westerly for the run into Echuca. This was the end for



The Herald, Wed., Jan. 7, 1970

Mark Thornthwaite, still pursuing the heavy double canoe on his own, and flattened by his effort of the previous day.

We picked him up at noon, his left arm useless, and on the point of complete exhaustion.

It was here that Philip Ball gained his winning break.

Barry McGuffie's canoe, without a coaming, was shipping water in the rough chop; the added weight caused him to drop back.

Then he capsized, losing valuable time, and the effort of righting and emptying his canoe took a lot out of him.

When we passed Barry, he was driving himself to the limit and obviously feeling the strain.

The lighter, wiry Philip, an hour's paddle ahead, was slipping effortlessly through the water, looking as fresh as when he started.

He finished this stage with a lead, on aggregate, of 69 min. 58 sec. over Barry, with the boys in the Canadian canoe 6 min. 50 sec. farther back.

At this stage, all except three canoes — Ball, McGuffie and the Canadian double — had either retired or had been disqualified for the major trophies for receiving assistance.

The three made an easy run of it from Echuca to Torrumbarry Weir, taking an hour and a half longer than they had over a similar distance the preceding day.

About five miles out, Barry attempted to make a break, but Philip stayed with him and was only five seconds behind into Torrumbarry.

With only the short final stage of 35 miles from Murrabit to Swan Hill to complete, he still had a margin of 67 min. 52 sec. and would only have to stay reasonably close to Barry to win the Lipton Trophy.

Barry put everything he had into it, collapsing after he crossed the finishing line at Swan Hill. But Philip was only 23 seconds behind him.

Jim Hesselshwerdt and Trevor Whitehead, in the Canadian canoe, took 21 min. 22 sec. longer.

Philip Ball's total time for the marathon was 45 hr. 36 min. 20 sec., his winning margin 67 min. 30 sec.

Although an evaluation of the event by the Red Cross and the sponsors has yet to come, it seems certain that the Murray Canoe Marathon will be developed as a major competitive event.