

# THE RACE TO THE MIDNIGHT SUN

## - THE VIEW FROM SEAT FIVE -

In June 2012, a team of paddlers from Tropical Far North Queensland invaded distinctly untropical far north Canada to stage a daring raid on the world's longest paddling race – the Yukon River Quest. They came in search of glory, but first they had to avoid killing each other...

Story: Geoff Wright



Main image by Justin Kennedy  
[www.jtkphotography.ca](http://www.jtkphotography.ca)



THE YUKON RIVER QUEST IS THE LONGEST ANNUAL ULTRA-MARATHON PADDLING RACE IN THE WORLD, RUNNING 715KM FROM WHITEHORSE TO DAWSON CITY. IT BEGINS ON THE LONGEST DAY OF THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE'S CALENDAR, THE SUMMER SOLSTICE, WHEN THE SUN BARELY SETS THIS FAR NORTH.

Our master and commander, Bodo Lenitschek, competed in the Yukon River Quest in 2008, winning his division in a mixed two-man canoe. Convinced that a team of outriggers could be competitive in the event, he returned to Cairns with a plan.

First, he secured the use of a carbon-fibre voyageur canoe, poetically named Breaking Wind, the same type that holds the race record. Then a six-man canoe crew took shape: me (in seat 5), Ralph Seed (seat 1), Keith Vis (seat 2), Grant Davis (seat 3), Caleb Wiles (seat 4) and Bodo, the steerer, in seat 6. We like to think of the Down Under Dogs as an elite group of Cairns' finest outrigger paddlers, but truth is, we were the only suckers that Bodo could coerce into joining him in such an escapade. Our average age was 52, but we had years of collective outrigger experience.

Ralph offered his home at Tinaroo dam for our Yukon training camps, where we paddled a 'classic' outrigger canoe belonging to the Dam Outriggers. At these camps we combined training, team meetings, audio-visual presentations and dietary discussions. In each session we'd paddle 50-80km around the dam.

The closest we got to a dress rehearsal was a 115km dusk-till-dawn paddle from Ette Bay to Ellis Beach. Launching under a full moon from Ette at 6.00pm, we were forced to turn back after 10 minutes as we'd rigged the canoe too close for the conditions and it was unstable. A quick re-rig and we left for Cairns, albeit now out of touch with the yacht we'd arranged to shadow us. Conditions quickly deteriorated, wind and

swell picked up, and the sky darkened with rain clouds, blocking the moon. We were 5-8km offshore and navigating by sight. Near midnight we had to beach the canoe on an island to extend the ama further out and repair a rigging ratchet. The trip took us 10½, and we were stuffed. It was a wake-up call.

Morning outrigger training was ramped up after that, and we did two 20km paddles as a crew every week, plus another 20-30km per week in club crews or individually. We also had a personal trainer, who had us running, climbing hills and doing gym work.

Ralph was adamant our stroke had to be extremely efficient, in both energy input and forward thrust, so it could be maintained for the many hours needed to complete the race. He also worked out that if we used our Xylo paddles instead of Zaverall lightweight paddles, we would be lifting an additional 20 tonnes of weight over the length of the race. We ordered Zaveralls.

We received recommendations from nutritionists, but the best advice came from Mike Le Roux, a local Cairns ultra athlete. He told us to take in 450 kilojoules of energy every hour, if possible breaking this down to 150Kj intake every 20 minutes. We used Optimiser Endura, along with gels, bars and wraps. For hydration we planned to carry sufficient water to get us midway across Lake Laberge, from which point there was little chance of consuming polluted water, so we'd drink from the river.

The final special training we undertook was in a dragon boat, which was as close as we could get to the seating width of the voyageur. A few short runs in this revealed there would be a steep learning curve in terms of balance and precision when we took our final positions in our race canoe.

Months turned to weeks, then days in a flash. We were well prepared physically, kitted-out as best as we could be without ever having seen the canoe, and ready for the Yukon.





The team sewed extra padding into the seats of their paddling pants to ease the pain

MOST OF US HIT WHITEHORSE A WEEK BEFORE THE RACE. Bodo had already collected the voyageur and we were itching to get it in the river, but Caleb, who'd arrived in Whitehorse earlier, was missing in action. He finally showed on Friday morning, hungry and possibly hungover. But it was good to have the crew together, so we shoved some food down his throat and embarked on our first Yukon paddle.

Team bonding wasn't great. Grant was grumpy, Bodo pissed off we hadn't paddled the day before, Caleb was still digesting breakfast and Ralph was tinkering with his heart rate monitor. Less than 20 metres into our first run down the river, things got worse. After the first huck call we were upside down.

Caleb abused Grant, Grant abused Caleb, Bodo spat the dummy, Ralph tinkered with his heart rate monitor, Keith enjoyed a dip, and I was stunned into silence by the sound of our support crew's laughter. In retrospect, this was the best thing that could have happened. It showed us just how unstable the canoe was, and how important smooth changes would be.

We quickly came to respect our canoe's ability to dump us in the water when we failed to offer her respect. She was fast and light, but murder to change sides in, and steering was challenging. During the week we experimented with the seating arrangements, changed the locations of buckets and holders, packed and tested the load distribution, and balanced and reloaded the canoe till we could do it in our sleep. Meanwhile Ralph tinkered with his heart rate monitor.

We took the canoe down the river fully loaded and empty, and then finally did a fully loaded run 60km into Lake Laberge. By the end of the week we had most of the seating changes perfected, gear locations working, Caleb's music machine playing, food and hydration methods in place and pretty well everything sorted, except for Ralph's heart rate monitor. The last thing to do was to change the signage: Passing Wind became Down Under Dogs and we were ready to rock.

OUR GOAL WAS NOT JUST TO FINISH, BUT FINISH FIRST and break the race record of 39 hours 32 minutes, set by a six-man voyageur team called Kisseynew in 2008. On sign-in day, officials checked our gear to ensure we had the mandatory equipment (which included bear spray).

At the race briefing we met a focused Californian crew in a voyageur called Such a Blast. Their personal profiles read like a who's who of outriggering. They were all at least 10-15 years younger than us, there was an Olympian kayaker in the crew, and most had done numerous Molokai crossings. They even looked the part - all tall, trim and, well, Californian. They would become our main rivals.

At breakfast on race morning, Ralph finally stopped tinkering with his heart rate monitor. It just didn't work. The canoe was packed with gear, and there was time for a final coffee and toilet stop. (We'd cut most fibre from our diet over the last few days, hoping we would all be mildly constipated for the race - stopping the canoe for constant toilet breaks wasn't an option.)

At 11.30am on Wednesday 27 June 2012, we lined up under the start banner in full race gear, waiting for speeches to end and the race to start. A brief rain shower closed in, reminding us just how far from home we were. Rain in the tropics is just wet; rain in the Yukon is colder than snow.

The race started at noon, with 187 paddlers running 500 metres from the line to their respective canoes. We got away without a hitch, but around 20 craft were ahead of us, including the Californians. Bodo's strategy was clear - get in front and stay in front - and 15 minutes later we were leading. After 2 hours 15 minutes, we passed Policeman's Point, the last checkpoint before Lake Laberge. We were 4 minutes ahead of Such a Blast and 7 minutes ahead of the race record.

Roll number two at the Five Finger Rapids





**"IT'S HARD TO EXPLAIN HOW COLD WE WERE. It was the kind of cold that only wearing wet clothes in 1°C temperatures with a wind can produce. It gets right into your bones – in fact it finds bones you didn't even know you had. It's painful."**

The lake is 80km long and very wide, with zero current. We slowed to about 11.5 km/hour, but felt strong. Bodo would call us out for 1-minute break every hour, starting at Seat 1 and working through the canoe. In this minute you could change clothing, take a piss, eat some food, stretch or just have a drink. We were paddling at a stroke rate of 60 per minute, which Ralph maintained perfectly all race. Our hucks were controlled by a gym timer, which beeped every 50 seconds to signal a change. Gradually we pulled away from the field.

Exiting Lake Laberge we were 12 minutes ahead of the race record and leading the Californians by 9 minutes. We'd been paddling for 6 hours, 44 minutes and our speed varied from 14 to 22km/hr, depending on current. However night loomed and when the sun set at 11pm the temperature plummeted. We all added layers of clothing, except Keith, who just pulled a long-sleeve shirt over his singlet. We were going strong, the sun was behind the hills, it was dull, but the twilight was still bright enough to see.

Most of us had been peeing in our drinking cups during our 1-minute break (we just rinsed them out afterwards). It becomes harder to pee after 8 hours paddling, but, as your body shuts down and doesn't process food and liquids very well. Ralph and Keith, who had difficulties with cups, had opted to use a catheter type of system, but were struggling with this too. Bodo demanded they pee in their cups; they tried, but no joy. Cursing, he brought the canoe into land. Finally we found a place to stop and everyone used this opportunity to add clothes. We were back in and paddling again fairly quickly.

By 2am it was 1°C, (with a breeze) and the water was 3°C. It was cold, but we were well covered and paddling hard. We rounded a bend close to the riverbank and abruptly encountered a boil and whirlpool. From the back I saw nothing, nor did Bodo, we just heard "Oh Shit!" from the front of the canoe as we dropped into a whirlpool about a metre deep. Our canoe flipped in seconds, and we found ourselves upside down, heading downstream in the dusk.

To right a voyageur, you have to get to the bank. It was a fast section of water, and I guess we were drifting at 10km/hr. Everyone surfaced OK and Caleb grabbed the stern rope, swimming towards the bank to try and secure the canoe so

it would swing in. We all swam with it, trying to push it to the bank. It seemed an eternity before we got the canoe into an eddy area, and we were in the water for about 15 minutes.

Just after we'd managed to lift, drain and refloat the canoe, the Californian team paddled past. They called to check we were OK before charging off. There was nothing for it except to get back in and paddle hard to warm up. And then we started to count the cost of the flip. Bodo had lost his maps, our GPS died, the beep machine stopped beeping, and we'd lost drinking cups and loose food. But we were all safe, and off chasing the Californians.

IT'S HARD TO EXPLAIN HOW COLD WE WERE. It was the kind of cold that only wearing wet clothes in 1°C temperatures with a wind can produce. It gets right into your bones – in fact it finds bones you didn't even know you had. It's painful.

We'd been paddling for about 30 minutes when Keith missed a change and suddenly slumped in his seat. He was in a bad way and we needed to stop immediately. The river wouldn't help, and it was another 10 minutes before we could get into an eddy on the bank. Keith had the least amount of clothing on when we flipped and he was now hypothermic. Grant and Ralph got him into dry clothing, rain pants, jacket and beanie, then we wrapped him in a space blanket. Caleb had a thermos of warm soup and Keith managed a few mouthfuls. We lifted him into seat one and gave him a paddle to slump forward onto. The rest of us pulled on our rain gear, which prevented the wind cutting through us, got back into the canoe and began paddling.

Five minutes downstream we heard shouting from the bank as we passed Little Salmon checkpoint. We could have pulled in and warmed Keith properly, but without our maps we were flying blind and the chance was gone. The Californians were now 29 minutes ahead of us and we were 48 minutes adrift of the race record.

Keith slowly came around and even started to paddle again in an attempt to warm up, and also because the man just never gives up. Three hours after Little Salmon we reached Carmacks, the 7-hour mandatory stop. It was 7:17am on Thursday morning and we'd been paddling for 19 hours and 17 minutes. We were cold and our spirits were down.



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The fantastic support crew of Helen and Stephanie Seed, Kiki Paull, Sue Vis and Susan Markwell cheer the Dogs to victory

At Carmacks everyone is clocked in and not allowed to leave until 7 hours later. We arrived a further 7 minutes down on the race record, but amazingly only 18 minutes behind the Californians, having closed the gap by 11 minutes even with a paddler down.

It was a real struggle just to get out of the canoe. Our legs were like jelly, and we were freezing. Our support crew helped us to our RV and fed us beautiful bowls of warm soup. The Californians had gone to a hotel, so we were first into the hot showers where \$3 bought us three minutes of luxurious hot water. Bliss. I had a bad case of sea legs. The room wouldn't stay still and my legs didn't want to hold my body up. Our support crew helped us into our warm clothes, got us fed and into bed. I had to share with Ralph, but even though he farted and snored, nothing would stop me sleeping solidly for 4 hours.

While we slept the ladies washed and dried all our gear, went begging and borrowing cups and lost gear, cleaned out our canoe, and had everything ready by the time they woke us. Ralph took Keith to the medical aid station to get their OK for him to continue. As he left, I heard Keith mutter, "If the doctor says I can't go on, I'll have to get a second opinion!" With hypothermia, after you've completely warmed up, you're normally good to go again, and so it was with Keith.

The Californian crew had been cleared to leave, but to our delight they stuffed around, losing another 9 minutes before getting away. The chase was back on.

THE INFAMOUS FIVE FINGER RAPIDS LIE IN WAIT ABOUT 2 ½ HOURS FROM CARMACKS. Going wrong here can be lethal, but we'd been told to take the right-hand channel, which has a clear V down the centre, with shoulder waves coming out from the island and the right bank. The plan was to enter the channel, then leave the V by crossing to the left, where there are gentler rounded shoulder waves. Unfortunately things did not go to plan. We followed the V to the end, into some sharp, high-standing waves. The canoe leapt out of the water, nosedived and then rolled upside down, putting the Dogs in the drink again.

The daytime temperature was in double figures and thanks to a support boat we were able to get to shore and have the canoe drained, upright and ready to go in about 30 minutes. Bodo was swearing though. We were just about through the rapids, what went wrong? And his maps were lost again, torn away by the force of the flip, along with most of the replacement drinking mugs. No time for analysis, though, the Californians were pulling away. The boys had used the river time for a good piss, it was warm, and in no time we dried out and felt great.

The support crew cheered like crazy as we passed them just downstream from the rapids. They'd watched us flip and a race co-ordinator had told them that they'd probably have to pull us out of the race. To see us powering past was fantastic for them.

Without maps, Bodo had to make a lot of judgement calls. The river splits often, snaking past many small islands. Taking the wrong option could put extra kilometres onto the route. Our speed varied according to the flow. Ralph or Grant would call the canoe speed from their GPSs to Bodo, and suggest a faster course. It was always a tough choice: cut the corner and take a shorter route at a slower speed, or stay out in the faster current and go an extra 500 metres.

Caleb had lost his drinking cup in the flip and asked to borrow Grant's. "You're not pissing in it are you?" Grant replied loudly. "No," said Caleb. "Just drinking." He borrowed the cup, dipped it in the river and it slipped out of his hand. Moments passed, then Caleb said, "Ummm Grant, I hope you weren't too attached to your cup..." Grant stopped paddling and turned around. Keith heard the steam coming out of Grant, so quickly gave him his cup, saying; "Its OK mate, I haven't pissed in it. Have mine, I'll share with Ralph." And so we dodged a certain fatality.

Seven hours after leaving Carmacks we finally sighted the Californians. We would have loved to paddle past them, but they'd pulled into the bank for a manual piss break, after having issues with their condom catheters. Under a fantastic sunset at the Fort Selkirk checkpoint, we were 4 minutes ahead of Such a Blast. Everyone was paddling strongly, but we were sore and tired...time for some drugs.

We each had a little bag of pills, in small packets marked 'Pain', 'Bad Pain', 'Upset Stomach', 'Drowsy' and 'Anti-inflammatory'. I was taking an anti-inflammatory tablet every 6 hours, as a precaution, but needed a 'Bad Pain' pill when my hands started cramping. Only near the end of each leg, after 12 hours, did I use a No Doze tablet to stay alert.

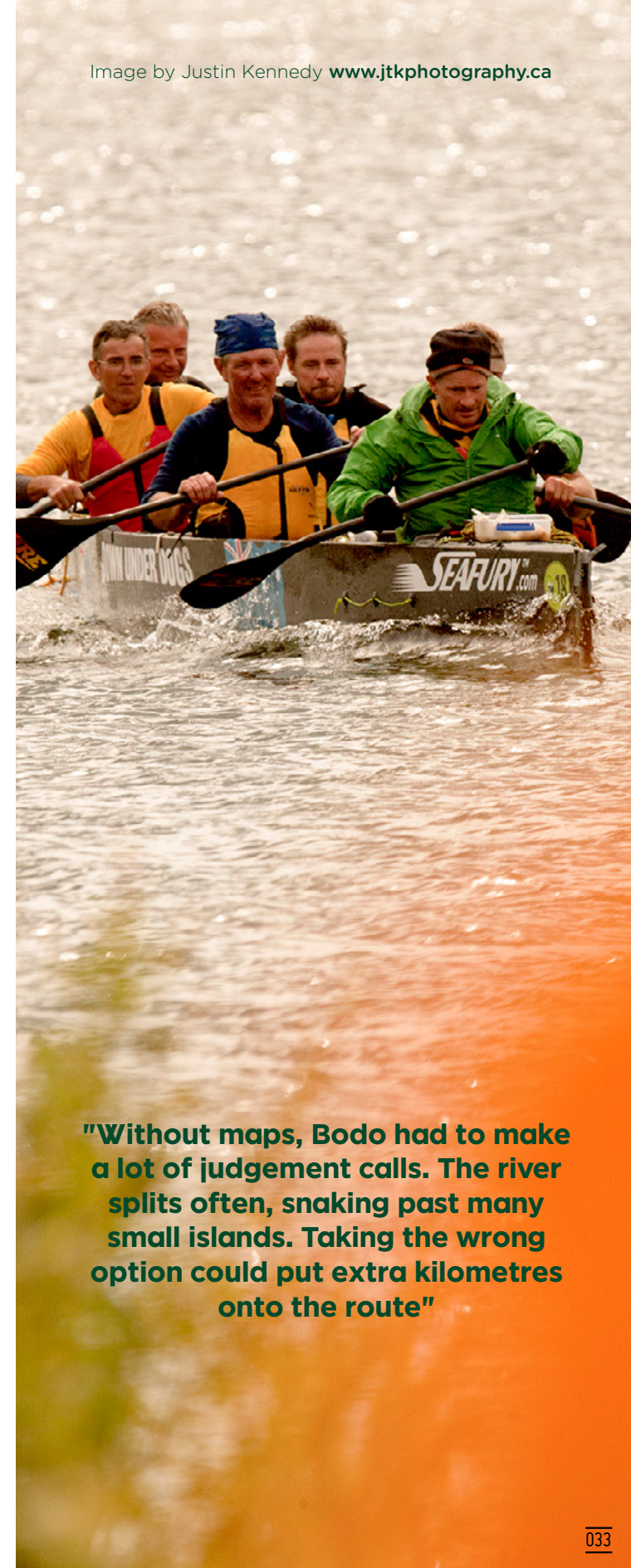
A second, 3-hour layover was mandatory at Kirkman Creek, a small settlement with a bakery only accessible by river. The biggest problem, without maps, was finding it - but we arrived at 4.22am on Friday, the first canoe in. We'd paddled for 14 hours and 8 minutes from Carmacks and were 30 minutes ahead of the Californians.

In the hothouse, by the potbelly stove, we warmed up with soup, sandwiches and cake. Most of our clothes and sleeping bags were wet from the last flip, but we could have slept anywhere. Our lifejackets with our race numbers went at the foot of our sleeping bags, so we could be woken up in time to get moving.

BREAKFAST WAS A SCRATCH AND CUP OF COFFEE, but I managed to fill my dive boots with hot water before leaving. True to form, all the Dogs were packed and in the canoe, paddles at the ready when we were given the flag to go at 7.22am. All that remained was a 150km sprint home...just another 8½-hour paddle. Thought for the day: 'stay dry!'

We reached 60 Mile River, the last checkpoint before Dawson, just before noon, with bodies wracked with aches and pains.

Image by Justin Kennedy [www.jtkphotography.ca](http://www.jtkphotography.ca)



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An hour later, while paddling past a small hunting shack on an island, we heard shouting and screaming. This was real Banjo territory so we kept going, but suddenly two charter boats arrived packed with our support crew, providing a great lift to our spirits.

We crossed the finish line in Dawson City on Friday at 3:51pm, having paddled for 1 day, 17 hours and 51 minutes. There was no race record, but of the 68 teams that entered, comprising 187 paddlers from 13 countries around the world, we finished first – 54 minutes ahead of Such a Blast.

It had been a long road. I'd started training seriously in January 2012, when I weighed 92kg and thought I was pretty fit. I stopped drinking alcohol, toughened up my diet, stepped up

my running and started gym sessions. I had a body scan done in February – weight 87.7kg, muscle mass 37.8kg, body fat 24.1% – and another in May: weight 82.1kg, muscle mass 42.5kg, body fat 11.0 %. I weighed myself 10 days after finishing the race and came in at 78.2 kg. Cups, maps and tempers weren't the only things we lost on that race – but a winner's medal wasn't the only thing we took away from it either.

The race was one of the hardest things I have ever put my body through. The cold was extreme, the pain terrible, and working without sleep was difficult, but we all found the inner strength to push our bodies well past the point where we should have given up. To finish, and to finish in first place, was a magnificent feeling. Would I do it again? The jury is still out.



The team, from left to right: Keith Vis, seat 2; Ralph, seat 1; Caleb Wiles, seat 4; Bodo Lenitschek, seat 6 (steerer); Grant Davis; seat 3; Geoff Wright, seat 5

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