

Flag 49 proudly carried by *Christopher Bray* (MI05) 22yrs, on his 2-man, unsupported expedition across Victoria Island in the High Arctic with expedition partner *Clark Carter*, 21yrs. **Start date:** 31 July 2005 **Finish Date:** 25th September 2005

The goal of our 2-man, unsupported expedition was to cross Victoria Island, above the Canadian mainland inside the Arctic Circle. Being the 9th largest island in the world, it was surprising that such an expedition has not been tried until now. After studying maps, satellite photographs and gathering as much local knowledge as we could, we planned a route from the most easterly point of the island to its most westerly, a journey of just over 1000km. We gave ourselves 65 days to achieve this, with the first 1000 hours being perpetual daylight, hence the name of our expedition – Ocean Frontiers 1000 Hour Day Expedition.

Victoria Island is a hidden paradise in the Arctic - half of the island is frozen year round into the arctic ocean, while the other half partly thaws out in summer, forming part of the legendary 'Northwest Passage'. Far from being a monotonous icecap traverse, one of the great attractions to us of Victoria Island is that the terrain is so diverse. Everything from mud and swamps, through grassy plains, boulder fields and to tundra. The island is a patchwork quilt of lakes - almost as much land as water. Further, the island teams with spectacular wildlife including polar bears, musk ox, wolves, caribou, arctic fox, lemmings, geese and seals.

Being unsupported for 65 days means bringing a huge weight of food and equipment with us. For example, 16kgs of chocolate (high fat and carbs for its weight) and 7kgs of butter. To transport all this gear with us, we designed and built 2 combination kayak/sled/carts in my garage at home, from aluminium. Our 'PACs' (Paddleable Amphibious Carts) are essentially bulky kayaks with 2 demountable car wheels. Fully laden each would weigh a staggering 250kgs.

We had our 2 PACs sent ahead of time to Canada from Australia via cargo ship. Unfortunately once arriving in Vancouver, British Columbia had just entered into a trucking strike at the wharves. BC Businesses were loosing \$30 mill a day - it was a major strike with thousands affected. Hence Clark and I were stuck in Cambridge Bay (A small community of 1500 people on Victoria Island) for 3 weeks while we tried to free our PACs from the strike so we could begin our expedition. Thanks to a lot of people working on our behalf and helping us out, we were able to have an exception granted for our shipping container, and it was released from the strike - 1 of only 2 shipping containers ever released. This was incredibly fortunate, as the strike continued for another 6 weeks after we got our PACs finally flown into Cambridge Bay.

Originally planned to be a summer expedition, our 3 week delay would push the tail end of our expedition into the beginnings of the harsh Arctic winter, but we were determined to set out.

We chartered 2 seaplanes to take us and our 2 PACs to our 'start' point, and from there we began our torturous route. The terrain was what we expected, but far more exaggerated. Pushing ourselves beyond our limits every day - feeling sick from exertion, a few weeks into it, it became clear we would not reach the other side in our allotted 65 days. This realization came as some relief though, as what we really came out there for was for the journey, the experience - not just to reach a destination - a simple point on a map. By pushing ourselves this hard each day we were utterly exhausted, and didn't have time to explore or document our surroundings. Much of the land we were crossing has never been visited before in the history of mankind. In some pockets, we did find evidence of Ancient Inuit - stone tent rings, bone tools (harpoon heads) etc. As this region is unexplored we were encouraged to photograph these archeological sites and take down their GPS positions and give this information to the Inuit Heritage Society.

Once we realized we would not make it to the far side, we adopted the attitude of just pushing on as far as we could each day while taking the time to stop and investigate things of interest. From then on, every day we discovered something new or had an incredible experience. We had an encounter with a Polar Bear, and wishing to remain downwind of it, setup camp early and slept within sight of it. Each night we setup a perimeter tripwire system we designed and built to warn of marauding bears, but thankfully this was the closest bear encounter we had.

We had two separate encounters with arctic wolves - the first one could have been a problem - I was ice fishing a few hundred meters from camp and was unarmed. I noticed the pack of 9 wolves heading towards me and bid an ever hastier retreat back to camp, sprinting the last bit as they bounded after me. At last within earshot, Clark emerged from the tent with shotgun and bear spray, but at the sight of two of us the wolves backed off, howled and walked away.

The 2nd wolf encounter was even closer - a pack of 5 assembled on a hill near camp, and the white alpha male came down to investigate us, walking around camp, at times within 4m. Looking from us to his pack and back again he howled several times just meters from us, perhaps trying to convince the rest of his pack closer, but thankfully to no avail. Eventually, after we got some great video and photographs, he left and the whole pack slid silently away. We went down to a nearby lake to cut through the ice for the water below, and turned around to head back to camp onto to discover the wolf had snuck within 2m behind us! We were quite unnerved, but remained calm, and confronted it in a playful manner. To our astonishment, the wolf apparently entered into the spirit of it and crouched down with

his bum in the air, wagging his tail overhead – the classic ‘Throw me a ball’ stance. For several minutes we ‘played’ with the wolf, until it became clear that he had another agenda on his mind. Every 15 sec or so he’d lose interest and peer back to where the rest of his pack should have been. We could keep track of one wolf circling us, but it could easily turn dangerous if the rest arrived. Whenever we turned to head back to camp the wolf snapped out of ‘play mode’ and into ‘stalk mode’ creeping up ever closer behind us. We managed inch our way back towards camp. When the tent appeared over the skyline and our intentions became obvious, the wolf sprinted off ahead, seizing the opportunity to investigate the camp. By the time we got there he’d vanished again, this time for good. It was an amazing experience.

Our PACs suffered damage along the way, and we were continually having to make repairs, as well as building a new paddle from one of bear tripwire poles and spare sheet of aluminium to replace one that was lost. We built the whole PAC from aluminium except the two-point, which we built from steel because we didn’t want that to break – however, about 1/3 the way into the trip we both managed to tear this steel bracket completely in half from the huge hauling forces we had to apply. Thankfully we managed to jimmy up a repair for this, which held-up for the remainder of the trip.

Most of the east coast we were initially following is permanently ice-bound, but by day 26 we reached a milestone - Denmark Fjord - where river melt water is impounded, and nearby islands hold the pack-ice at bay. Over the next 11 days we paddled a gradually narrowing lane of clear water, camping on shore. We came across numerous bear tracks, including some into which our 30cm rule pathetically fell inside, and on day 23 had an encounter with the real thing - it sauntered onto the esker we’d been intending to camp on, so we spent a nervous night on rough ground, checking our bear alarm hourly to make sure it was still working. We had more than enough headwinds this paddling stretch - tent bound for two days by a sub-zero gale on the muddy foreshore, and on one day clawing only 500m in a 3 hour paddle. There were compensations though, unforgettable moments of paddling past blue multi-year icebergs in perfectly glassy water, being investigated by bearded seals etc.

On day 35 we finally ran out of open water, having to thread our way to shore through rapidly closing bergs. We then had a decision to make. Our delayed start meant that we were already experiencing sub-zero temperatures (we’d both suffered minor frostbite) and we’d been warned that as sunlight dwindled winter would arrive not gradually, but like someone turning off the lights.

Our original plan was to be picked up from the West coast by a relatively short flight from Holman, but our late start and slow progress meant we’d need to be picked up inland, much further east, in freezing conditions. The last float planes had gone South for the winter, and the snow on this wind-ravaged island doesn’t build up enough to suit skis. Our options were only helicopters (very expensive), or to find a flat area on which a pilot could land using "tundra" tires. The most predictably flattish areas in this primordial landscape are Eskers, but according to the maps and satellite images there were none we could reach along our intended route after it left the coast. So on day 36 we struck directly west, hoping to reach a large Esker 30 miles inland. It became a bit of a race against time, trying to reach this esker before the lakes we’d need to cross would start to freeze up, forcing us to make lengthy detours around them rather than paddling directly across. We began climbing, and the flat land gave way to hills, and placid streams up which we hauled turned to continuous rapids. Tough going, but at camp 45 we were treated to another unforgettable experience as the Aurora Borealis – the Northern Lights - burned in shimmering green curtains above us.

We made that esker, but only just, delayed tent-bound by gales for one and then two days, with just a day’s painful progress in between. We crossed the last big lake literally as it froze, with ice forming on our PACs, our paddles, and turning our drysuits into suits of amour as we paddled.

That was day 46. The Esker was massive, set among impressive hills, and within a couple of days we’d found two suitable landing sites. This proved to be as far as we got. The weather increasingly dictated things, with maximum temperatures declining steadily to minus 5, with minus 9 as the lowest (-38 if you include wind-chill, greatly exacerbated by the damp conditions). A deep Siberian low pressure system creating strong gales crossed to Alaska, so via Iridium satellite phone we reluctantly planned an orderly but slightly early exit, rather than be stuck for a week in the tent, with food running low. On the day we organized to be picked up, a hunter went missing near Cambridge Bay, involving our pilot in a search, and by the time that was completed (successfully), weather, to put it mildly, was not good for flying, nor for anything else either. This continued for a few days, and we went onto half rations with our remaining food, just to be safe.

So on day 58 we were treated to a display of pure airmanship, as Willie Laserich and his co-pilot Scott McMillan flew their Twin Otter to our GPS co-ordinates, and began circling lower and lower until they could see first us, and then the white-outed ground below. They landed in 35 knots of cross wind, with freezing rain obscuring their windscreen, and used just 100 meters of our snow covered tussock studded "runway". The take-off, with our PACs tied inside, was almost as short. Willie at 73yrs, is a legend among arctic bush pilots - and we know why.

Once back in civilization we proceeded to head back to Sydney via a few places, giving a few talks and slide shows to schools along the way. Now safely back at home, with most of the media etc dwindling, we are now focusing on preparing a documentary, writing a book, and generally keeping ourselves entertained before our mind wanders towards searching for another far-flung corner of the world to visit.

Visit www.1000HourDay.com for details, photographs, or to contact me for an article for the ‘Explorers Journal’

Christopher Bray 5th November 2005 ← Apologies for the delay in returning the flag, we did not return to Australia right away.