

Dear Gig Harbor Boat Works:

I am writing to thank you and Gig Harbor Boat Works for helping me realize my 50year dream of rowing from Victoria to Alaska. I want you to know that my Whitehall performed admirably and was the perfect choice for this trip. First I will outline the trip details and then follow with comments about my boat. You and Gig Harbor are welcome to use any of this information and photos as you see fit. You might also want to try and track down a posted article on the Painter's Lodge website as they had a feature of my row since my craft was named after my mentor, Mike Rippingale who was a fishing guide there from 1956-1970!

My trip from Victoria to Ketchikan can be reduced to simple numbers; distance, speed, and time required to cover the distance. My **inSight** GPS tracker was programmed to tabulate these; 1400 km travelled at an average of 5 km per hour over 280 hours of rowing. Much to my astonishment my peak speed was 61 kph! I knew I was flying on a couple days with 30 mph tailwinds but this seemed excessive. Then I realized the program had included a car drive in Vancouver when I was testing the equipment! These numbers do not capture the magic of the journey and are not reality in themselves, but reflect the magnitude of the challenge. Add in weather conditions, wind and tides and the picture get clearer; the trip really was an odyssey. But the people encountered, sights and surprise events are all beyond time and distance. They are timeless and blessings beyond measure.

The Race to Alaska advertises the distance from Victoria to Ketchikan as 700 nautical miles, or 840 miles. The route that I planned to take was longer, almost 900 miles, as I wanted to take circuitous routes across Queen Charlotte Sound and Dixon Entrance where I was exposed to the open Pacific. I also wanted to make short, island hopping jumps in order to stay within 1-2 miles of the shore. One final, sobering thought; 3 ft. waves 8 ft. apart add about 20% more distance as the boat rides the waves and I

encountered frequent waves and strong headwinds likely making this an underestimate. Certainly GPS measurements between fixed points will fail to capture this extra distance travelled!

In all, I was away for 28 days, May 16th to June 13th. During this span I rowed for 22 days. I took 6 rest days when I visited friends, replenished food supplies and above all, showered! On seven afternoons I was beached by headwinds that averaged more than 30 mph.

On 15 mornings I faced headwinds that averaged 25 mph. Luckily I also had two mornings of 30 mph tailwinds that allowed me to fly and quickly gain ground. The afternoons were a similar story. 17 afternoons threw headwinds at me that average 26 mph. Again I was blessed with four afternoons of tailwinds that carried me quickly towards Alaska! My highlight days were Day 18 into Shearwater and Day 24 in the Grenville Channel when the tailwinds allowed me to cover 70 and 80 km respectively. In all, I encountered 20 days of rain and 15 morning or afternoon half days of headwinds greater than 30 mph.

My journey was broken into 5 stages, each with its own challenges, but the toughest by far was traversing Johnstone Strait from Chatham Point to Telegraph Cove. I encountered almost continuous headwinds; it did not matter if it was an Ebb or Flood tide, 4 AM or 4 PM, or whether the Channel was running West, East, North or any of the compass points in between. This stretch sapped my strength and pushed me to the breaking point. If the strait had been a little longer or the winds a little stronger, I would have never survived the effort. I consumed much of my muscle mass fighting the winds and struggled to recover for the rest of the journey. Later, conditions that I could have handled early in the journey would prove to be too much and left me sitting on the beach hoping for better weather. The varying conditions of each stage are summarized below.

Stage 1: Sidney Island to Campbell River

4 days

In this stage I travelled through protected waters and calm seas, much as I had expected. The days were sunny or partly cloudy, ideal

conditions for rowing. It did not rain. Little did I know that this would be the end of such good conditions. I encountered only two half days of headwinds, one drove me onto shore just short of Qualicum Bay. The only true struggle was the varying NW and NE 20 mph headwinds I encountered as I tried to cross from the tip of Denman Island to the easterly point of Comox. Later in the morning the winds died and I made quick work of getting to Oyster Bay. Then a gentle afternoon SE wind picked up and blew me into Campbell River.

Stage 2: Campbell River to Telegraph Cove 5 days

During this stage it rained every day, usually only for a morning or afternoon, but more than enough to dampen my equipment and force me to bail out the rowboat. 75% of the time the headwinds were harsh: 9 half days the headwinds were over 25 mph. Four mornings greeted me with headwinds averaging 25 mph, including the first morning past Chatham Point when the winds topped 40 mph and four to six foot waves were breaking and sea foam was flying. I chose to exit Johnstone Strait and take the long route but I had to round Edith Point to escape. Six times I tried only to be driven back a mile to hide in a sheltered bay. On the seventh try, three hours after starting, I rounded Edith Point and was carried quickly to Blind Channel. The afternoons were worse; five times the winds were at least 30 mph and twice I was forced to the shore to wait for better weather.

Stage 3: Telegraph Cove to Shearwater 4 days

The rain let up a little in this stage and the winds too abated, particularly when I was exposed to the open Pacific swells rounding Cape Caution. I experienced three mornings and afternoons with headwinds but they were less than in Johnstone Strait, usually between 20 and 25 mph. Even better, my final run into Shearwater was behind a 30 mph tailwind that blew from 6 AM until 6 PM and allowed me to cover 70 km, or 36 nautical miles. My

good fortune was even more obvious the next day when I was resting: a storm hit with driving rain and 40 mph Westerly winds all day.

Stage 4: Shearwater to Prince Rupert

6 days

Rain again but this part of the coast is known for rain. Surprisingly the rains let up; I only encountered rain for half the time, but when it did rain it was torrential! I had to bail almost every half hour during the deluge when it hit. 9/12 half days were windy but the winds' strength was less. 20 mph headwinds beset me on four mornings and on 5 afternoons the headwinds averaged 25 mph and beached me twice. Still, I rode a 20 mph headwind up Grenville Channel one afternoon and covered 42 nautical miles, my longest daily!

Stage 5: Prince Rupert to Ketchikan

3 days

75% of the time it rained, usually heavily and day long, although the fog and rain did let up so that I could float easily on a tailwind into Ketchikan and see the cruise ships glistening in the distance. My first day out of Rupert was on a splendid tailwind of 30 mph that pushed me rapidly to Port Simpson. I took the afternoon off to look for an old friend only to encounter a 25 mph cross wind for a short evening row. Later I suffered through two more mornings of headwinds and an afternoon of a 30 mph North Westerly that stymied an open ocean crossing. But these setbacks were balanced out by afternoon headwinds of 30 and 15 mph that made the last two days rowing pleasant.

My Whitehall performed beyond my expectations, thank you so very much. The lightness of the fiberglass/Kevlar hull allowed me to easily beach the craft and roll it up the beach on crab trap floats tied in a line on a

rope. I then converted the boat to a “tent” and slept inside the entire trip. I never bothered to use the tent I carried. Once your standard boat cover was attached I had a very comfortable place to read and sleep.

The boat’s sea worthiness was progressively tested through Dodd Narrows, Seymour Narrows, up Johnstone Strait and finally in Dixon Entrance. I became very comfortable in following currents as strong as 10 knots and could easily steer down the tongue and avoid the whirlpools. In rough heavy seas, I was able to cope with 4-6 foot waves and breaking whitecaps. Indeed, using the Concept II sculling oars that I purchased from you I found I could tackle and overcome 35 mph headwinds. Feathering them forward reduced the wind resistance and then the headwind also drove the oar into the stroke. I used the flexibility of the boat to vary from a standard rowing technique to sculling with the sliding seat. I had replaced your standard straps on the footplate with the anchoring system used on Concept II’s ergometers with great success. The grip size on my sculling oars was smaller than on my 8 foot spoon oars: and as it turned out this was an accidental stroke of genius! By continually rotating between my two sets of oars as well as standard rowing or sculling, I was able to rest different muscle groups as well as protect my hands. I only acquired 1 troublesome blister for the entire trip. I was able to row up to 16 hours per day when conditions dictated and remain in good condition. My Gig harbor Whitehall was masterfully crafted for the odyssey I undertook. I would recommend this craft to anyone who asked! Thanks again.

Ken Poskitt