

**QSKC Skills Weekend
Noosa 10/12 november 2017**

Saturday

Standing there with my helmet on overlooking the water, dressed from head to toe in nylon, plastic and neoprene, I felt like we had just crashed the wrong party. A girl on my left was wearing a bikini. Draped over her shoulders, a brightly coloured orange sarong was blowing as freely in the wind as her sun-kissed blonde hair. She was holding a little dog on a leash whilst staying perfectly perched on one of the rocks below. A shirtless older man with a serious tan approached from the right. I noticed his shark tooth necklace and the sand on his teeth when he smiled as he walked past our group. The sound system from one of the tents on the beach was blaring out 'Wish they all could be California girls'. The surf comp was in full swing and life seemed good. For a moment I thought I would stay, but Eddie's voice brought me back to reality. We were heading back out to sea.

A short time before, we had stood silently on the north side of the channel. Mark Hessling's group paddled past on their way out to sea. The closer they got to reaching the waves of the Noosa bar, the further apart they became until we could no longer make out the paddlers or the kayaks. I had a set of binoculars at home, Malcolm had a set in his car. We both wished we had them in our hands. What we could see was a high, white wall hurling towards the now dotted objects. A surf lifeguard on a jet ski soared behind at high speed. We could only watch and hope for the best.

One by one the slammed paddlers arrived at the beach. Adrian was the first one we came across. He ran past our spectator group to help out Peter Voght who was separated from his kayak and now standing on a sandbank knee-deep in the middle of the surf, hands on his hips. I spotted Cheryl who had been returned to the beach by the surf lifeguard on the jet ski. She commented that it was a bumpy ride. In the distance we saw two paddlers carrying back a yellow kayak. They looked lonely and defeated so far up the beach.

Soon the beach resembled a busy ants nest with kayaks and paddlers moving in and out. Some paddlers were sitting on the sand, exhausted. Others were exchanging stories with arms swinging up and out to mimic the height of the waves and swimming actions. Out of the entire group, the word was that only three paddlers had managed to stay upright. The hustle and bustle soon made way for a group huddle where the leaders quietly discussed what had happened. I felt it was a private affair as I took a photo of Mark's men in a close circle. Cheryl's brand new Audax, plastered with sand, sat in the foreground keeping watch for intruders.

Eddie is a wise and tactful man, so when he spoke the words 'It is better to be a man on the beach wishing he was out at sea, than a man at at sea wishing he was on the beach', he was trying to tell us we should stay on the beach. I looked around for pretty shells until we paddled over to the surf comp to have a look if the sea was any better there by any chance.

Karl is an efficient man, so when we had the choice to either portage the kayaks from the beach, over the rockwall and along the southern side of beach again, or paddle cross the channel to check out the surf there again, he voted for the latter. I have paddled with Karl

before and can confess he has a mind that thinks like mine from time to time. We left the surfers to it and headed north.

Not letting us loose in the surf unprepared, Eddie kept his group on dry land and got us all to grab a paddle. He drew a kayak in the sand, discussed the finer points of water movement and observed everyone individually performing a high brace, a low brace and a stern rudder stroke. He tucked in an elbow here and there, adjusted some wrists, stretched a few arms out and rotated a hip or two. When Eddie was satisfied with our efforts he sent us off into the inlet to paddle around the corner through the surf for some surf launch and land practice and a play in the waves.

It was great fun! Smashing through the waves on the way out and getting dunked on the way back in. I never caught a nice wave, but did plenty of broaching, bracing, capsizing and rolling. We took it in turns to head out and come back with heroic stories or rush in to help a hapless swimmer and pluck empty kayaks from the sea. High fives from Eddie all around until Sue changed it all got a whole hug from him.

Easily identified by a colourful purple cag that is the envy of Jaffa, a yellow helmet and a sparkling Ruby Red Romany Pilgrim, Sue Hopgood makes a gutsy little kayaker. Instead of staying on the beach until she felt like it when encouraged to give rolling in the surf a go by Eddie, she allowed me to help push her out to sea to 'get calm', as she put it. I watched her paddle off through the breakers. Expecting her to paddle to the safe zone and sit at the back for while, I was surprised to see her intentionally capsize just before that. The waves blocked my view and I found myself standing on my tippy toes to gain a bit of extra height. Did she roll up? Did she make it? Was she out?

The waves cleared and out of the ocean, in Baywatch slow motion, rose a righted kayak and a triumphant Sue with her paddle high in the air. We exchanged wahoos! from the beach in excitement for her first ever surf roll. But Sue was not done yet. A huge wave was gaining momentum behind her. She glanced over her shoulder, lowered her paddle and powered forwards. Catching the wave perfectly, she rode it back all the way to the beach using a stern rudder followed by a great brace and landed right in front of now wild crowd. As I told Mark Hessling later, it was a distance of at least 5000m. What a girl!

Not all waves are created equally. Eddie calmly sprung into action when he spotted Jaffa drifting in the ocean, paddle still in hand. Like a riderless horse returning to the stables, Jaffa's Tasman Raider was dutifully heading towards the beach without him in an upright position. Struggling to get closer to the beach, Eddie got Jaffa to lay on the stern of his kayak and gave him a body tow back to safety. He made it look easy.

But it wasn't. Having yet again abandoned my designated paddle buddy for the day, Malcolm, with whom I formed Team Impex, I tried to tow the lighter Sue through the waves and back again. No matter how much effort I put in and how hard Sue tried to stay in a low balanced position on the stern, it seemed we were not gaining much ground. Every time a wave approached we would get ready for the hit. Me by trying to avoid hitting the wave side on and Sue by bracing herself and keeping the kayak steady. Eventually we turned around and went back. It was a similar story the other way but with a few capsizes, a few rolls and getting Sue back on. Martin Purvins and Howard also had a go and we watched as the bow of the red Pace was lifted high out of the water going through the waves. It looked quite dramatic.

Not sure if this was a sea skills assessment or a sea skills training session, we slowly made our way back inland performing self and T-rescues, re-entry and rolls and a bit of towing. Reunited with my patient paddle buddy Malcolm, we had some fun listening to my very creaky foot pump which soon gave way and fell apart, dislocating itself completely from everything it had ever been attached to.

We had a quick break in the little bay by the famous sausage bank on the inlet of the Noosa River. It was here that I caught up with Adrian Testa, whose little baby girl was only a few days old when I last saw him, but is now five months of age. You can only talk about babies for so long and I soon lost Adrian to the call of the swirling water at the point of the of the bay where the currents meet to provide a fun little play spot.

Whilst having some snacks on the beach and having to make the difficult decision between the two flavours of processed drinks in foil packages offered by Jaffa, Eddy was delighted to spot two little brown duck swim past. They were admiring the kayaks and took a shine to Sue's Romany. I fondly recalled the times spend as a kid feeding ducks in the park and got ready to sling them a piece of my biscuit. Just in time to realise that feeding wild animals is frowned upon in Australia I turned around and saw Pete.

Pete had been very kind earlier that day and let me have a paddle in his black Romany that he knows I like very much. As I was having great fun in his kayak Pete was getting around very uncomfortably with his long legs sticking way out of the cockpit of my kayak. Inspired by Jaffa's drink sharing example, this was my chance to return the favour so I kindly offered one of my homemade biscuits to Pete. As he was munching on the thing, I was explaining to Sue that she could have one as well but that I wouldn't recommend it as my biscuits are very bland and boring. Pete accidentally dropped his biscuit in the sand and the ducks turned away.

I had a play in the currents in Pete's Romany, paddling in and peeling out and staying stagnant in the churning water. It was a popular spot with us kayakers taking turns, a fisherman with a line and a hook right on the point, considerately lifting his line up and down to allow us to pass and a swimmer with a beer in a novelty inflatable floater catching a ride. Eddie was taking photos on land with Pete silently standing next to him, arms folded, watching me in his kayak wondering if he would ever get a go.

Our planned twenty minute mess around in the currents turned into close to an hour but we eventually paddled home. Eddie got us to form a raft and let us drift out with Pete and Sue standing up in their kayaks for part of the way.

Malcolm and me reflected on the day as we paddled back to the little beach on the side of the Noosa River we had launched from that morning. The once bright sun was starting to fade a little and the mood was happy and content. Malcolm pointed to a big building on the left and shared with me that it was a nice restaurant. He had recently had a meal there to celebrate Grandma's 100th birthday. He fondly remembered what a nice day it was. I though he was going to tell me about the amazing life of his old family member on her momentous day but instead he described how the water was like glass and that he didn't have his kayak with him. Still hurting from this missed opportunity, his voice sounded just as disappointing now as it would have done that day.

That's when you know you are in good company!